

Dr Ian Woolford – Indian Election

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to a La Trobe Asia podcast. I'm Nick Bisley, the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia, and with me to talk about the Indian election results is Dr Ian Woolford, the head of Hindi and South Asia Studies here at La Trobe University.

Ian Woolford

Good to see you Nick. It's an exciting week.

Nick Bisley

It's an astonishing week. Now, everyone thought Modi was going to win and they thought he'd do very well, but I don't think anyone predicted that he was going to win by this month.

Ian Woolford

I don't there was a single opinion poll that put the win this strongly. All of them were saying that Modi was definitely going to win. We never know how to trust the polls – they've been very unreliable in the past but just the huge nature of his win and the utter decimation of the previously ruling Congress Party – well the numbers were hard to believe at first.

Nick Bisley

I remember when we had our seminar a month or two ago, we thought Modi was doing well, but the real question was much less about, was he going to win, but what kind of coalition is he going to have to stitch together and it looks like what's been the norm in Indian politics, you know, coalition governments and complex kind of negotiations between the regional parties and everyone else – that's all out the window.

Ian Woolford

It certainly looks that way. People are arguing back and forth whether what this means for the rise of regional parties and for coalition politics. I think the consensus is that it's not over, although certainly for the formation of this government, Modi's party, the BJP, has an outright majority in and of itself. I have the numbers right here. 282 seats, and they only need 272 so this is a huge win, and when you add in their coalition partners, the NDA, it's just a clearer majority for Modi.

Nick Bisley

They've got nearly 400 haven't they, with all the various allied parties?

Ian Woolford

336, total, so ... and this is the largest majority of any ruling party since ... in 1984 a Congress had, I think it was, near 400, so it's a big deal.

Nick Bisley

It's striking, not only the size of his win, but the size of the collapse of Congress. You said Congress had 400 then ...

Ian Woolford

It's an utter decimation of the Congress Party and again, I don't think anyone saw it this much. They lost, let's see, before they had 262 seats, they lost 162 seats plus, so the Congress only has 44 seats at the moment and with their coalition they have 59 seats. In fact they don't even have enough seats to have a formal opposition leader. I just didn't see that happening.

Nick Bisley

So they don't even qualify to be an opposition.

Ian Woolford

There's an actual formal post of opposition leader that has a status equal to one of a Cabinet member basically, but you need 10%, so they'd need 54, 55 seats and they didn't even get that. So it's a humiliating defeat for Congress.

Nick Bisley

And what about what everyone thought might have made a bit of an insurgent campaign, Kejriwal's party, the AAP, they seem to have been steamrollered in a lot of respects by the success of the BJP and that you seem to have a lot of voters go from Congress straight across to BJP and not spread out. What do you think was behind that?

Ian Woolford

I don't think we've heard the last of Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party. It definitely didn't do as well as they would have hoped. They had a few successes in the State of Punjab, they actually did quite well. They didn't do as well in Delhi as they'd hoped. Incidentally, the leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, the AAP, Kejriwal, is ... I don't know if he's out of jail yet. He was jailed today for something that he said against the BJP leader and they could have posted bail but he's very dramatic, so he decided to stay in jail. But it's these sort of antics that I think people seem to have gotten fed up with, when he was in the Chief Minister post in Delhi, he famously resigned it after 49 days to do this national campaign. Their signature issue was corruption and I think they successfully injected this into discourse over the election. It very much became an issue and I credit them with that and I don't know what the future holds with them. I don't think we've heard the last of them.

Nick Bisley

I was reading something the other day where Kejriwal has been quoted as saying, quitting that Chief Minister post was a mistake, people got a bit fed up. The supporters felt like they'd been kind of let down ...

Ian Woolford

He's officially apologised as of yesterday, he said it was a mistake and he's hoping to re-form another government in Delhi. Very curious to see what happens with that.

Nick Bisley

So why do you think Modi and the BJP did so well? What is it that led, do you think, to this just huge quite unexpected result?

