

ISAS Brief

No. 305 – 3 December 2013

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Rajasthan Elections in India: A Mix of Royalty and Caste Equations

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If anti-incumbency has shown a decline in some Indian states, in others it still remains a persistent trend. Rajasthan, which went to the polls on 1 December 2013, is one of them. For the past two decades the incumbent government has been voted out in every election. The current Congress government, led by Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, faces an uphill task in bucking this trend. The voter turnout, according to latest figures, was nearly 73 per cent which was up significantly from 66 per cent in the last elections held in 2008.

While the pre-election opinion poll conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies predicted a handsome victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), winning around 120 of the 200 seats up for vote, in reality the contest could turn out to be closer. The Gehlot government has been generous with populist schemes, including free medicines in government hospitals and pensions for the old and destitute. In fact, according to an analyst, Rajasthan now has more “freebies” than any other state. It also became one of the first states to implement the National Food Security Act though it might be too early to assess its impact.

The Raje Effect

Congress, however, faces an opposition BJP which has been re-energised by the presence of Vasundhara Raje who was the state’s CM from 2003-2008 before Gehlot. Following the 2009

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general elections, where the BJP did poorly in Rajasthan, Raje fell out with the BJP leadership and kept a low profile. But she was brought back by the BJP high command in 2013 to head the party's campaign in the belief that no one else has Raje's charisma. In contrast, Gehlot is not known to be an eloquent speaker by any stretch of the imagination.

Rajasthan will also be a test for Gujarat Chief Minister and prime ministerial aspirant, Narendra Modi, who has been busy campaigning in the state. The future of Modi will preoccupy commentators until the national general elections in 2014, and Modi's role in state elections will be analysed like astrological conjunctions. Solid indications of a "Modi factor" will be hard to discern in most states, but Rajasthan provides a more significant test than other states. Since Gujarat is a neighbouring state of Rajasthan, Modi's impact will be under that much more scrutiny than more distant parts of India.

The Congress, on the other hand, suffers from an abundance of leaders many of whom do not see eye to eye. Besides Gehlot himself, the other Congress leaders active in the campaign were central minister C P Joshi, who was heading the party campaign, and two young ministers from Rajasthan, Jeetendra Singh, from Alwar's royal family, and Sachin Pilot, a Gujjar and the deceased Congress leader Rajesh Pilot's son.

Part of Raje's stature comes from her blue blood which carries much more weight in Rajasthan than anywhere else in India. A member of the royal Scindia family from Gwalior she is the daughter of Vijayraje Scindia, one of the founders of the Jan Sangh, the organisation which spawned the BJP. Raje's Rajasthan connection comes from her marriage into the Jat royal family of Dholpur in the eastern part of the state. Though she has long been separated from her husband, her electoral career goes back to 1985 when she won her first election from Dholpur in the 1985 Assembly polls. Since then she has steadily risen up the political ladder. Indeed there are no shortages of former royals in Rajasthan politics. One of the more prominent ones this time is Diya Kumari of the Jaipur royal family contesting on a BJP ticket from Sawai Madhopur, home to the famous Ranthambore tiger reserve. The Congress is rightly accused of dynastic politics. But in the BJP there is no dearth of sons of famous fathers contesting elections in Rajasthan. BJP leader Jaswant Singh's son, Manavendra Singh, a former MP, is contesting from Sheo; and estranged Congress leader Natwar Singh's son, Jagat Singh, is the BJP's candidate in Kaman.

The Caste Factor

Royalty is, however, no passport for guaranteed electoral success as the caste equations in Rajasthan are equally potent. Many of the erstwhile royals belong to the Rajput sub-caste, which though powerful is not that numerically significant in the state. There are several lower castes and tribes who hold the key to electoral success in Rajasthan. For instance, Diya Kumari's opponent in Sawai Madhopur is Kirodilal Meena, a BJP rebel and member of the influential Meena tribe (classified as a Scheduled Tribe by the government) which constitutes 12 per cent of Rajasthan's population. Instead of floating his own party, Kirodilal has joined

the National People's Party, formed by P A Sangma, a politician from the Northeast and a former Speaker of the *Lok Sabha*, Lower House of India's Parliament. Kirodimal has put up candidates for as many as 133 seats and hopes to do well in the 30-odd seats where the Meenas are dominant. Though he might not win too many seats he could well prove to be a spoiler for the BJP. Then there are also the Jats and Bishnois, who make up roughly 18 per cent of Rajasthan's population. The Jats were conferred Other Backward Class (OBC) status, which gives them quotas in government jobs and educational institutions, during Prime Minister A B Vajpayee's tenure.

The other caste group which will play a role in the electoral calculations are the Gujjars, constituting five per cent of the state's population, who have periodically paralysed Rajasthan over the past few years demanding Scheduled Tribe status which the Meenas enjoy. Though they have been unable to achieve their demand, the state government did give them five per cent reservation in government jobs under a "special backward class" category, which has now been challenged in court. This is in addition to the OBC status that the Gujjars in Rajasthan already enjoy. The Gujjars and the leader of their agitation, K S Bainsla, are likely to back the Congress this time around.

All the above factors make Rajasthan a fascinating contest and one that might not be as one-sided as opinion polls are predicting.

Table 1: Rajasthan

Population, 2011 census	68,548,000
Electors, 2013	40,608,000
Literacy, 2011	67%
Polling stations	45,334
Electors per polling station	900
Scheduled Tribe pop.	9,239,000 (13.5%)
Scheduled Caste pop.	12,223,000 (17.8%)
Sex ratio (females per 1,000 males)	928
Urban population	25%

Table 2: Rajasthan Elections, 2003 and 2008-9

	2003	2008-09
Seats in national parliament	25	25
<i>Won by Congress</i>	4	20
<i>Won by BJP</i>	21	4
Seats in state assembly	200	200
Won by BJP	120	78
Won by Congress	56	96
Voter turnout	67%	66%

Seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes	25	25
Seats reserved for Scheduled Castes	34	34

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