

Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

TOP ARTICLE | Changing Landscape

Apr 3, 2009, 12.01 AM IST

Will the economic crisis affect the elections? Some sections of the electorate are in distress. They will vote in anger. However, the actual number of crisis victims is relatively small. They will affect outcomes mainly in some urban constituencies, hurting the BJP in some places like Surat and the Congress elsewhere. Hence, their net effect on electoral outcomes will be limited. For the rest of the electorate, things are not too bad. Though the global economy is shrinking, India is still growing at over 6 per cent and inflation is very low. If anything, that should help the incumbent UPA government. However, the electoral value of economic performance is asymmetric in India. Incumbent governments are punished when economic conditions are bad, but electoral outcomes depend on other factors when there is low inflation and reasonable growth.

Typically, these other factors are driven by the divisive politics of identity. Parties have allocated seats based on the arithmetic of caste, religion and ethnicity, along with the candidate's access to resources and muscle power in some cases. With neither the Congress nor the BJP likely to win a majority on its own, alliances will ultimately determine who will rule the country. However, the BJD has abandoned the BJP, and the latter is having a hard time attracting new partners. The Congress is having problems of its own. The Yadavs have dumped it and formed a separate coalition within the UPA. The pre-election alliance strategies of both the NDA and UPA having collapsed, a patchwork ruling coalition will emerge post-elections, based on electoral performance. Meanwhile, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are competing to lead the Third Front.

Congratulations!

You have successfully cast your vote

[Login to view result](#)

Underlying this messy terrain, there are emerging symptoms of remarkable tectonic shifts that could permanently change the landscape of Indian democracy if not in this election, then certainly by the next in 2014. The most important is the rise of regional parties. The era of coalition governments reflects the growing dependence of national parties like the Congress and

BJP, in their bid for power, on the vote banks of regional parties.

The Akalis in Punjab, Samajwadi Party in UP and the RJD, LJP or JD(U) in Bihar are all regional parties. Though the BSP now presents itself as a national party, its main base is still UP. Nor is this a specifically north Indian phenomenon. Politics in Assam, Orissa, Andhra, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu etc is now driven by regional parties. Even the CPM draws its strength not from its politburo members but from its regional political bases in Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal.

One consequence is the emergence of regional factors and issues as drivers of national political trends. There is an interesting tension between centralised control of economic power on one hand, through the finance ministry, RBI, Planning Commission and central ministries, and increasing regional dispersal of political power on the other, a tension that the 13th Finance Commission may need to address.

Another consequence is the arrival of regional party leaders on the national stage. Unlike regional Congress bosses, always loyal to the 'high command', these regional leaders are people with political bases and ambitions of their own. Many of these new leaders are not the children of erstwhile royalty or scions of great political families. They have risen from the 'aam aadmi' ranks and honed their survival skills in the rough and tumble of politics from below. Scions of political families, raised in the belief that they were born to rule, may one day find themselves rudely pushed aside if the courtiers strategising for them fail to come to terms with these new realities. Sooner rather than later, 'people like us' in India may find that they are being ruled by 'people like them' from Bharat.

Another remarkable trend, though less visible, is the emergence of a new politics of performance challenging the old divisive politics of identity. In many conversations in the fields and mandi towns of Bharat, I have heard it said, 'Is bar jo kaam karega usi ko vote milega' this time those who do the work will get the votes. I had not attached much significance to these remarks until a recent survey commissioned by the Times of India picked up exactly the same sentiment, though presumably from an urban sample in this case. Initiatives launched by eminent persons in favour of elections for good governance, such as Messrs N R Narayana Murthy, E Sreedharan and others or Bimal Jalan and his associates, also reflect that sentiment. Perhaps below the surface there is a building voter revolt against the divisive politics of identity, vote buying and muscle power. It could fizzle out and come to nothing in the absence of a principal agent to nurture and channel this potentially earth-shaking force.

But, if properly channelled, such sentiments could gather momentum leading to a cathartic cleansing of Indian politics. Will it make a difference in these elections or perhaps in the next one? Much depends on the media. It has tremendous power that it can deploy to lead that cleansing process, especially television and the Indian language press that has the widest reach. Can we hope that the fourth estate will rise to play its historic role in changing the landscape of Indian politics? We shall just have to wait and see.

The writer is emeritus professor at the National Institute of Public Finance & Policy.