Ian Woolford

I think most people agree that it is the combination of the utter failure of the Congress Party over the past ten years to capitalise on these so-called liberalising economic reforms of the '90s. There's been a real stagnation and then a general sense that the former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, was just an ineffective leader. This is generally how it's characterised. So you have that, plus you can't underestimate the public's desire to having someone they perceive as a strong and charismatic leader in the Prime Minister's seat, and Modi definitely is that. He's extremely charismatic and people view him as quite strong, so those two factors together ...

Nick Bisley

Yes, I've been reading a little bit about how people say this is very much a vote for Modi and not a vote for the BJP and that in some respects this is not only, as has often been trumpeted, the largest democratic exercise in human history, but it's also the first kind of presidential-style campaign in Indian politics.

Ian Woolford

Yes, and you mentioned it's the largest democratic election in human history. Pretty much every five years India gets to have the largest election in human history – eight hundred plus million eligible voters. They had a huge turnout – the largest one they've ever had, of over five million voters, so this definitely was the largest election ever held, which is amazing to watch in of itself. He did something unusual for his party. There was opposition to his candidacy from within his party, but he obviously overcame that, and he very much ran on his own personality. The BJP tended to have ... they put up their posters and they have a committee of leaders on the poster, and there's definitely the idea that you're voting for a party. Modi definitely made this about him and this was clearly a smart decision on his part. It's amazing that he's able to do it. I mean, he had an amazing social media campaign, amazing mobilisation, especially of youth voters that voted more for him than they did for the Congress Party, which is a huge achievement. And it was very much a presidential style referendum, absolutely.

Nick Bisley

Yes, because I think one of the abiding images of the campaign, was those masks. You know, you'd see these huge campaigns and all these BJP activists and supporters with their Modi masks on, and ...

Ian Woolford

Yeah, they look almost creepy. You watch videos and they have Modi masks ... they're especially creepy when people put the masks on the back of their heads, but yes, I think it shows again the pull of this leader. People were just really enthralled by him.

Nick Bisley

Do you think they also not only capitalised on a pretty decrepit government, and disillusionment with that, because they did run a super slick campaign at lots of different levels and they seemed to be completely outmanoeuvring Congress.

Ian Woolford

You're absolutely right there and one of the most obvious example we can give is Modi's and the BJP's use of social media. Modi has upwards of four million followers on Twitter. I think he's the second or third most Twitter-followed political leader right now, on the planet. And Rahul Gandhi was not officially, but was basically the Congress Prime Ministerial candidate. He doesn't have a Twitter account, which is really boggling ... he really doesn't. It boggles the mind, and it's most embarrassing. So when we're talking about harnessing the youth vote, it's very difficult, I would say, to be young and a Congress supporter and look cool online because you can't even follow your candidate. And Modi – he engaged with his followers on Twitter, he posted regular updates and would even talk to people – it wasn't just a broadcasting platform for him. It was definitely a way to engage with his voters.

Nick Bisley

And do you think this is going to be a bit of a line, that is to say, if you want to be successful in politics, you're going to have to play in a social media game?

Ian Woolford

One of Modi's advisers, **Shekhar ??? 07:39** Gupta was just down in Melbourne and gave a talk and one of the things that he said Modi said to him in private, oh, we can't have any BJP candidates that don't have these 50,000 followers on Twitter. So this is clearly something that Modi is thinking. This is an essential ... this isn't something he's implementing now, but it's obviously on his mind. He's trying to change the face, the way campaigns are conducted.

Nick Bisley

Yeah, because you've got that changing electoral landscape in India as you're getting more people moving into the cities, you're getting more people who are clearly supportive of things like economic growth and that kind of bank politics looks like it might be beginning to recede to some degree and some sort of new complex developments occurring.

Ian Woolford

If that could happen, most people would agree that would be a good development, vote bank politics of course refers to the practice of appealing to the smaller minority groups in regional areas, and whether or not, in order to get votes, the classic example being people often accuse Congress of playing vote bank politics with the Muslim population in India and I think most people agree that this isn't healthy for the country. Modi certainly says so, and I think in attempting to nationalise the election, if that could be one result of this it would be a very good result.

