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Capital Loss for Congress in India

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The fog of war is confusing. The fog of defeat can be even more debilitating: the comfort of denial and post-defeat rationalization are its natural offspring. The Indian National Congress Party's comprehensive defeat in the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) elections in April 2012 has added to its growing list of recent electoral setbacks and its public response has followed a time-worn typescript. Swinging between defensiveness and despair, its official statements have ranged from the technical "this was not my election" response by Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit to the carefully crafted "it was a local election" comment by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Further down the pecking order, party spokespersons, struggling to find silver linings in the defeat, have half-haughtily, half-hopefully pointed out that they managed to win the last Delhi assembly election after a similar MCD rout in 2007.

The lone public voice of introspection has come from East Delhi MP Sandeep Dikshit who, in the first pang of defeat, talked of a general anti-Congress mood, a disconnect between the party and the people and national issues like price rise and corruption as key factors. The party has swiftly backtracked on this view but Dikshit, who is also the Chief Minister's son,

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should know: it is in his stronghold of East Delhi where the Congress has had the worst shocks, winning only 19 out of 64 wards.

It was an area that was absolutely central to Sheila Dikshit's return to power for a record third time in 2008 and it is home to several local party heavyweights and state ministers [Education Minister and Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Gandhi Nagar, Arvinder Singh Lovely; Urban Development Minister and MLA from Laxmi Nagar, AK Walia; former Health Minister and Shahadra MLA, Narendra Nath] as well as the state Congress chief and Member of Parliament (MP) from Northeast Delhi, JP Aggarwal. It has been specially nurtured by the state government with hundreds of millions being pumped in on flyovers and development projects; yet voters have turned away, as they have in North Delhi (only 29 of 104 seats) and South Delhi (again 29 of 104).

Why should any of this matter to anyone outside Delhi? It is always risky to draw general conclusions from a municipality election but there is always a certain symbolism to an election in the national capital. So what lessons does this poll hold and what does it really mean outside of its local context?

First, this loss comes on the back of the Congress losing the Bangalore municipality for the first time in 2010 and failing to unseat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-Shiv Sena combine in the Mumbai municipality, despite being in alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party earlier in 2012. Of course, people vote differently in local, assembly and national elections but it is hard to ignore the growing impression of the urban vote slipping away from the Congress.

In the 2009 Lok Sabha election, the party did well in at least 17 urban cities – it swept all seven parliamentary seats in Delhi, for instance – but the stink of big-ticket scams and a larger sense of stasis afflicting the central government has meant that something seems to have shifted, at least in urban India.

On a wider canvas, the political vocabulary of the Congress since 2009 has been so focussed on the rural aam aadmi that it has struggled to evolve an imagery that resonates with the aspirations driving urban India. Ironically, Delhi was the one place where the party did walk the talk on development, focusing its entire campaign on good governance issues. The Chief Minister was the party's main campaigner in this municipal election and nearly half of the party's 20-page manifesto was devoted to the state government's achievements over three terms in sectors. In that sense, the party's campaign was unambiguous that it was seeking a mandate in the municipal polls on the basis of the state government's performance, even as it sought to focus attention on the alleged corruption in the current BJP-run MCD.

The failure to translate any of this into votes means that the Congress must now ask itself serious questions. For example, the Congress lost ground in the assembly election segments

of every state government minister, with the exception of Arvinder Singh Lovely (in whose assembly constituency, the Congress won three out of four wards), which at the very least reflects a sharp trend of voter anger with the state government.

Secondly, the flip-flops over the Sandeep Dikshit argument seems a microcosm of the larger problem within the Congress, between an old guard that seems smug and arrogant in the cushiness of power and a younger second line that is increasingly gloomy and worried about the prospects for 2014. Every defeat produces excuses but the road to recovery can only open if the right lessons are learnt.

Third, in Muslim-dominated areas, Congress leaders failed to cut much ice despite trying to play a version of their tactics in Uttar Pradesh. The state Congress chief appealed to Muslims to vote in a consolidated manner and Sheila Dikshit raised the issue of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi but the party finished well behind the regional outfits and independents in Muslim-dominated areas. Elections after elections are showing that old certainties are changing.

Fourth, the BJP has won a convincing victory (138/272 seats overall) but the election of several independents and candidates from the smaller parties (as many as 57) means that national parties have to be on notice. The BJP comfortably outpolled the Congress by a good six percentage points but with only a 0.54% increase in vote share from the 2007 MCD election. Despite the magnitude of the loss, the Congress' vote-share actually increased by a little over one per cent.

The decline of the Congress certainly benefits the BJP but may not automatically translate into gains by itself. Despite the size of its victory in this local election, the BJP cannot rest easy as the focus shifts to bigger contests on the road to 2014.

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