

ISAS Insights

No. 153 – 6 February 2012



469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Uttar Pradesh goes to Polls

Ronojoy Sen¹

Abstract

A seven-phase election will be held in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's largest state, between February 8 and March 3. The election is important from the national perspective primarily for two reasons. One, it might bring about a change in the federal coalition governing India with one of the two largest parties in UP, the Bahujan Samaj Party or the Samajwadi Party, finding a place in the federal government in return for Congress support in the state. Two, it will be a test of strength for Rahul Gandhi's leadership. UP elections are notoriously difficult to call, but what can be said with some certainty is that no party is likely to get a majority on its own leading to a scramble for post-poll alliances.

Introduction

The coming election in five states in India is being dubbed a mini general election. While that might not be entirely true given that general election, if it were to happen according to the normal schedule, is still two years away, what makes these Assembly polls crucial is the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections. With a population of around 200 million, UP would rank among the top ten most populous countries in the world if it were a nation. Given its size — the state sends 80 members to the Lok Sabha (India's Lower House of Parliament) — the elections in UP always assume greater significance than those in other states of the country. This time the UP polls, which will take place in seven phases beginning February 8, have taken on additional importance for two reasons. First, despite UP, often referred to as the Hindi heartland, being traditionally crucial to the fortunes of who governs India, the two

¹ Ronojoy Sen is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institute.

dominant national parties — the Congress and the BJP — have done poorly in the state in recent times. The Congress won 21 seats from UP in the 2009 Lok Sabha election and 22 in the 2007 UP Assembly polls. The BJP won only 10 seats in the Lok Sabha election and 51 in the Assembly polls. So this will be a test of strength for both the BJP and the Congress.

For the Congress, the stakes are particularly high since Rahul Gandhi is spearheading the party's electoral campaign and the results could well determine the future course of his political career. Second, the Congress is desperately shopping for allies at the federal level ever since its largest coalition partner, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, has been persistently blocking major policy initiatives as well as voting against it in Parliament. The two main players in UP, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), both lend 'issue-based' support to the government. In the event of a fractured mandate in UP, which at the moment seems most likely, the Congress could tie up with the SP, which has 23 MPs in the Lok Sabha, or BSP, which has 21, and in return bring either into the federal government. This would ensure the marginalization of the Trinamool Congress.

Perilous to Predict Poll Outcome

Predicting UP elections is always a perilous task because of the state's size and the complex interplay of region, caste and religion. What can be said with some certainty is that the Mayawati-led BSP, which in the last elections won an absolute majority with 206 seats in the 403-member UP Assembly, is going to take a hit. Opinion polls as well as local sentiments point to a fall in the seat tally for BSP. Two opinion polls, both conducted in November 2011, predict a dramatic decline for the BSP. The Star News-Nielsen survey predicts that the BSP will come down to 117 seats.² The India Today-ORG poll, forecasts the BSP's vote share will fall from 30.43 per cent in 2007 to 25 per cent in 2012.³

While opinion polls in India have often been wide of the mark, there is little doubt that the BSP has lost ground. Part of it could of course be ascribed to anti-incumbency. However, recent state elections results have shown that governments can beat anti-incumbency if they perform. The biggest black mark against the BSP is the perception that Mayawati, in her first full term as chief minister of UP, was running a very corrupt administration. In the India Today-ORG poll, 31 per cent of the respondents felt that the government had failed to curb corruption.

The biggest scandal to rock the state was the one involving siphoning of funds from the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM), a federal government scheme. The CBI is

² Telegraph India, http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111218/jsp/frontpage/story_14897525.jsp. Accessed on 30 January 2012.

³ India Today, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-2012-india-today-opinion-poll-mayawati-bsp/1/163597.html>. Accessed on 30 January 2012.

investigating the scam which is believed to involve officials in 72 districts. Mayawati has thrown out two ministers, Babu Singh Kushwaha and Anant Mishra, both of whom have been implicated in the NRHM scam. She has dropped several other ‘tainted’ ministers and 110 sitting MLAs from her party’s candidate list, but it could be a case of too little too late.

Mayawati’s announcement late last year that UP would be split into four separate states also does not seem to have resonated among voters in the way she hoped it would. Finally, the spending spree by the Mayawati government on building parks with giant statues of herself, other Dalit icons and elephants (the electoral symbol of the BSP), has not gone down well with voters. According to the India Today-ORG poll, 74 per cent of those surveyed disapproved of the statues. Here it might be mentioned that the federal Election Commission was too zealous by ordering in early January that each and every statue of Mayawati as well as the elephants be covered before the election. Not surprisingly, Mayawati turned this order to her advantage by calling it ‘casteist’ and ‘anti-Dalit’.

Notwithstanding the charges of corruption and maladministration, the BSP still remains a formidable force because of its popularity among the Dalits (the former untouchables) who constitute 21.1 per cent of UP’s population. The BSP has evolved from being a party of the Jatavs (the caste to which Mayawati belongs) to a party that is able to garner broad support among the Dalits. In the 2009 general election, 85 per cent of Jatavs, 64 per cent of the Pasis and 61 per cent of the other Dalits voted for the BSP.⁴

A Formula that Worked

One of the reasons for the BSP’s good showing in the 2007 Assembly election was that it managed to cobble together an unlikely coalition of Dalits, Brahmins, Muslims and Most Backward Classes (MBCs), which was dubbed the ‘Sarvajan’ formula. The BSP’s list of candidates for 2012 mirrors this trend. Tickets have been given to 88 Dalit or Scheduled Caste candidates, 117 to upper castes (74 of whom are Brahmins), 113 to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), most of whom are MBCs, and 85 to religious minorities. Mayawati is clearly hoping that the electoral arithmetic of 2007 will again work for her.