Nick Bisley

To turn then to the regional parties, because certainly under Congress for the UPA government, regional parties had been in the recent past the real winners. You know they'd been able to dictate everything from foreign policy to spending commitments and this sort of stuff. How do you see the election playing out for them? Are they being pretty seriously undermined? Is it a temporary blip?

Ian Woolford

I don't know, myself. Some people have argued that this is just temporary and that when you look at the actual numbers, the percentage of the overall vote that the BJP got, they got 30 to 31% of the national vote which I suppose in terms of things could be said isn't that high, if you have 70% of the population voting for Congress, which got 19% or some of the regional parties. So it would be incorrect to say that the regional parties aren't extremely important. That said, I don't think it in any way diminishes the historic nature of this upset. India has not seen anything like this. Congress has been in power for most of the years since independence and when they haven't been, it's always been a cobbled together coalition that has been ruling, which is not what we are seeing now.

Nick Bisley

I guess because it's so new and because it's so distinctive, it's very hard to tell, is this is one-off and everything's going to recede back to the norm? Or is this re-setting the clocks? It's kind of hard to tell, but you're also seeing already a kind of manoeuvring what they've got into Cabinet offices and various other things. What have you seen so far in your watching in the kind of government formation process?

Ian Woolford

Oh, I can't pretend to understand Cabinet formation in India at all. A lot of this is happening behind closed doors, although I think he is trying to project an image of this not being back room dealings, but trying to let people know what's happening. There are questions of ... there are people on the senior BJP leadership who effectively Modi stepped over to take this post ... is what role are they going to have in the government? And that's one of the main questions people have.

When you talked about the assets that he had, then again I think one the main assets in this changing landscape is the younger vote, which is a huge number of these voters ... 23 million of the new voters were 18 to 19 year-olds. These are new voters – 20 million of them, and they broke for the BJP. So in terms of building this and in terms of an asset, I'm sure the party is going to be seeing that as something they are going to be able to sustain, given that fact.

Nick Bisley

The first-time voters have been brought in and buying in to the BJP story. And that's interesting given that historically the BJP is associated with a very particular part of Indian society – that Hindu nationalist – we certainly saw that last time they were in government in the late 1990s, under Prime Minister Vajpayee, so for the BJP there's a kind of a challenge of being pan-Indian and getting that whole generation to buy in, whilst also having this base which is somewhat exclusive.

Ian Woolford

This is the big question that a lot of people, especially in the West, especially in Australia – every story about Modi has an asterisk, at least stories in the West, an asterisk, talking about his communal past and various tensions in India. I think it's important to stress that Modi did not run, at least not ostensibly run on the Hindu nationalist platform. Different people argue over his motivations for this but it was very clear in all of his speeches that he was focussed on a pro-development, anti-corruption, moving India forward, corporation, business favourable platform and it's clear that I think really this is what most people were voting for. And obviously we all hope that he can be successful in moving India forward. A concern that some people have stated, which is not a concern that I share that much, is that if he somehow fails to deliver, there's no way he can deliver on all the promises he's had, or the promises people had for him, that's clear. But the fear is that then he'll draw more on the internationalist feeling in order to stay in power. I don't see how he could do that and I wouldn't expect him to, because he's well aware of what people voted for, and why they did, and I don't think voters would put up with that, actually. That's my own feeling.

Nick Bisley

He runs the risk I guess of the ... I guess you could call it the kind of Obama phenomenon, when you had in his first term, a huge, particularly young supporter base, with in many respects unrealistic expectations as to what he could deliver, but then got very jaded. Okay, he got up the second time round, but his presidency in many respects has been one of a kind of underwhelming delivery on unrealistic expectations.

Ian Woolford

Well, supposedly Modi won't have some of the same problems that Obama had in that he has a majority ... I mean, they are definitely in power now so they would hope that means they could implement their agenda without too much opposition, again with no formally named opposition leader, I don't know if they may make some arrangement, or if there is one, but they would think that they hopefully wouldn't have that problem.

