

FPC Briefing: India's BJP Contemplate their Future
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Following a second consecutive defeat in India's general elections, India's principal opposition party – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP - Indian People's Party) – faces a potentially uncertain and unstable future. Although touted as a prospective winner in the elections of May 2009, the BJP's comprehensive loss to India's historically dominant Indian National Congress (Congress) party, under Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi, has called into question both the BJP's organizational and ideological basis. Despite remaining as India's second largest political force, and indeed the country's only other national party besides Congress, the BJP faces a period of repackaging for India's electorate. Given that the BJP's current head, LK Advani who turns 82 on Sunday 8th November, and has announced his plans to step-down, any re-branding will be underscored by a phase of internal restructuring, most prominently involving the emergence of a new leader.

Pathways to power: balancing between "hard" and "soft" nationalism

Reaching back to a political heritage originating in the nineteenth century, the BJP espouse an ideology based upon *Hindutva* (or "Hinduness"); an ethnic and culturally defined nationalism that strives to adequately represent Hindus in India. This ideology is based upon a common culture, specific linguistic features and geographic unity – "Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan" – and negates the secular, religiously tolerant and peaceful basis of India's political system, present since independence in 1947. These features denote the BJP as a communal and sectarian party who insist upon strong allegiances to a specific ethnic group rather than to Indian society as a whole. As such, this basis has often left the BJP being regarded as xenophobic (and especially anti-Muslim and anti-Christian), as well as being aggressively nationalist. Such sentiments effectively breach India's Constitution that celebrates tolerance and national unity through diversity.

Hindu nationalism's organizational structure was established through the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS - National Volunteer Corps) in Nagpur in 1925. An all-male organization, the RSS is founded upon paramilitary skills, ideological training and supreme loyalty to the Hindu nation¹. The organization insists upon the racial purity and the racial superiority of India's Hindus², leaving critics to denounce the RSS as being essentially fascistic in nature. It was through the RSS that the BJP become a political force (first as the Jana Sangh in 1951 and then as the BJP from 1980). While ostensibly disconnected, the BJP acts as the political wing of the RSS and is part of the RSS's wider *Sangh Parivar* (Family of Associations), which aims to penetrate all levels of Indian society. Other *Sangh Parivar* organizations include students and workers unions, education groups and militant wings. As such, the RSS remain as the BJP's "umbilical cord", impacting upon its ideological content, decision-making, personnel and leadership. Reflecting these continued ties, the majority of the BJP's members and leadership are members of the RSS.

Under the dual leadership of Atal Vajpayee and LK Advani, the BJP emerged as a political force in India in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This rise rested upon balancing between the party's two faces. The first face, represented by Advani, was

a hard militant *Hindutva* that advocated aggressively pursuing a right-wing Hindu-dominated nationalist agenda. In turn, the second face, represented by Vajpayee, was a softer and more conciliatory *Hindutva* that emphasized itself as a credible centre-right conservative alternative to Congress. The BJP's rise accompanied a general fracturing of Indian politics as the dominance of Congress succumbed to more mass-based and communal-based electoral politics. These changes included the rise of lower caste and regional parties in the early 1990s, which the BJP perceived as threatening their upper caste Hindu support base. Tumult within Congress' organizational and leadership structure also followed the assassinations of Indira Gandhi in 1984 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, which additionally aided the BJP's emergence.

The BJP's communal politics (and hard *Hindutva*) reached their zenith in the early 1990s, as the party pursued their core policy of replacing a Muslim mosque (*Babri Masjid*) with a Hindu temple (*Ram Janmabhoomi*) at Ayodhya in northern India. On December 6 1992, a rally at the site led to the destruction of the mosque and sparked Hindu-Muslim riots across India, which left 1,200 people dead. The events at Ayodhya established the legitimacy of *Hindutva* among the Hindu middle class as representing Hindus under threat from outsiders, and led to rising electoral support for the BJP³. Harnessing growing disillusionment with Congress, additionally manifested by mounting government corruption, rising economic and social dislocation, and internal instability, Vajpayee then appeased his party's militancy and attracted regional partners.

Coupled with an emphasis on making India strong (and an electoral promise to test nuclear weapons, increase military expenditure and acquire a permanent UNSC seat), the BJP slowly gained political momentum in the 1990s. The party also advocated a pro-capitalist stance that differed from Congress's socialism and demanded that Pakistan return its territory in Kashmir. In turn, the party appeared to eschew the idealism of Congress and its founding father Jawaharlal Nehru, instead promoting a security and foreign policy based upon pragmatism. As such, BJP leaders wanted to broaden India's international standing, which included having closer links with the United States and, counter intuitively (given its Muslim majority), engagement with Pakistan. Growing electoral support culminated in the BJP-led (and BJP dominated) National Democratic Coalition (NDA) that gained power in March 1998. In turn, Vajpayee became the first non-Congress affiliated Prime Minister of India with Advani as Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister.

