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Lawrence Sáez & Gurharpal Singh (Eds.). *New dimensions of politics in India: The United Progressive Alliance in Power*. London: Routledge. 2012.

In this volume, Sáez and Singh succeed in assembling an interesting group of specialists with the purpose of reviewing the management and public policies of India's present governing coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which represents a new dimension in the Indian political scene. Since the beginning of the 1990s, the governments that have come to power have been the result of both federal and regional party coalitions. However, none of these coalitions has managed to remain in power for the normal five-year period of a legislative body (except for the coalition headed by the Congress Party between 1991-1996 and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), between 1999-2004) or be re-elected in by Indian voters for a second consecutive term, mainly due to the ideological and programmatic divergences of their members. The UPA, formed after the 2004 elections, and succeeding the leadership of the more nationalist NDA coalition, has ended the apparently inevitable one-term only fate of minority governments in the Indian political system. This book adds to the recent literature devoted to the theoretical rethinking of minority governments. Both during its first term in office (2004-2009) and its current term, the UPA has been made up of a group of primarily secularist political groupings, the social democracy promoting Congress Party being the majority force.

The purposes set by this collaborative effort are "... [to] understand the new innovations in UPA's policies... [and to] evaluate the effectiveness of these policies as measured against their proclaimed aim and objectives" (p. 6). The book intends to focus on the analysis of public policies designed and implemented by the UPA-I and on its ongoing second term of governance. However, the assessment of the UPA's performance is also made both implicitly and inevitably on the basis of the past performance of the NDA, which consisted of right-wing nationalist parties—mainly the *Bharatiya Janta Party*, or Hindu Nationalist Party, (BJP). The chapters may be grouped together in three major themes: governance, secularism, and security.

The re-election of the UPA (led by the Congress Party) in the 2009 general elections caused several myths: It was argued that the victory of the alliance headed by the Congress Party was the result of the "youth majority vote." It was also said that Rahul Gandhi's participation was a sign of the generational change in the structure of the party and, therefore, of the government itself, making the Congress Party an attractive option for the nation's younger population. Paradoxically, that sector of society did not contribute significantly to the re-election. In fact, they were the group least enthusiastic about supporting a second UPA government. So, what was the real reason for their second term success? Had they been successful in fighting poverty? James Manor states in his chapter "Did poverty help re-election?" that government programs focusing both on alleviating conditions specific to the rural poor and on improving urban citizens' quality of life with no distinction among citizens' demographic profiles partially contributed to the party's triumph at the polls. Manor explains:

The Congress-led government in New Delhi also reinforced its spending on poverty initiatives with several new laws that sought—in part or entirely—to benefit poorer groups ... These include the Right to Information Act 2005 (which reinforced the demand-driven character of some other programs), the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, and the Forest Right Act 2006. (p. 17)

If other schemes are taken into account (i.e. midday meals, the total sanitation campaign, a national rural employment guarantee), then we may conclude that the most marginalized groups

of society and the beneficiaries of those programs were indeed decisive in the elections. However, after analyzing official election figures regarding economic backgrounds, Manor concludes that many parties implemented such programs; the Congress Party was not alone in using such initiatives. Further confounding the election results was the finding that it was not only the poor who had voted for the Congress Party. As the authors note, “The figures also show that as we move up the economic ladder, the Congress share of vote increases slightly. That suggests that its victory is not explained by inordinate electoral support from less prosperous groups” (pp. 19-20).

Shailaja Fennell’s chapter, “Educational Exclusion and Inclusive Development in India”, analyzes the role played by the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) scheme in the UPA’s educational policy and concludes that this scheme, adopted and adapted by the UPA as an educational policy, was actually an order issued by the Supreme Court of India in 2005, resulting from a petition submitted by non-governmental organizations. Explains Fennell: “It was the interim order of the [Supreme] Court, on 28 November, 2001, that directed all state governments to provide children in government and government-assisted schools a prepared mid-day meal as a measure to relieve ‘classroom hunger’” (p. 42). It can therefore be deduced that the program implementation benefited the governing alliance. In this regard, Harihar Bhattacharya (“UPA (2004) and Indian Federalism”) claims that it is noteworthy that the execution of the central government’s public policies depends on the will of state governments.

The second section of the book tackles the UPA’s management and public policies, particularly the UPA’s emphasis on the de-communalization of Indian policies. In his essay “UPA and Secularism,” Gurharpal Singh analyzes the implications, importance, and meaning of the UPA’s reinstatement of the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) for the education system. Singh reminds us that the NDA had not eliminated the NCERT, but neither had it renewed the organization’s mandate, resulting in the creation of a body essentially specializing in the production of textbooks. One of the first actions taken by the NCERT upon its reinstatement by the UPA was to revise the books being used in the public education system in order to amend the “[saffronization]”¹ of education that had taken place under the NDA, which included the “raising [of] the profile of Hindu cultural norms, views, and historical personalities” and the negative “[portrayal of] other religions” (p. 58). It is worth reiterating that the 2002 Gujarat incidents,² which occurred under NDA leadership, could have been caused by the high level of society’s polarization at that time regarding other religious groups, particularly Muslims, resulting from the ultra-nationalist discourse spread in classrooms.

Steve Wilkinson in “The UPA and Muslims” tackles the state of religious minorities after the return of the Congress Party in 2004. According to Wilkinson, the fact that the UPA-led

¹ Saffronization is an Indian political neologism used by critics to refer to the politics of right-wing Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*) that seek to make the Indian state adopt social policies that recall and glorify the ancient Hindu cultural history and heritage of India while de-emphasizing the more recent Islamic or Christian heritage.