Nick Bisley

So what sort of government would you anticipate? I mean, he's sort of been hinting at ... he's campaigned on pro-growth, low corruption, business-friendly, outward looking, economically focused – do you think that's going to be the priorities of the government, that's where they're going to ...

Ian Woolford

Absolutely these are the priorities. If he doesn't deliver on this very quickly, in a way that he can show the people that things are happening. Look how quickly the voters turned on Congress. I think the BJP is well aware that this could happen to them. So we'll see. I mean, he calls them his Gujarat model of development. He was Chief Minister of Gujarat. I mean Gujarat's always been a prosperous state by comparison with other nations, right on the seaboard, so trade is extremely important there. But I see a pro-business, pro-development government. His critics would say the relaxation of certain environmental standards, making it easier for corporations to buy up land. These are things that one could argue with, but in general they're good for business, they're good

for trade with other countries and this is going to be his main focus for sure.

Nick Bisley

I think Amartya Sen come out on the record to say, we need to look more at the human side of the development of the Gujarat story.

Ian Woolford

No one looks at numbers like he does. And he has laid bare the inequality that is a huge part of India's development in Gujarat. It's a good example of that, where people are being left behind at quite a strong rate so that's one of the big questions for Modi's government. But of course people also voted for him hoping that he could address these issues as well. Poverty was one of the number one issues on voters' minds.

Nick Bisley

I guess to link the story around the economy and Modi, to think about India's place in the world, I was at a conference last week where Modi was described as India's Abe, that they are right wing nationalists, who is going to ruffle feathers internationally, whilst basically trying to take the standing of the country up a notch or two on the international league tables. Do you think that's a reasonable kind of parallel, or do you think it's going to be focussed principally on the internal story around economic development.

Ian Woolford

He's only going to be focused on the internal story because all of the number one issues facing India are internal, but India's internal story has huge ramifications for the rest of the world. But in terms of relations with other countries, I think in some ways ... well, we always talk about India US relations, everyone wondered ... well, look what happened on Twitter, we got John Kerry congratulated Narendra Modi and he's took a while to reply to John Kerry. He took a while to mention too, Barack Obama called me and I think that the general feeling in India and definitely in Modi's party is that we don't need to go to the US any more. I think we can wait for them to come to us.

Nick Bisley

And do you think that relationship though, that's been established for a while, it really started under ... was in 2005, when they basically said it's okay, on a nuclear bomb test. Do you think that's going to continue or do you think they'll try to keep a little bit of distance?

Ian Woolford

I don't know. Clearly, there have been some tensions in the US India relationship in the past few months. They've been at a low. There was one little diplomatic flare-up which was blown out of proportion, but I think it was indicative of bigger problems. Modi until very recently wouldn't have been able to get a visa to the United States because of questions over his past role in violence in the state. This restriction has been lifted. The United States had the Supreme Court basically clear Modi, so there's an effort clearly on the US to open the doors.

Nick Bisley

I mean, it was pretty clear from fairly early on in the campaign that the Americans were going to be quite content to break bread with Narendra Modi.

Ian Woolford

It would have been a shock if they hadn't, yeah.

Nick Bisley

Any sense of how they're going to approach China, because I think that's the big question I think from a foreign policy point of view. The US, okay, that's a manageable relationship. But with China, they've got a disputed border, a bit of a rivalry going on, but a very good economic relationship.

Ian Woolford

I see him focusing on the economic partnership. I don't think this new government has any desire to antagonise and I think they're looking to promote trade and promote the economy. He's going to be looking to trying to heal **17:12** Japan very favourably, either in working with them and also following their model. I do not imagine this new government trying to escalate any of these tensions.

Nick Bisley

Fantastic. That's all the time we have today. Thank you Ian for a great discussion of India's election. We'll look forward to re-convening in a few months' time to see how it's all travelling.

Ian Woolford

Absolutely. Thanks Nick.

Nick Bisley

Meanwhile, you can follow Ian on his Twitter account @IAWoolford. You can also follow me on my Twitter account and find out all the things we're doing here at La Trobe Asia, @NickBisley. Thanks for listening.