

India's Domestic Political Setting

Prepared by the Congressional Research Service for distribution to multiple congressional offices, February 14, 2013

India, the world's most populous democracy, is a federal republic where the bulk of executive power rests with the prime minister and his or her cabinet (the Indian president is a ceremonial chief of state with limited executive powers). Most of India's 13 prime ministers have come from the country's Hindi-speaking northern regions and all but two have been upper-caste Hindus. The 543-seat Lok Sabha (People's House) is the locus of national power, with directly elected representatives from each of the country's 28 states and 7 union territories. A smaller upper house, the Rajya Sabha (Council of States), may review, but not veto, most legislation, and has no power over the prime minister or the cabinet. National and state legislators are elected to five-year terms.

The most recent parliamentary elections were held in 2009 when the incumbent Indian National Congress Party (hereinafter "Congress") led its United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition to a convincing victory, as it had five years earlier. Congress, the party of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, dominated the country's politics from 1947-1977. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mohandas Gandhi), and her son, Rajiv, also served as prime minister. The main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government from 1999 to 2004 under Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and his deputy, L.K. Advani. Vajpayee's was India's only non-Congress government to complete a five-year term.

Congress and the BJP are India's two major national parties, but together won less than half of all votes and less than 60% of Lok Sabha seats in 2009. The influence of regional and caste-based parties has become an increasingly important variable in Indian politics, especially as no single party has won a Lok Sabha majority since 1984. This has meant national rule by sometimes fragile coalitions for the past three decades. In the most recent elections, several major regional parties formed a loose "Third Front" alliance. The eight parties noted below account for 71% of the total 2009 vote and 82% of current Lok Sabha seats.

Key Government Officials

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, a Congress stalwart and federal finance minister from 1991-1996, is an Oxford-educated economist and India's first-ever non-Hindu Prime Minister (he is Sikh). He also chairs the Planning Commission and heads the Department of Atomic Energy.

Defense Minister A.K. Antony is a Congress member and former Chief Minister of Kerala.

Finance Minister P. Chidambaram is a Congress member and corporate lawyer from Tamil Nadu who has also served as both finance and home minister.

External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, a Congress member and lawyer from Uttar Pradesh, has previously served in several federal ministerial positions.

Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde, a Congress member from Maharashtra, is a former police officer and power minister.

Commerce and Industry Minister Anand Sharma, a former chief spokesman for the Congress party from Himachal Pradesh, has also served as Minister of State for External Affairs.

Planning Commission Deputy Chairman Montek Singh Ahluwalia is an Oxford-educated economist and civil servant who has been a senior government adviser for more than 30 years.

National Security Advisor Shivshankar Menon is a career diplomat from Kerala and former Foreign Secretary.

(continued on reverse)

Key Parties

Congress is the world's largest political party and played a key role in the Indian independence movement.

It is generally considered to be a populist, left-leaning party, although a Congress-led government did initiate major economic liberalization in the early 1990s. Rajiv Gandhi's widow, Sonia, is currently party president and wields considerable, if not decisive, influence over policy making. Her son, Rahul, serves as party vice president and is widely considered heir-apparent to Congress leadership. Congress won 206 Lok Sabha seats and 29% of the popular vote in 2009, and it currently leads the ruling UPA coalition.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led by recently-seated president Rajnath Singh, is a right-leaning party that advocates Hindu nationalism ("Hindutva") and generally rejects secularism in the Western mode. The party is the only national-level competitor for Congress and leads five state governments, including in Gujarat, where Chief Minister Narendra Modi won reelection in 2012. The BJP won 116 Lok Sabha seats and 19% of the 2009 vote, and leads the opposition NDA coalition.

Left Front is a coalition of four communist parties led by the Communist Party of India – Marxist and with a votebank limited to the states of West Bengal and Kerala. A UPA supporter from 2004-2008, the Left Front suffered major setbacks in 2009 national and 2011 West Bengal elections. This communist coalition won 24 Lok Sabha seats and 7% of the 2009 vote.

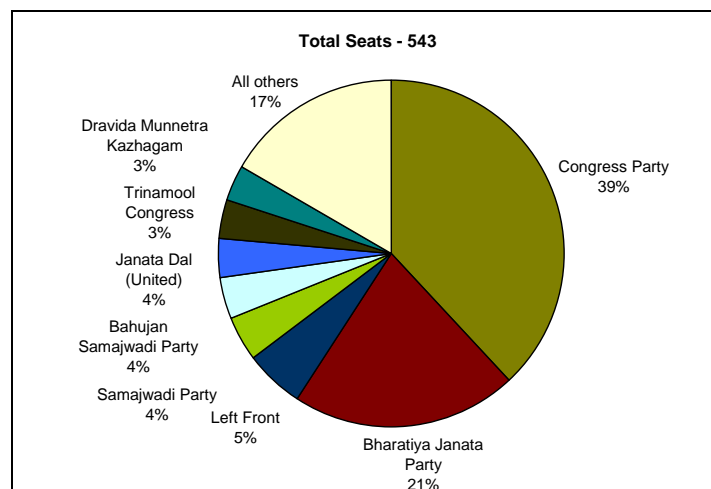
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) wins most of its support in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. With socialist leanings and led by former state Chief Minister Mayawati, the BSP was originally formed to represent historically disadvantaged castes and tribes ("Bahujans"). It won 21 Lok Sabha seats and 6% of the 2009 vote.

Samajwadi Party (SP) is Uttar Pradesh's other major party, also socialist in orientation and also representing lower castes, as well as many Muslim constituencies. It is led by former state Chief Minister and federal cabinet minister Mulayam Singh Yadav, whose son Akilesh became Chief Minister in 2012. The SP won 23 Lok Sabha seats and 3% of the 2009 vote.

Janata Dal (United) (JDU) is Bihar-based with socialist leanings and is led by state Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. It won 20 Lok Sabha seats and 1% of the 2009 vote, and is a member of the opposition NDA coalition.

Two other notable regional parties are West Bengal's Trinamool Congress and Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). The former, led by state Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, won 19 seats and 3% of the 2009 vote, and withdrew acrimoniously from the UPA in September 2012. The DMK won 18 seats and 2% of the vote, and is a UPA member.

Major Party Representation in India's 15th Lok Sabha



Sources: Election Commission of India, Government of India agencies, and party websites

Contact: K. Alan Kronstadt, Specialist in South Asian Affairs, 7-5415