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Indian Assembly Elections 2009: Another Blow for the Bharatiya Janata Party

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Abstract

This paper examines the results of the recent assembly elections in three Indian states – Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh. The Congress Party won in all three states while the principal opposition party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), suffered another defeat at the hustings. Apart from outlining the results of all the three states, this paper analyses the reasons for the Congress Party's victory and the BJP's defeat. A key observation of the election results is that, apart from Arunachal Pradesh, the Congress Party's successes in Maharashtra and Haryana were not entirely convincing. What unequivocally emerged, however, was that the BJP's lacklustre campaign contributed to the Congress Party's victories. The BJP, bereft of any leadership, virtually lost the elections even before they began.

Introduction

The results of the recently-held assembly elections in Maharashtra, Arunachal Pradesh and Haryana were declared on 22 October 2009. The Congress Party won in all the three states while the opposition BJP was, once again, left licking its wounds. Why did the BJP perform so badly in all three states? Were the Congress Party's victories really convincing? How did the other regional parties fare and how did they affect the performances of the Congress Party and the BJP?

The Election Results

The verdict in Arunachal Pradesh, where the Congress Party won 42 of the 60 assembly seats, was not surprising, as there was no real opposition to the Congress Party. Dorjee Khandu was retained as Chief Minister and sworn in on 25 October 2009.¹

The same, however, cannot be said of the outcome of the elections in Maharashtra and Haryana. In Maharashtra, the ruling Congress Party-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) retained power by winning 144 of the 288 assembly seats. This also happens to be the third

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¹ *The Hindu*, "Dorjee Khandu sworn in for second term", 26 October 2009.

consecutive triumph for the alliance. The Maharashtra results baffled the opposition BJP-Shiv Sena combine as well as the political analysts who were predicting a change this time round. The ruling combine was viewed to be inefficient in the state, and it was believed that farmer suicides and increasing inflation would bring about its downfall.² Yet, the Congress managed to win, with the BJP-Shiv Sena combine witnessing a decline in seats.

A decisive factor which swung things in favour of the Congress-NCP alliance was the role of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), led by the Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray's nephew, Raj Thackeray, as a spoiler.³ The MNS, with 13 seats, will make its debut in the Maharashtra assembly. One of the important outcomes of this result which would please the Congress Party is that it has won more seats than its partner, the NCP. In the 2004 assembly elections, the Congress Party won 68 seats while the NCP won 71 seats. This time around, the Congress Party won 82 seats while the NCP's tally decreased to 63 seats.⁴ Ashok Chavan of the Congress Party, who was appointed Chief Minister in the aftermath of the 26/11 terror attacks, has once again been entrusted with the onerous responsibility of leading the state.

In Haryana, the Congress Party emerged as the single largest party, winning 40 of the 90 assembly seats. The fact that the Congress Party failed to secure a simple majority on its own came as a surprise as it had expected a comfortable majority on its own. In the Lok Sabha elections, the Congress Party won nine of the ten parliamentary seats in the state. Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, who was sworn in on 25 October 2009 for a second consecutive term, was quick to admit that the Congress Party could have done better if not for infighting and faulty ticket distribution. The reasonable showing by the main opposition in the state, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), led by Om Parkash Chautala, which won 31 seats, surprised not only the Congress Party, but also the BJP which severed ties with Chautala some time before the polls.⁵

Key Issues for the Parties

The results in the Maharashtra and Haryana elections highlighted some key issues for the parties involved. Firstly, the BJP clearly needs to devise an agenda which can strike a chord with the Indian middle class and the young voters. At the moment, the BJP lacks a decisive programme and authoritative leadership, both of which are imperative for an effective election campaign. In Maharashtra, for example, while the Congress Party's track record on the governance front was far from flattering, the opposition could not corner the government on its failures.⁶ Furthermore, the strategists within the BJP need to sit back and introspect on decisions deemed as 'suicidal', such as contesting alone in Haryana rather than having a pact with a strong regional player such as the INLD. While hindsight is always 20-20, the stiff fight put up by INLD clearly showed that, with a united opposition to the Congress Party, the outcome in Haryana could have been different.⁷

The second point emerging from these assembly results is that while the Congress Party may have emerged the victor, the verdict in Haryana makes it unequivocally clear that there is no space for complacency or hubris of any sort. Using the results of the parliamentary elections

² *The Hindu*, "Hat-trick of triumphs", 22 October 2009.

³ *The Financial Express*, "Congress-NCP score hat-trick in Maharashtra", 23 October 2009.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The Financial Express*, "No joy for Hooda as Cong tally falls", 23 October 2009.

⁶ *The Hindu*, "Hat-trick of triumphs", 22 October 2009.

⁷ *The Financial Express*, "No joy for Hooda as Cong tally falls", 23 October 2009.

as a benchmark of popularity, the Congress Party was predicting a clean sweep. However, it ended short of even a simple majority in the state. According to *The Times of India*, “Hooda’s colleagues complained that complacency on his part almost did him in. The Congressmen acknowledged that they had underestimated the discontent over power shortage (and) price rise...”⁸

Conclusion

Anyone familiar with Indian politics would know that it is naïve to write the political obituary of any leader or party. In Haryana for instance, the INLD managed to put up a reasonable show despite facing an ignominious defeat in the Parliamentary election less than six months ago. The BJP would do well to keep this in mind. Some serious introspection with regards to its organisational set-up and genuine intellectual cogitation on the future agenda of the BJP may help to resuscitate it. However, at the moment, the principal opposition party seems directionless, headless and moribund. It may not be able to do much at this point in time, but it can pay heed to Sir Winston Churchill’s famous words, “Success is the ability to go from one failure to another with no loss of enthusiasm”.

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⁸ *The Times of India*, “Hooda falls short, but independents come to rescue”, 23 October 2009.