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Bypolls in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar:

The Bharatiya Janata Party on the Back Foot

In the latest round of by-elections in three Lok Sabha ((Lower House of Parliament)) constituencies in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost in all three seats. The BJP's loss in Gorakhpur, which was vacated by Yogi Adityanath after he was appointed the Chief Minister of UP in 2017, to the Samajwadi Party (SP) was perhaps the most significant result. One of the most important aspects of the BJP's loss in Gorakhpur was the coming together of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the SP. If the SP and the BSP can forge an alliance for the 2019 national elections, it is likely to have a critical impact on the outcome.

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The latest round of by-election results in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, both States governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), either on its own or as part of a coalition, have come as a surprise to the BJP. The BJP's loss in the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) constituency, which was vacated by Yogi Adityanath after he was appointed the Chief Minister of UP in 2017, to the Samajwadi Party (SP) was perhaps the most significant result. The other Lok Sabha constituencies where the BJP lost were Phulpur in UP, vacated by the

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Deputy Chief Minister of UP, Keshav Prasad Maurya, and Araria, where the sitting Member of Parliament (MP) from the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) had died. Bypolls were also held in two Assembly constituencies in Bihar with the BJP and the RJD winning one each. One of the most important aspects of the BJP's loss in Gorakhpur and Phulpur was that the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) backed the SP, making the election virtually a two-way contest. If the SP and the BSP can forge an alliance for the 2019 national elections, it is likely to have a critical impact on the outcome.

Analysis of the Results

The BJP's defeat in Gorakhpur has come as a shock to the party since it had held the seat for the last 27 years, of which Adityanath himself was the MP for 20 years.² In the 2014 national elections, the BJP's victory margin in Gorakhpur was over 300,000 votes. That such a safe seat could slip out of the BJP's grasp within a year of winning a landslide victory in the UP Assembly elections is sure to have the party high command worried. What is more troubling for the BJP is that the vote share of the SP was more than the combined vote share of the SP and the BSP in the 2014 national elections, where both parties had contested separately. This brings into question Adityanath's popularity hardly one year into his tenure as the State's Chief Minister. In the 2018 by-election, the SP won 49 per cent of the vote share compared to a combined vote share of 39 per cent for the SP and the BSP in 2014. In contrast, the BJP's vote share fell from 52 per cent to 47 per cent in the same period. The situation was even worse for the BJP in Phulpur where the SP won 47 per cent of the vote share compared to a combined 37 per cent for the SP and BSP in 2014. In contrast, the BJP's vote share dropped from 52 per cent to 39 per cent. In 2014, the BJP had won Phulpur by a margin of over 300,000 votes, whereas in 2018, the SP's Nagendra Singh Patel won by a margin of nearly 60,000 votes.³

² "Gorakhpur, Phulpur bypoll outcome a lesson for BJP: Adityanath", PTI, *The Hindu*, 14 March 2018. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gorakhpur-phulpur-bypoll-outcome-a-lesson-for-bjp-adityanath/article23245142.ece>. Accessed on 17 March 2018.

³ "Election to the Parliamentary from the 51-Phulpur Constituency", Conduct of Election Rules, 1961: Statutory Rules and Others – Return of Election. [http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ByeElec2018/Results/51-Phulpur\(PC\)-UP.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ByeElec2018/Results/51-Phulpur(PC)-UP.pdf). Accessed on 17 March 2018.

The symbolic significance of the Gorakhpur result cannot be underestimated. Adityanath had addressed 16 rallies in Gorakhpur during the election campaign and announced a slew of projects for the constituency. However, the SP-BSP alliance upset the BJP's calculations. The SP's nomination of Praveen Kumar Nishad, a member of the Nishad (boatman) community, which is numerically strong in Gorakhpur, also paid off.

In Bihar's Araria constituency, the incumbent was the RJD's Mohammed Taslimuddin. The RJD had nominated Taslimuddin's son, Sarfaraz Alam, who defeated the BJP's candidate by over 60,000 votes. The result showed that the RJD still retains its support among Muslims and Yadavs, despite its leader, Lalu Prasad Yadav, being in jail.