² The 2002 Gujarat incidents refer to a series of violent incidents including the Godhra train burning and Naroda Patiya massacre and the subsequent communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat.

government created the Sachar Committee³ proves its commitment not only to improving the living conditions of minorities but also to guaranteeing their access to education. However, the committee's recommendations, as well as those of other committees, have not been implemented through the schemes that were set out:

Instead of a focus on diversity and mainstreaming Muslims into caste-, income- and poverty-based programs in the private and public sectors, the party's leaders highlighted the delivery of more funds to minority-concentration districts, special measures for Urdu, and reservations for Muslims 'on the basis of their backwardness' (a caveat to avoid the constitutional prohibition on religion-specific measures). (p. 75)

This theme is linked to a wider one: that of affirmative action. Historically, the Congress Party has not taken a favorable stance on the creation of quotas for religious minorities. However, Rochana Bajpai, author of the chapter "Social Justice and Affirmative Action," identifies a change in the party's ideology and, therefore, the alliance it leads. Bajpai arrives at this conclusion after a thorough analysis of the party's legislative debates. The author compares the position of the Congress Party at the time of the Mandal Commission⁴ and then again during the 2005 debate regarding the creation of educational quotas for the *Other Backward Castes* (OBCs). Bajpai states that prior to 2005, the party's reluctance to favor such schemes was based on the perceived ineffectiveness of identity-based mechanisms for the achievement of social justice. Bajpai explains:

... [S]ocial justice was understood primarily in terms of inequalities in the distribution of material goods, and while it was accepted that these often overlapped with an inferior position in the ritual hierarchy, the implicit contention was that historical discrimination was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for socio-economic disadvantage. (p. 87)

At the time, it was considered that supporting "positive discrimination" of religious groups could be a new threat to national cohesion, bearing in mind the incident of the Partition.⁵ By 2005,

³ The Sachar Committee, appointed in 2005 under the UPA-I, was commissioned to prepare a report on the latest social, economic and educational condition of the Muslim community of India. The committee found that Indian Muslims lived below the minimum required conditions set by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and that while the Muslim population in the country was 14%, Muslims representation in the government was only 2.5%. To increase equity and opportunities for Indian Muslims in residential, work, and educational sectors, the committee proposed multiple strategies.

⁴ The Mandal Commission was established in 1979 with a mandate to "identify the socially or educationally 'backward'." The commission was to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination. In 1980, the commission's report recommended the implementation of affirmative action, whereby members of lower castes would be given exclusive access to a certain portion of government jobs and slots in public universities,

⁵ The partition of India was set forth in the Indian Independence Act 1947 and resulted in the dissolution of the British Indian Empire and the end of the British Raj. It resulted in a struggle between the newly constituted states of India and Pakistan and displaced up to 12.5 million people, with estimates of loss of life varying from several hundred thousand to a million (most estimates of the numbers of people who crossed the boundaries between India and Pakistan in 1947 range between 10 and 12 million). The violent nature of the partition created an atmosphere of mutual hostility and suspicion between India and Pakistan that plagues their relationship to this day.

however, a change was seen, not only in the approach towards religious minorities but also in the social inclusion of the most economically deprived groups. Quotas are no longer seen as a divisive factor but as a mechanism to foster national and social integration.

The final section of the book focuses on foreign, energy, and security policies. Kanti Bajpai analyzes the UPA's management of India's international relations, concentrating on, in three separate sub-chapters, India's relationship with the U.S., Pakistan, and China. Bajpai's work is descriptive and rather uncritical; I elaborate as follows. The United States sub-chapter is actually concentrated on the implications of the negotiation and execution of the nuclear deal between the two countries, also known as the "123 Agreement." In this section, there are numerous contributions from another author, Raja Mohan. The reader wonders whether there should be a limit for quotes used by an author in order to avoid the risk of becoming the spokesperson for another's arguments. In this sense, both authors emphasize the fact that negotiations were not only started by the NDA and continued under the same terms and conditions by the UPA, but also that this meant the culmination of one of the most transcendent aspirations for Indian scientists and both left- and right-wing politicians: that India be *de facto* recognized as a nuclear state.

I disagree with both authors regarding their assertion that India is "using" democracy as a foreign policy strategy. (Mohan has used this argument in other works in order to point out that this precise topic is the foundation of the "quasi-natural" alliance between the United States and India). Were it the case, however, that India's apparent efforts to implement democratic policies served only to achieve certain foreign policy goals, U.S. diplomacy would refer to India as an "ally" (an associate with whom to cooperate) but not, as it does, a "partner," which implies a fundamentally shared set of objectives and a close, personal relationship. Bajpai also has a remarkably hard-headed approach to India's relationships with Pakistan and China; thus, India's relationships with Pakistan and China are portrayed as being in a state of a permanent conflict. I consider that such an assertion implies a Manichaeian view of reality. Are the dynamics of a bilateral relationship reduced simply to conflict and cooperation? If so, it is no wonder that Bajpai has considered India's relationship with the United States a significant point for the UPA, since it is evident and essential, at least for him, that the U.S. act as the mediator between both India and Pakistan and India and China.

In his chapter "India's Energy Security During the UPA Government," Lawrence Sáez carries out a wide and interesting projection of India's energy needs. This subject has both political and economic implications, taking into account the fact that India is not only not an oil producer but is one of the top ten oil importers. Sáez therefore states that "energy security has become one of the most important challenges for India's domestic economic development, namely in terms of the ability of energy supply to make economic growth sustainable as well as redistributive" (p. 113). Rahul Roy-Chaudhury finishes this collective work by analyzing the government's security strategy, particularly emphasizing the management of terrorism threats. Roy-Chaudhury's work is noteworthy, considering the few studies recognizing in Hindu nationalist groups an internal threat to the country's stability.

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