The BSP’s main rival, the SP, is likely to better its tally of 97 seats that it won in the 2007 election. A party that draws its support from the OBCs — primarily the Yadavs — and Muslims, the SP is banking on its own caste calculus and anti-incumbency sentiment. The party is sticking to its tried and tested ways by giving nearly 50 per cent of its tickets to Yadavs and Muslims. The only difference is that the face of the party is Akhilesh Yadav, the son of the ageing SP chief and former UP chief minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. Akhilesh has taken out ‘yatras’ to woo voters and to jumpstart the SP campaign, which was first off the

⁴ Christophe Jaffrelot, ‘Her Sarvajan Test,’ Indian Express (26 January 2012). <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/her-sarvajan-test/903996/>. Accessed on 30 January 2012.

blocks. It will be interesting to compare the campaigns of Akhilesh and Rahul, both of whom represent the future of their respective parties.

The SP is, however, caught in a race with the Congress to capture the Muslim vote in UP. Though the Congress has announced several sops for Muslims, it is yet to shake off the taint of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, when Congress was governing India. More recently, events like the Batla House encounter in 2008 in Delhi where two youths from Azamgarh in UP, who were suspected of being terrorists, were killed and four went missing, have turned Muslim opinion against the Congress. The SP in turn has used these events to its advantage and championed the cause of Muslims. If opinion polls are any indication the SP will be the single largest party with 132 seats and 25 per cent of the votes.

The Congress has been reduced to a bit player in UP for the past decade and had won only 22 seats in the 2007 elections. The Congress decline is illustrated by the dramatic fall from 29.13 per cent votes in 1996 to a mere 8.84 per cent in 2007. However, the Congress did much better in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections winning 21 seats. This time under the leadership of Rahul the Congress is looking to radically improve its position. Rahul has been concentrating for some time now on reviving the Congress in UP and has targeted the Mayawati government on several issues, including land acquisition policies in rapidly urbanizing areas like Noida.

A Gamble

At the same time, the Congress is also aggressively wooing the Muslims and the MBCs. The Congress has announced a 4.5 per cent quota for the economically backward minorities within the OBC quota, which was later hiked to 9 per cent by the federal minority affairs minister, Salman Khurshid. The Congress strategy is a calculated gamble since Muslims, who have in recent times supported the SP in large numbers, constitute 18 per cent of the state's population (in 10 districts they number over 30 per cent) and can swing the result in 130-odd seats. The Congress has also targeted the MBC vote promising a sub-quota within the quota for OBCs. In addition, the Congress is the only major party that has gone for a pre-poll alliance, tying up with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) which is strong in pockets of western UP and had won 10 seats in 2007. According to the opinion polls, the Congress will win 70 seats and the RLD another 15 making the combine indispensable to any party forming government.

Like the Congress, the BJP too has seen its fortunes decline dramatically in UP, falling from a high of 33.31 per cent vote share in 1996, following the Ayodhya movement and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, to 19.62 per cent in 2007. The BJP will be desperate to improve on its 51 seats won in 2007 and take third place ahead of Congress. It is this

desperation that has seen the BJP bring former Madhya Pradesh chief minister and Hindutva mascot, Uma Bharti, as its star campaigner.

The Congress' proposal to carve a minority sub-quota within the OBC quota has given a fillip to the BJP, which has branded the Congress as both anti-Hindu and anti-OBC. Part of the reason for pushing Bharti — who will be contesting from Charkhari in Bundelkhand — to the foreground is that she is from the OBC. That BJP is pulling out all stops to court OBCs is evident from the induction of expelled BSP minister, Babu Singh Kushwaha (who is also an OBC), into the party. While protests within the party and outside forced the BJP to rescind Kushwaha's membership, he will still be campaigning for the party. The opinion polls predict that the BJP will marginally improve its tally to 65 seats, giving it the opportunity to ally with the BSP if the need arises. But anything less than the Congress tally would be a setback for the BJP.

There will be plenty of other factors that will influence the eventual result: rebels contesting as independents, smaller outfits like the Peace Party and the Ulema Council acting as spoilers, and delimitation of constituencies. This is also the first major set of elections following the anti-corruption agitation by Anna Hazare in 2011. The Anna team has been campaigning in the poll-bound states for a stronger Lokpal to check graft, but its impact is likely to be minimal in UP.

Post-poll Possibilities

What can be said with some certainty is that no party is likely to get a majority on its own. Depending on the election result, it is likely that the BSP will seek the support of the Congress or the BJP to form government. Alternatively, if the SP does well it could tie up with the Congress. A SP-BJP alliance is untenable since Muslims are a major support base of the SP, and the Hindu nationalist BJP is anathema to a majority of them. A hung verdict is not good news for UP voters since coalition governments in the past have been unable to last their full terms. Before her last term, Mayawati herself has been pulled down thrice by her coalition partner, the BJP, with her chief ministerial stints lasting for four, six and fifteen months respectively. The worst case scenario, however, is no party being able to form a government and a spell of President's rule before fresh elections. Again this will not be unusual since the state had had four bouts of President's rule in the last two decades, with two of them lasting nearly a year each.

We will have to wait till March 6, when the results will be announced, to find out which of these scenarios play out in UP.

.....