Encountering defeat: a leadership void and ideological instability

Despite gaining power and testing nuclear weapons in May 1998 (which initially gained international sanctions, but then marked India's emergence as one of the twenty first century's great powers to be), the BJP-led NDA stayed in power for only one term until 2004. Whilst successfully holding together a diverse political coalition, the BJP were unable to deliver many of their core Hindu nationalist manifesto promises. In particular, the party appeared overly confident, especially with the failure of their "India Shining" campaign, which indicated a certain material and ideological disconnect with large (particularly poorer) portions of Indian society. The BJP's communal agenda also raised its head during this period – most ferociously in Gujarat in 2002, governed by the party's Narendra Modi. Here the infiltration of *Sangh Parivar* activists into the state's apparatus aided state complicity and orchestration in violence directed towards Gujarat's Muslims⁴. Despite being the worst case of communal violence since the Partition of India in

1947, Modi was re-elected later in 2002. In a very close general election in 2004, overall BJP seats fell from 182 to 138, while Congress' share rose from 141 to 145 over the same period.

By the time of the 2009 elections, the BJP again appeared to be out of touch with the nation at large. Their campaign of pro-international market capitalism, persistent advocacy of reclaiming Kashmir from Pakistan and promoting themselves as the party of national security, continued to contrast with Congress' emphasis on welfare for India's poor and the protection of religious minorities. In turn, an insistence upon religious symbolism seemed to jar with the image of a newly emergent India touted as a great international power with budding links to the US, the EU and China. This disconnect was particularly the case when the BJP opposed the Indo-US nuclear deal on political-interest rather than national-interest grounds. Continued communal violence, for example against Christians in Orissa, also impacted upon the BJP's coalition partners. As such, a regional ally - the BJD - withdrew from the NDA. Consequently, the BJP's own share of the vote fell to 116 seats in 2009, while Congress' seats rose to 206. The two party's coalitions - Congress' United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the BJP's NDA - finished with a total of 257 and 158 seats respectively.

In the aftermath of their 2009 defeat, the BJP appeared to be descending in chaos. As such, the party's former Union Minister Arun Shourie called the party president Rajnath Singh "Alice in Blunderland"⁵, and indicated a renewed contest between the militant and conciliatory faces of *Hindutva*. In turn, the party expelled one of its foremost founding members, Jaswant Singh, who had served as Minister for External Affairs and Finance Minister during the 1998-2004 NDA government, for publishing a book that praised Pakistan's founder Mohammed Jinnah. Reflecting the RSS's ongoing influence, reports noted that his expulsion was ordered by their leader, Dr Mohan Bhagwat⁶. Jaswant Singh then went on to call the BJP an Indian version of the Ku Klux Klan⁷. Overall, this chaos has left the party searching for both its political identity and its political leadership.

The BJP's first crisis centers on their political leadership. With Advani announcing his retirement and Vajpayee's impact on the party already considerably lessened since 2004 through ill-health, the era of the two figures who have dominated the political rise of Hindu nationalism for the last 60 years is now over. Of possible successors, Narendra Modi has been the most prominent, although despite a high profile with Indian business, he failed to make a significant impact as a campaigner in the 2009 general election. His association with the 2002 violence in Gujarat also makes him an unacceptable figure among several of the BJP's regional allies, India's public at large and various international actors and governments. In turn, the fact that other possible BJP leadership candidates (such as Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj and Uma Bharti) are around 60 years old, underscores the BJP's perceived inability to successfully connect with India's young population, seven out of ten of whom are under 40 years of age.

Coupled together, these factors have meant that there has been no smooth transition from the Vajpayee-Advani era to the BJP's next political generation. This lack of transition again stems from rivalry between the competing ideological tensions within the party, along with a lack of the BJP's organizational strength and autonomy in the face of the RSS's influence. The importance of both this lack of organizational strength, as well as having no clear leadership succession is underscored when one looks at Congress. To this end, Congress have been slowly

preparing Rahul Gandhi for their leadership, and he successfully campaigned in the 2009 general elections, helping Congress win control of 75% of the seats he campaigned for. This preparation also emphasizes the continued political heritage enjoyed by Congress, something which the BJP currently lacks. (Rahul Gandhi is the son of ex-Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi, the grandson of ex-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the great grandson of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru).

