India organizes the real Mother of all Elections

The 7th of April is the starting day of the parliamentary elections in India, the results of which will be available on the 16th of May. Manjeev Singh Puri, India’s Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the EU, will guide us through the peculiarities of this prolonged and gigantic election operation. He will elucidate the relations between national parliament and the state level, big names and small ones, international themes and local issues. And what about Indians in Belgium: will they vote as well?

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In Belgium, there are about 9,500 Indians-with-Indian-passports, with an equal number of people of Indian descent but without Indian nationality. The first category has a right to vote, the second does not. In order to make use of their vote, Non Resident Indians (NRIs, in the official jargon) first have to register in one of the 543 Indian electoral districts. They will also have to be present in their constituency the day the election caravan calls in at their district, so as to cast their vote. The result of this regulation is that more than 20 million NRIs across the world will be virtually absent in the elections. This year, 11,800 of them have registered.

With almost 815 million citizens entitled to vote, these parliamentary elections in India constitute the biggest ballot held in the world, as well as in history. Therefore, the very

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1 This expression can be read as a reference to, and implicit comparison with, the upcoming elections in Belgium on 25 May 2014, which are time and again referred to as the ‘Mother of all Elections’. This is why the emphasis here is on ‘real’.
numbers are overwhelming, especially for Belgian inhabitants, who thought they would themselves take part in the ‘Mother of all Elections’ in May. In total, 930,000 polling stations have been provided, where 5.5 million civilian staff and 11 million security officers (including army and police forces) will ensure that everybody will be able to cast his/her vote on one of the 1.4 million electronic voting machines. The entire democratic exercise will cost the Indian state about 35 billion rupees (with the current exchange rate, this equals 425 million euro).

India IS democracy

According to legend, Winston Churchill did not expect Indian democracy to be long-lived, except maybe in the form of a process which would bring to swindlers and charlatans. During the last half-century, South Asia has witnessed quite a few military rulers and putsches, but not in India, where representative democracy has been safeguarded particularly well – save for a short period characterized by exceptional measures during the 1970s, under the rule of Indira Gandhi.
For Ambassador Puri, it is extremely difficult to give an answer to the question as to why democracy thrived better in India than in the neighbouring countries. ‘Already, during the struggle for independence, people like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, but also Mohammed Ali Jinnah [the founder of Pakistan], fought for a representative democracy. India IS democracy’, he emphasizes. After which he proudly points out that it is the world’s largest democracy, in which, from day one, all citizens – men and women – were qualified to vote.

‘Today, India has no less than 1.5 million women who have been elected to the village councils or panchayats. This is more than the total number of women elected in the rest of the world put together.’ Yet, in the Lok Sabha, the Lower House of Parliament which will now be elected, only 10 per cent of the elected members are female.

The state legislatures are also elected every five years, but those elections only rarely coincide with the national elections. The President is not elected directly by the people, but by members of the two Houses in the national parliament, and the legislative chambers of the states.

The current President, Mr Pranab Mukherjee, was sworn in in August 2012 for a term of five years. Every state, meanwhile, has a Governor, who is not elected but appointed. They constitute the link between the national government on the one hand and the governments and legislatures of the states on the other.

Thus, the elections from 7 April until 12 May will, first and foremost, provide 543 new members to the Lok Sabha. Subsequently, the President can designate 2 additional members to represent the Anglo-Indian community. The Rajya Sabha, i.e. the Council of States (or the Upper House of the Parliament of India), is composed of representatives of the states and has 250 seats.

After the declaration of the results of the elections – which will take place on 16 May – the President will invite the largest party or the coalition with the most seats to form a government. Probably, the first estimates will be published after 12 May, when the last polling is over and the embargo on exit polls and opinion polls concerning the actual voting behaviour expires.

Diversity and decentralisation

In Europe, there is an increasing tendency to speak about ‘super-diversity’ in order to describe a society characterized by growing ethnic and cultural diversity. The Indian ambassador spontaneously uses the term ‘mega-diverse’ to describe his country. To begin with, the issue of linguistic diversity, a topic Belgians know about from their own experience: in India, Hindi is the official national language of the Indian government, and English is formally recognized as administrative language (i.e. as a ‘subsidiary official language’). In
addition, there are 22 officially recognized languages used in the respective states, besides hundreds of local languages.

Currently, India has 28 states and 7 union territories, but the southern state of Andhra Pradesh is being split in two parts, so that soon, Telangana and Seemandhra will come into being. Between 1947 and today, on several occasions, additional states have been created. Haryana was cut out of Punjab; Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand emerged from Madhya Pradesh and Bihar respectively; Andhra Pradesh was extracted from Madras; Mizoram has its origins in Assam...

The states are becoming more important, which is normal, says Ambassador Puri: ‘People want to bring government closer to their lives and their community.’ This could give rise to the deceptive idea that the states in India are comparable to the (geographical) regions and (linguistic) communities in Belgium, but Uttar Pradesh, for example, has 200 million inhabitants. Maharashtra has 112 million.

Often these states are based on traditional realities, says the Ambassador, since India has a history of thousands of years. Towards the end of the British period, it contained more than 500 princely states, all of them having considerable autonomy and their own traditions. ‘The notion of federalism is gaining importance and in the future the states will accordingly demand more regional power. Nevertheless, this evolution at the same time goes together with an increasing significance of the federation, i.e. of the nation state that India has become during the past seven decades’.

The Ambassador is doing his job: he is selling the idea of a nation in which unity in diversity is experienced as enrichment by everyone. However, there have also been separatist movements in India, amongst others in Punjab, in the northeast, in Kashmir. Has the Indian state learned from these movements and rebellions? ‘The most important lesson to be drawn is that the state has to be inclusive, that each individual Indian and each community must have the feeling that they benefit from being part of the Union.’

