

Christians in India cheer election results: Secularists prevail

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Christian churches in India have applauded the upset election victory last month of the secularist India National Congress Party over the National Democratic Alliance, which is known for its Hindu-first message. After Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress Party, declined to accept the prime minister's job, the post went to a Sikh, the country's first minority-faith prime minister.

Manmohan Singh said that his government would not tolerate riots such as those in Gujarat state in 2002 (in which upwards of 1,000 Muslims died) and the anti-Sikh riots in 1984. "These things should never happen again," Singh said in New Delhi.

The election results "have encouraged us to restore our hope in the democratic system of our country and the secular fabric of our nation," said Ipe Joseph, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in India, a coalition of Protestant and Orthodox churches. Christians constitute about 2 percent of India's population (Muslims are about 12 percent and Sikhs slightly less than 2 percent).

The NCCI is a member of the National United Christian Forum, along with the Catholic Bishops Conference of India and the Evangelical Fellowship of India. The forum issued its congratulations to the "secular democratic forces" that won the election. "We note that this mandate by the people of India is to strengthen the secular traditions for which India is known the world over," said Archbishop Vincent Concessao, president of the forum.

The NCCI president, Church of South India's (CSI) Bishop Jeyapaul David, said the decision of the Italian-born Gandhi not to accept government leadership was "a wise step." Hindu nationalist leaders had threatened to make an issue of her foreign birth. David noted that by declining the post of prime minister, Gandhi "has taken the wind out of the sails of the defeated [Hindu] fundamentalists." In addition, Singh was the architect of India's economic reforms when he was finance minister ten years ago, though the nation still faces formidable economic problems.

Joseph partially credited NCCI's "Vote Consciously" campaign for turning out the Christian vote in many areas. The campaign appealed to voters to support secular political parties that would "safeguard the constitutional rights of the citizens, protect the rights of the minorities, and build a society where communal harmony will prevail," Joseph said. —*Ecumenical News International*