Ideologically, the need remains for the BJP to choose between a pure *Hindutva* approach that emphasizes religious difference and threats to the Hindu nation, and an approach that stresses inclusiveness, moderation and conciliation. Again, this choice (or balance) sums up the more hardcore ideological roots of the party courtesy of the RSS and the moderating modern face of the party as promoted by ex-Prime Minister Vajpayee. Politically, this contrast is summed up by pursuing either a pronounced rightward political lean or being situated in the large centre ground that dominates Indian politics. The BJP also still has ties to extremist groups (such as the *Shiv Sena* in Maharashtra), which concurrently alienate India's non-Hindu population, as well as the country's younger voters who are more concerned with economic growth and well-being than religious-based politics. As such, the BJP is facing a crisis of direction as pandering to either the party's militants or moderates will result in the alienation of some of its supporters.

Looking to the future:

The BJP faces not only leadership troubles but also problems of definition versus the "hard" and "soft" faces of *Hindutva*, as well as its relationship with the RSS and the rest of the *Sangh Parivar*. Certainly, it appears hard for the BJP to redefine *Hindutva* sufficiently without negating its core ideological content and thus alienating core *Hindutva* (and thus BJP and RSS) supporters. Politically, this means that the BJP will find it very hard to gain an absolute majority in any general election. However, given the overwhelming coalitional nature of Indian politics (which will remain as its core characteristic over the coming years), the political aspirations of other smaller parties can help the BJP to re-gain power. Ideologically however, the party will have to remain both moderate and centrist to have any chance of election victory. While the 1990s Ahodhya agitations gave the BJP electoral momentum, a repeat of such actions seems implausible as India's electorate has now matured to focus on economic rather than religious issues. Times of economic or existential crisis (such as another war with Pakistan) could however allow such sentiments to be effectively employed.

In turn, it is possible that the BJP will be able to re-brand themselves as a party advocating (non-religious) reform along a right-of-centre agenda, on the lines of the Christian Democratic and conservative parties that emerged after the Second World War in Europe. Certainly, as India's middle class grows over the coming years and decades as a result of India's economic emergence as a great power, support for such an agenda can grow. The BJP's advantageous electoral positioning within a modernising, globalizing, and media-dominated middle class also intrinsically strengthens the mainstreaming of *Hindutva*. In many ways, the 1998-2004 NDA government presented *Hindutva* as an acceptable, viable and experienced political force and saw the emergence of an acceptable religious nationalism that questioned the secular origins of the Indian state. For these reasons alone, engagement with the BJP by Western political parties should remain a priority, especially as they are the only other national party apart from Congress and thus the only other party who

can credibly govern India. Internationally, the BJP advocate much of the same policies as Congress – continued economic liberalization, closer relations with the United States and widening bilateral ties – suggesting continued common ground with potential international governments.

Without such a re-branding however and with existing ties to the RSS remaining in place, the BJP's future is uncertain. Not only is the appeal of the big national parties under threat from regional and caste parties but the BJP lacks a national acceptable and recognizable figure with the gravitas either of Vajpayee or Advani. Indeed, if the BJP's internal rivalries are not set aside or indeed solved, some commentators have predicted irreversible decline. In turn however, it is the BJP's links to the RSS that give the party its national support and logistical base. As such, if the RSS itself reformed and toned down its ideological content, this relationship could become more harmonious and credible, thus realising the political gains to be made. Otherwise, another political double act akin to Vajpayee and Advani, that represents both the hard and soft faces of *Hindutva*, may indeed be the BJP's best solution to its current ideological and organizational dilemmas. Whatever the outcome, choosing or balancing between political pragmatism and political ideology will determine the future career of the BJP in Indian politics for some time to come.

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¹ W. Andersen, S. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revitalism* (Delhi: Vistaar, 1987); K. Jayaprasad, *RSS and Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications 1991).

² V.D. Savarkar, *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (Hindi Sahitya Sadan: New Delhi, 2003).

³ T.B. Hansen, C. Jaffrelot, *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001).

⁴ K.M. Chenoy, S.P. Shukla, K.S. Subramanian, A. Vanaik, *Gujarat Carnage 2002: A Report To the Nation* (Delhi: Independent Fact Finding Mission, 2002), <http://www.sacw.net/Gujarat2002/GujCarnage.html>

⁵ V. Ramakrishnan, 'Divided Family', *Frontline*, No. 26, Vol. 19, September 12-25, 2009.

⁶ A.G. Noorani, 'No Questions Please', *Frontline*, No. 26, Vol. 18, August 29 - September 11, 2009.

⁷ 'Jaswant Describes BJP as Indian Version of Ku Klux Klan', *The Times of India*, August 27 2009, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/4937984.cms>