

## THE OBAMA FOLKS HAVE AMBITIOUS PLANS, SOME OF WHICH REALLY CLASH WITH INDIA

## THE MIDDLE CLASS IN INDIA LOOKED AT OTHER POLITICAL PARTIES AS NOT OFFERING ANY OTHER PROGRAMS TO COUNTER THE CONGRESS AGENDA



### TV Paul

The political scientist discusses India's election results with Ajit Jain

**T**V Paul, an expert on security matters and nuclear non-proliferation at McGill University in Montreal and the author of half a dozen books, is thrilled over the results of the Indian election. "I see now a momentum and a desire to take India to the next level," he told *India Abroad* in an interview.

#### Your reactions to the Indian election result.

The Indian middle class is getting globalized. They are saying stability is good for their pocketbooks. A combination of that and the populist policies that the Manmohan Singh government initiated — the rural employment program and a number of other initiatives — are showing some results now. The increasing middle class in India looked at other political parties as not offering any other programs to counter the Congress populist agenda. Populist maybe a bad word but it was a vote grabber.

**But the middle class alone couldn't have decided the outcome.**

I am not suggesting the middle class alone helped the Congress-led coalition's victory. It is the combination of the middle class and the rural population and the farmers who made the difference. Look at the key constituencies: Why would Delhi vote for the Congress Party? I believe Delhi has BJP support. It should have gone the other way. Take for example the urban centers of India. Salaries of the public sector and government employees have increased in a big way. Even the income of university professors and others has gone up.

We are sensing the increase of the middle class. Even the lower middle class can now buy Nano cars. Their number is also increasing. And that population is interested in

pocketbook issues.

The Opposition talked largely about personalities, that Manmohan Singh has no guts; they tried to use caste and the communal issues during the election. Such ideas didn't sell unless, of course, there was some powerful triggering event like the Babri Masjid [demolition], etc. That was not there.

My reading is there is a certain level of maturity taking place amongst the Indian electorates. As electorates are vulnerable to political manipulation, stability may become a catchword in their vocabulary. If Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi can manage that it will be great for the Congress party.

**What do you make of Shashi Tharoor's success in your home state, Kerala?**

It is interesting that initially many people thought Shashi would lose because he was an outsider. He doesn't speak Malayalam that well. He speaks with an accent. But see the results. He really conquered his federal constituency of Thiruvananthapuram. The Nadar community is quite powerful in Kerala and they tried to put a lot of blame on Shashi saying he's in the US, he has never lived in Kerala, he has never worked in India, etc. The fact that Shashi was able to make a connection to the old sections, and not only with the youth but poor families to everything in a typical Congress leader's style of carrying the babies, etc, helped him. He was very active. People like Shashi Tharoor needed a political party. The smartest thing for the Congress party in this election was they brought out and named candidates like him. There are very few of Shashi's kind in [India's] parliament. He will get some visible portfolio.

**What contributed to the Leftist parties' drubbing?**

There's a lot of infighting going on within them. In Kerala itself there are factions amongst the Marxists. I think there was an intense fighting between these factions. Then they [the Communist Party of India-Marxist] fought with the CPI [Communist Party of India]. It's not that popular party but it has enough votes to tilt the balance. They also alienated the middle class and the Church. The Church became very angry with them.

**Why?**

They started putting all kinds of curriculums and started restraining the ability of the Church to run schools. The Church is active in running educational institutions and hospitals in Kerala. So, the minister who tried to become a priest when he was young turned out to be a Marxist now. The argument is made that in the last election, the Communists had some sympathy of the Church, which for some reasons was against the Congress. That resulted in voters going over to the Marxists. The Communists are not bringing any focus to the place. They don't have the ideas for investments and apparently they didn't use the money that the Central government gave for various developmental activities. Kerala didn't get much but the Central government is undoubtedly pouring money in education. I hear there's some deficit financing going on but still there's enough foreign exchange reserves and enough money continues to come into the country from outside. Within two months the Central government has created some 2.5 million jobs.

**What went against the Bharatiya Janata Party?**

In Orissa they didn't have any alliance. In Tamil Nadu I don't know whether they really had an alliance with the AIADMK [All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam]. Look at all the regional pockets where the BJP could have done well. They did okay in Karnataka. The BJP has the majority now in Karnataka. It is a paradox that the BJP has more seats from Karnataka than in Delhi and Rajasthan. It is the result of their introducing some sort of communalism in Karnataka.

**Is India slowly going back to two-party system?**

I don't think so. It is almost the same for regional parties versus these two major parties — the Congress and the BJP. It may be happening in some pockets but in key states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it is very early to predict how it is going to shape up. The Congress party has a great chance. But what can they really offer? In UP they apparently have a chance. There are some reports that the Congress didn't put many efforts in Bihar as in UP.

**What about the purported Third Front?**

I don't know much about Mayawati but there are reports she hasn't done anything in UP about development. She's only building mansions and becoming a personality like Bollywood stars. None of these people have any great ideas for conforming to the country other than getting power.

**Your thoughts on Manmohan Singh. Last time, many said he was a reluctant prime minister.**

I think Manmohan Singh is still a reluctant player. I don't think he has ambitions to become a popular leader. I believe the outside world has enough respect for him. Now it is both inside and outside — Manmohan Singh is recognized as a legitimate leader on his own. But I think they have to do certain things for transforming the country.

**Will the election results impact Canada-India relations?**

Canada is thinking of selling nuclear reactors to India. I believe Russians and French are more likely to be dealing with India in the civilian nuclear field. The Americans policy is changing. The Obama administration is looking towards China more than the Bush administration did, which will hurt India to a certain point.

**Would you say the Obama administration is also looking at Pakistan more?**

Yes, Pakistan more because they want to transform certain areas into part of Pakistan, areas where the Taliban is active, helping Pakistan to take control beyond what the Pakistan government is doing. That would mean the Pakistani army is going to exact as much resources as possible from the US.

I don't know if the Obama administration can afford to lose India, but they will keep it as a standby. The Obama folks have lot of ambitious plans; some of which really clash with India. India cannot at the same time hold on to the old ideas on CTBT [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty] — disarmament for everybody and then we sign the treaty. India can afford to do both. India can't sign the NPT [nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty] but the other two, ICBT and CTBT [it can sign].

There's a desire that India should take into account about the new momentum that Obama is talking. India can't afford to be outside using its old arguments.

There's very much pressure on India to sign these two treaties, ICBT and CTBT, but they still don't know how to go about it without losing faith and domestically it will be a big problem.

**Would you say the Congress government is coming round to signing the treaties?**

I don't know about the Congress party but the intellectuals in India are in support of India signing these treaties.

**Are you optimistic over what has happened in India?**

I couldn't have been more thrilled over the election results in India. I see a momentum and a desire to take India to the next level. What's important is that on the young people and the middle class, the economic rationalities prevailed over other forms of rationalities in the country. My suggestion is that the government now needs to look at which pockets are not progressing, and on which areas you need to emphasize — like education. All these years, India has neglected primary education. Look at what has happened. The country has 300 to 400 million young people still illiterate. If you provide education even the rural poor will come up.