

Address at the ISAS Forum

by

Ambassador Shyam Saran

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I wish to thank the Institute of South Asian Studies, its Director Prof Tan Tai Yong and Ambassador Gopinathan Pillai for inviting me to this high level Forum on the Indian Elections. You certainly have the timing right-catching the polling momentum at its very crest, when 8 of the 9 phases have been completed. The last phase will be over on May 12 and thanks to the use of electronic Voting Machines, an incredible one million and four hundred thousand of them, we shall have the final results by May 16 and perhaps a new government in place by May 18. The post election mood of anticipation cannot match the pre-election suspense that we savour at the moment, and entire tribes of pollsters, psephologists and yes astrologers would by then have mostly slunk away in serial disgrace, though some, thanks to the laws of probability and nothing more, may have got a few of the sums right. So compliments on getting the timing right and therefore people's attention. For this knowledgeable audience, it should not be necessary to spell out the breathtaking numbers that proud Indians love to reel out whenever Indian elections are discussed. But yes, it is difficult for people to grasp that by May 16, we would probably have had an unprecedented 67% of an electorate of 814.5 million exercising their franchise, determining the fate of political aspirants in 543 constituencies, each representing an average of 300,000 voters. Just by way of comparison and not to make you feel small, perish the thought, Singapore has 87 parliament seats with a voting electorate of 2.2 million.

It is legitimate for people to ask and this is frequently the case, that if India can repeatedly and successfully organize by far the largest electoral exercise in human history, why should it not achieve similar success in nation building? I wish it were so simple. India is usually very good at event management, even on a gigantic scale, such as the Kumbh Mela, but attention wanders on process management. It's like having the Big, Fat Indian Wedding but the marriage itself may not turn out to be so exciting. On the other hand it just might if one is lucky.

I use this analogy to caution people in assessing post-election prospects of India on the basis of election results alone. There may be fractious in-laws and recalcitrant family folk who may muddy even the best script that a new leadership may roll out. We have seen this before and may do so again though I hope not.

What makes the 16th general elections different from its predecessors? Do these departures reflect deeper social and economic changes and how may these impact on India's future trajectory?

The current elections will have seen the active participation of 150 million first time and young voters with 14% of them in the 18 to 19 years age group. They are both urban and rural and thanks to mass media their aspirations are the same. They wish to have better educational and employment opportunities; they want a decisive leadership which can deliver both better governance and a rapidly developing economy. One aspect of the Aam Admi phenomenon was that it dissipated much of the cynicism that had taken hold among India's populace that politics will remain mired in the same disabilities as before. It suddenly became clear that change was indeed possible and within reach even if the Aam Admi has faltered since its early success. The extraordinary story of the rise of Narendra Modi was also a story of traditional politics and politicians no longer being an immutable reality. This is in some sense an outsiders' election and this is different. The high turnout, which in some states touched over 85% is reflective of this new mood.

This, of course, sets a high bar for any incoming government and failure to deliver on these expectations may spell an even more dramatic political debacle than the UPA-II has had to contend with. The voting public wants everything they see lacking in the Congress led government. The Finance Minister, Chidambaram said it right recently though belatedly that his Party had failed to recognise that in the past decade, a new aspirational India had emerged, very different from the old stereotype of what he called a petitioning or what I call an entitlement

habituated India. People even in the most remote and poorest corners of India want empowerment and personal dignity not entitlement through hand outs. This election reflects the enormous change in India, brought about as a result of rapid economic and social development as well as the country's relentless if sometimes reluctant integration into the global economy.

Another aspect of the same socio-economic transformation of India is how much modern technology has embedded itself into the country's political and social processes. This is, of course, most dramatically represented by the 3-D hologram Modi giving darshan or audience to millions of his supporters in multiple locations simultaneously. But Google, Facebook and Twitter have also become indispensable players in the election process, connecting candidates to voters, voter to voter and pollsters to the public all in real time. There are an estimated 200 million Internet users, 100 million Facebook users and 33 million Twitter accounts in India and a billion mobile telephones which are powerful communication platforms. Mr Modi has 3.6 million Twitter followers, Mr Kejriwal over 1.5 million. No guesses for who are the majority using the social media- they are drawn from the same 150 million new and young first time voters I referred to earlier. Indian elections are being deeply impacted by and are in turn impacting on the use of social media, in ways that are not always very clear, beyond the print and electronic media which had hitherto remained the staple of electioneering.

If one should not trust pollsters, psephologists and astrologers, can one say anything at all about the broad trends in these elections? There is no doubt that there is widespread disappointment and frustration over the failure of UPA-II, in particular, its failures on the governance and economic fronts. This will be a vote against Congress and it is likely that the Party will record its lowest tally ever. Will the votes it will lose go mostly to the BJP? That is not entirely clear because of the many political parties in the fray and the continuing appeal of regional parties and the salience of local issues. The political arithmetic gets complicated once you begin to disaggregate to the constituency level, where vote share does not always align with seat share, thanks to the first past the post system with several contending candidates in each constituency. While there is likely to be a significant vote swing in favour of BJP overall, its seat share may either see a smaller shift or contrary wise a bigger shift in comparison. That uncertainty will remain until after the election results are announced. The coalition pattern which has entrenched itself since 1996 will probably prevail but whether the largest party leading it will have seats close enough to absolute majority will determine the scope for decisive action. A presidential style campaign may not necessarily yield a presidential style government irrespective of the personalities involved. The 16th general elections are giving India another chance at playing to win rather than playing it safe to a draw as they say about Indian cricket today; at reaching out for the World Cup not just once or maybe twice to make you happy but each and every time.

Unique among the major emerging economies, India has a young, still growing and aspirational population, which could deliver a sustained and transformational growth punch if empowered through education and skills appropriate to a modern, globalised economy. To be globally competitive and to begin to aspire to set standards of excellence for the rest of the world, India will need to unleash the creative and innovative energies of its younger generation and that requires massive investment in human resource development, both in quantity and quality. This to my mind is the over-riding challenge a new government, whatever its persuasion, will have to confront.

India's aspirations must be directed towards a concept of prosperity and well-being different from that which has defined Western societies and which drives China's own spectacular growth story. In an increasingly resource and particularly energy constrained world which is under serious and growing threat of ecological degradation, current patterns of growth are no longer sustainable or even viable. These stresses and strains are further exacerbated by global Climate Change and you are all familiar, I am sure, with the dire predictions of the 5th Assessment Report of the IPCC released recently. The resource and energy intensive, waste generating and ecologically unsustainable patterns of production and consumption that characterise advanced industrial societies are simply not viable for India and will soon become unviable even within the developed world. India is still at an early phase of its development trajectory with much of its infrastructure

remains to be built. It has development choices that other emerging economies may not have and therefore there is an opportunity to build a globally competitive economy which generates material well-being and higher standards of living consistent with ecological sustainability. This is another strategic choice which will confront a new political dispensation.

India's democracy is an inspiring achievement. It has provided space for multiple identities and diverse religious and cultural expressions to flourish together within its fold. In an increasingly globalised and shrinking world, nations and societies which are successful in handling plurality and are comfortable in a cosmopolitan environment, have greater prospects of success. Those which find comfort in shrinking the space around them, defined through increasingly narrow identities are likely to wither and fail. The election campaign we have been witnessing in India asserts India's expansive inclusivity and its young voters appear to have transcended the social and sectarian divides which have been a constant overlay on Indian politics. That is an encouraging trend and I remain optimistic about India's future.

Thank you for your attention

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