Source: *TODAY*, p26
Date: 27 May 2016

DESPITE BJP'S BIG WIN, OTHER PARTIES SHOULD NOT BE DISCOUNTED

The state of play in Indian politics

RONOJOY SEN



The election results in four Indian states — Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Assam — announced on May 19 were welcome news for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. As part of a coalition with regional parties, the BJP won a resounding electoral victory in the north-eastern state of Assam.

Following the 2014 national election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his close aide and election strategist, BJP president Amit Shah, had seemed virtually unstoppable. However, heavy defeats in the states of Delhi and Bihar in 2015 had taken some of the sheen off Mr Modi and Mr Shah.

Little surprise, then, that the BJP is making a big deal of its victory in Assam. This is the first time that the BJP, which has historically been seen as a north Indian party, will form a government in eastern India.

In fact, the BJP won 80 per cent of its seats in the 2014 national election from the northern and western states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. The party's leadership has, with some justification, touted its success in Assam as evidence of the BJP's expanding footprint.

While the BJP's victory in Assam is significant, it would be wrong to see the results in the four states as merely a story of the BJP's expansion under Mr Modi.

The results in Tamil Nadu and the eastern state of West Bengal, where two incumbent female chief ministers, J Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee, stormed back to power, are proof of the continued resilience of regional parties.

The victory of Ms Jayalalithaa and her party, the AIADMK, was particularly significant as it was the first time since 1984 that a government in Tamil Nadu bucked anti-incumbency and returned to power. Ms Jayalalithaa's victory was built on numerous welfare schemes implemented by her government.

These included a free monthly quota of 20kg of rice to voters, uniforms to students in state-run schools, marriage assistance to families, mixers and grinders, and even goats and cows, to families living below the poverty line.

While these schemes placed a sizeable burden on the state's exchequer, they helped Ms Jayalalithaa retain her support base, particularly among women voters. Given the success of her populist policies, she had included more freebies for voters, such as mobile phones, in her party's election manifesto.

Her populist schemes were replicated on a more modest scale by Ms Banerjee in West Bengal. She distributed subsidised rice to the poor and free bicycles to students, among other things, and won the affection of voters in her state.

NOT WRITING OFF CONGRESS

The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led coalition won in the southern state of Kerala, signalling that leftist parties still have a presence, albeit a rapidly shrinking one, in India.

The BJP won 10 per cent of the vote share and one seat for the first time in the Kerala state assembly. While the party leadership sees this as a significant entry into southern India, which has traditionally been inimical to the BJP, it is too early to say if it can become a potent force in Kerala.

Finally, the defeat of the Congress party in Assam and Kerala, both states where it was heading the government, is increasing evidence of the decline of what is the Grand Old Party of India. It now heads the government in only six states out of 29.

But one should not write off the Congress as many have been doing in the aftermath of the results. The party might get some solace from the fact that it had a better strike rate than the BJP in the 2016 state elections. Whereas the BJP contested 661 seats in the four states and won in 64, the Congress contested 344 seats and won 100.

State elections in India are not always a good predictor for the national election, as Indian voters often tend to vote differently in state and national elections. Besides, the national election, scheduled for 2019, is three years away.

While the Congress is yet to recover from its debacle in the 2014 national polls and the BJP extends it reach beyond the Hindi heartland, the regional parties, which combine strong leadership and populist policies, continue to hold their own in several states.

In 2014, the regional parties, including those from the left, which are now confined to Kerala and West Bengal, won nearly 50 per cent of the vote share. The regional parties will be a force to reckon with in the next national election, and the BJP and Congress would already be thinking of picking the right allies.

Dr Ronojoy Sen is senior research fellow at ISAS (Institute of South Asian Studies), National University of Singapore.