The SP-BSP Alliance

An SP-BSP alliance in UP, which sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha, has the potential to affect the outcome of the 2019 national elections. In the 2014 national elections, the BJP won 71 of its 282 seats in the Lok Sabha from UP while its ally, the Apna Dal, won another two seats. If the SP and BSP were to come together in the 2019 national elections, they could significantly dent the BJP's seat tally in UP. If one takes as a yardstick the results of the 2017 Assembly elections in UP, where the SP and the BSP won a combined vote share of 44 per cent compared to the BJP's 41 per cent, the BJP could lose as many as 50 seats in 2019. It might be noted that if the SP's vote share is calculated only for the 305 seats it had contested in 2017 as part of its alliance with the Congress, its vote share rises to 28 per cent.

An alliance between the SP and BSP, however, would be difficult to stitch together and sustain till 2019. There is also no guarantee that the votes for each party will transfer to the other as smoothly as it did in Gorakhpur and Phulpur. There are several reasons for this. First, the relationship between the two parties has always been an intensely competitive one with a history of bad blood between the SP founder Mulayam Singh Yadav and BSP supremo Mayawati. Both parties had allied in 1993 for the UP Assembly elections, in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition, and even formed the government. However, subsequently, the two parties had several disagreements and, in 1995, Mayawati withdrew her support. Second, the alliance might not work at the ground level since the core support base of the two parties

– Jatav Dalits for the BSP and the Yadavs for the SP – have had a history of antagonism. A possible alliance between the two parties might end up sending confusing signals to their supporters, as well causing disaffection among party workers. Many of the local leaders too will be denied tickets since both the SP and the BSP could end up contesting half the number of seats than they usually do. Third, the BSP has usually been wary of alliances since its leadership feels that the transfer of votes benefits its partner more than the BSP.

There are some compelling reasons though for both the SP and BSP to pursue an alliance in 2019. First, both parties, particularly the BSP, are in dire straits following their poor showing in the 2014 and 2017 elections. For the sake of survival, the two parties might be forced into an alliance. Second, with a change of guard in the SP and Akhilesh Yadav effectively in charge of the party, Mayawati might find it easier to bury past animosities and work with the SP. Third, an alliance for a national election, unlike an Assembly poll, does not necessarily involve a decision on who is to lead the coalition, making coming together somewhat easier.

Conclusion

While the most recent bypoll results, along with earlier ones in 2018 where the BJP lost two Lok Sabha seats in Rajasthan, are significant, it must also be noted that these by-elections have limited predictive value for the 2019 elections. Bypolls are rarely given the same importance by voters as Assembly or national elections. This was reflected in the turnout for the bypolls in Gorakhpur and Phulpur, which was 48 and 37 per cent respectively and much lower than the average turnout for Assembly or national elections. Bypolls in the Lok Sabha constituencies are also usually fought on local issues and the results are not always replicated in the next national elections. Thus, according to one estimate, of the 35 Lok Sabha by-elections held in UP between 1962 and 2014, only in 11 constituencies did the same party go on to win the following national election.⁴

⁴ “Gorakhpur in perspective”, Gilles Verniers, *The Indian Express*, 15 March 2018. <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/gorakhpur-in-perspective-samajwadi-party-by-elections-phulpur-yogi-adityanath-5098126/>. Accessed on 17 March 2018.

Despite these caveats, the adverse results for the BJP in strongholds like Gorakhpur signal a mood of anti-incumbency, especially in States where it is in power. This has been reflected in national surveys, which have shown a greater dissatisfaction with the BJP compared to 2017.⁵ One of the findings of the recent Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies' 'Mood of the Nation Survey' is that the proportion of respondents "dissatisfied" with the Narendra Modi government has increased from 27 per cent in May 2017 to 40 per cent in January 2018.

The bypoll results have also had the effect of providing momentum to the opposition parties. Mayawati and Akhilesh are already in talks to contest a coming by-election in Kairana in UP together. It is too early though to say whether the collaboration in the bypolls will translate into an alliance for the 2019 elections.

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⁵ "Mood of the Nation Survey", Lokniti-CSDS-ABP News 25 January 2018 <http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Lokniti-CSDS-ABP-News-Mood-of-theNationSurvey2018-A-Report.pdf>.