As a matter of fact, the local level – organized in panchayats in rural areas and in municipal councils in towns or cities – receives more and more responsibilities and competences. The budget for this local level comes from the central government or from the state government. These are all ways to bring government closer to the citizens, and to make sure that those who are elected remain accountable to the electorate.

The issue of transparency and the notion of accountability towards voters are receiving a lot of attention in India. Actually, the movement against corruption which unremittingly kept knocking on the same nail during the past years, often with media-sensitive actions such as the hunger strike by Anna Hazare, has, in the meanwhile, itself become a successful political party.
Coalition politics and power balances

One of the consequences of the decentralization of power is the rise of regional parties. As a result, the big national parties, Congress or BJP, can no longer hope to gather enough votes and to form a government on their own.

The current government was led by Congress, but contained about twenty parties in a coalition called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Similarly, the BJP is embedded in a large coalition called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). During the build-up to the elections of 2014, there has also been an attempt to establish a Third Front-coalition around some left-wing and big regional parties, but that front does not seem to get off the ground.

The transition from a rather British and binary political landscape towards a landscape of fragmented coalitions is a kind of natural evolution, reasons the Ambassador. It is the Indian way to create the necessary balances between the centre and the regions. In addition, it renders the discussions and differences of opinion about the direction in which the country should be moving much more visible.

‘In the early years, the debate was mainly held within the Congress party, now it takes place between a broad range of parties.’ Every democracy is looking for ways to enable checks and balances, he adds, even in presidential systems such as the US and France, where the ‘coalition’ often takes the shape of cohabitation or shared power between president and parliament.
**Development is the priority**

‘Development remains the biggest challenge for India’, says Ambassador Puri. During the last decades, the Indian economy has experienced an explosive growth, at this stage being one of the largest economies in the world. Yet, with an average income of 1,500 dollars per capita, India is still a poor country, each year adding on one ‘Australia’, i.e. more than 20 million inhabitants. Providing education and employment for all the youth is a huge challenge for policymakers.’

‘On the social level, too, inclusion must be the first task of the government, if only because it ensures the cohesion of the nation. But also from an economic point of view, a better distribution of growth is much more desirable than the concentration of wealth in the hands of some. After all, a distribution of prosperity also means a distribution of purchasing power.’

When I object that the Indian state has failed to transform the years of high economic growth into broad social progress, Ambassador Puri responds that – except for China – no country apart from India has ever pulled so many people out of poverty. So failure is absolutely out of the question, he says. Even the simple fact that India has 600 million mobile phone users is quite telling, he argues. ‘It is precisely this kind of progress which evokes higher expectations among people, which is good, because expectations make people ambitious, and that is what we need.’

The discussion about income inequality will be tackled in various articles within this MO.be-dossier, yet I wanted to know whether Ambassador Puri thinks that education has fulfilled its social task – because research has shown that only three-quarters of enrolled pupils actually go to school, and that at least ten per cent of the teachers do not show up. Furthermore, the actual numeracy, reading and general knowledge skills of the pupils are much lower than those foreseen in the self-prescribed curriculum.

‘It is absolutely correct that good education should be the first and most important investment in the future of all these children and youngsters. And the government has done something about it. First by means of a campaign to get everyone into primary school, then with a campaign to get girls to school, and currently we are looking at ways to provide good education for children with disabilities or for children in special circumstances. Ninety six per cent of the children are now registered as pupils in school. The challenge at present is indeed to improve the educational results.’

**Corruption and violence against women**

The priority that should be given to development by the new government, whatever the political colour of the biggest party, brings us back to the importance of the battle against corruption. ‘A country as poor as India simply cannot afford the losses caused by corruption’, says Puri. Therefore, all parties speak out against corruption, he claims. This sounds very
optimistic indeed in a country where it is especially politics, at all levels, which is so well-known for its corrupt customs. Yet, at least it does show that the topic is high on the agenda.

Those who follow India from a distance and via the media have also noticed the massive attention for a number of notable rape cases last year, in Delhi, Mumbai and West Bengal. Whether or not this theme will play an important role in the elections, Puri does not know, as the consensus on this topic perhaps has become too large by now. As an Indian, he would in fact like to make a statement here: ‘The only answer to this violence against women is zero tolerance. Women have equal rights and India needs their contribution. This is only possible if the violence against them stops. That is why it was so good that the public massively responded, that the courts have intervened immediately, and that politics has swiftly followed suit by voting for stricter laws and enabling jurisdiction.’

**Far away stuff**

All around the world elections are about the question of how the government can ensure prosperity and well-being. Foreign relations do not carry much weight, says Puri: ‘How many Belgians will let their choice on 25 May depend on the Belgian or European viewpoint on the crisis in Ukraine?’ Besides, according to him, there exists a relatively large consensus in India on the major themes in international relations. ‘Everyone agrees that India should play a bigger role in the international community, especially as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; that the international system should offer India more opportunities to improve the quality of life of its populace; and that terrorism – also in its international dimensions – should be combatted.’

Is there also a consensus on relations with neighbour and arch-enemy Pakistan? ‘Perhaps you can rewrite history, but geography is inescapable. Cooperation between both countries would be advantageous to all. That is why it is of the utmost importance that Pakistan stops setting up and supporting terrorist groups, and that it brings an end to a policy which gives these groups the space to locate and organize themselves on Pakistani territory.’

When I refer to the recent interview that MO* had with the Pakistani Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, in which he says that Pakistan ‘will from now on fully engage in a policy of non-intervention and peaceful neighbourliness’, Puri confines himself to a short but telling reply: ‘Non-intervention is an absolute precondition in order for the world to function.’

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