

# ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies  
469A Tower Block  
Bukit Timah Road #07-01 (259770)  
Tel : 65164239 Fax: 67767505  
Email : [isasijie@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasijie@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## **Recent State Assembly Elections in India: How Big a Setback for the Congress?**

Dr Maathai Mathiyazhagan<sup>1</sup>

In February 2007, the Indian states of Punjab, Uttarakhand (formerly Uttaranchal) and Manipur held their state assembly elections. Manipur and Punjab witnessed a high voter turnout. The Punjab elections registered 74.3 per cent turnout which was about 10 per cent higher than that in the last assembly election in 2002. Similarly, Manipur had a turnout of 75 per cent in the first phase and 80 per cent in the final phase of the election. However, the percentage of votes polled in the Uttarakhand reduced by nearly 10 per cent when compared to the 2002 elections.

India's governing Congress Party suffered losses in Punjab and Uttarakhand. The only solace for it, perhaps, was retaining the tiny state of Manipur.

Even though the elected new governments have taken over power in their respective states, many questions have arisen about the results. Is the Congress Party losing its popular vote base in these states? Is its loss a boost for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) opposition, providing it the impetus to push further? Are the results reflective of anti-incumbency? Do they indicate a referendum for the United Progressive Alliance's (UPA) coalition government at the Centre? Do they pave the way for regional equations, with the possibility of another political front (or third front) in India?

### **Punjab**

The BJP and its ally, the Sikh Akali Dal (SAD) Party, won 68 of the total 116 seats in Punjab while the Congress Party managed to win 44 seats. In fact, the BJP put up an unexpectedly impressive performance, bagging 19 of the 23 seats it contested. The BJP termed this victory a referendum to the two and a half year's old UPA government. The Congress Party obtained 40.9 per cent of popular vote in Punjab, compared to 45.37 per cent of combined vote share of the SAD-BJP alliance. The Congress Party had an increased vote share of 5.09 per cent when compared to the last election in 2002 while the SAD and the BJP had an increase of 6.01 per cent and 2.61 per cent respectively. In fact, there was no significant difference in the

<sup>1</sup>

Dr Maathai Mathiyazhagan is Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at [isasmkm@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasmkm@nus.edu.sg).

vote share of the SAD-BJP alliance – they retained almost the same vote share (45.97 per cent) as in the 1997 election. This implies that, even though Congress Party lost power in Punjab, it has not, in essence, lost much of its mass base.

However, it is important to note that the Congress Party lost the support of the Schedule Castes (SCs) and Schedule Tribes (STs). Punjab had a total of 29 SC/ST constituency seats and the SAD and BJP won 16 and four of these seats respectively, thereby increasing their tally by seven seats when compared to the 2002 elections. It is also important to note that the BJP did not secure any of the SC/ST constituencies' seats in the 2002 election.

The Punjab results seem to indicate the incumbency factor as a cause for the Congress Party's defeat. Indeed, the price rise of essential commodities played a major role in determining the election results, especially among the lower income groups like the SCs and the STs. The average inflation rate in India is around six per cent and this rate ranges between 10 and 15 per cent for food items. Quite naturally, this hurt the lower strata of the Indian society and the unhappiness was evidently reflected in the election.

## **Uttarakhand**

The Congress Party obtained 21 seats in the 70-member legislature in Uttarakhand while the BJP captured 34 seats. It is interesting to note that both the BJP and the Congress Party had an equal vote share of 32 per cent while the major regional party, the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal (UKKD), had a share of about eight per cent. It is interesting to note that the three parties had increased their vote share over the last assembly election in 2002. The BJP had a seven per cent increase in vote share, while the Congress' and UKKD's share grew by five and two per cent respectively.

Since the upper caste (*Thakurs and Brahmins*) and *Dalits* (SC/STs) dominate the state politics, there is not much scope for the other backward castes. This is one reason why the Samajwadi Party, which is in power in the neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, has made little inroads in this state. Apart from the incumbency factor and a reluctant Chief Minister (N. D. Tiwari) who shied away from polls, party rebels and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) were instrumental in the defeat of the ruling Congress Party in Uttarakhand.

In certain ways, the Uttarakhand poll outcome was a reflection of the Mumbai corporation elections. Both the NCP and the Congress Party were main allies in Maharashtra assembly elections and gained power in the state. However, the NCP contested on its own in the Mumbai corporation elections, leading to a big victory for the Shiv Sena- and BJP-combine alliance. The seat-sharing arrangement with the NCP in the Uttarakhand election fell due to opposition from state Congress chief, Harish Rawat, and his team. This proved costly for the Congress Party. Although the NCP failed to win the election, it was responsible for the defeat of at least five Congress Party candidates, including the Forest Minister, Navparbhat. On the other hand, the Congress Party's rebels won three seats and, in the process, damaged the prospects of many other official party candidates in Nandprayag, Pauri and Dharchula constituencies.

The Uttarakhand election results have remained largely bipolar – swinging alternately between the BJP and Congress Party. The pendulum has swung back in favour of the BJP.

## **Manipur**

Only in Manipur was the Congress Party able to retain power. The Congress Party gained 50 per cent of the vote share, compared to only 26.18 per cent in 2002. The Congress Party won 20 seats, leaving it just one short of an outright majority in the state's 60-member assembly. It won only 10 seats in 2002. The Manipur People Party and the NCP had an equal vote share of 8.33 per cent and they won five seats each. The BJP, on the other hand, was completely wiped out of Manipur. It had a vote share of 9.55 per cent and four seats in 2002.

The Congress Party's victory was remarkable, given the fact that there was widespread agitation in Manipur against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act 1958 (AFSPA). There were accusations of widespread atrocities against civilians under the pretext of battling separatist groups, with the security forces having unchecked powers under the AFSPA. The outcome of the elections, however, seems to indicate that the people want stability and continuity, thereby voting the Congress Party for a second consecutive term.

## **Implications of Election Results**

The Shiv Sena-BJP front won most of the municipal seats in Maharashtra state in mid February 2007. Now the Akali-BJP alliance has won a majority in Punjab. In Uttarakhand, the BJP gained a further 15 seats to make 34 seats in a 70-member house.

The left parties [such as the Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Parity of India (Marxist)] are unhappy with their election results and have started pressuring the Congress Party at the Centre to slow down economic liberalisation efforts. However, this dissension is unlikely to have any serious implications on the stability of the Centre government in New Delhi. It is also unlikely that we will see the emergence of a third political front, led by the left parties.

This trend and the revival of the BJP certainly provide a boost to the BJP-led alliance in India. The outcome of state elections and the resurrection of the BJP's popularity should be of concern to the secular parities. Though the BJP did not play the Hindutva card in these state elections, the BJP's basic ideology to create a Hindu state remains unchanged. On the other hand, the so-called secular parties in India, particularly the Congress Party, have not been able to project the secular image. There are also doubts regarding many of the Congress Party's leaders, particularly in the states. They are known to change their loyalty for election gains. The election results are certainly a wake-up call for the Congress Party and its allies, and they need to unite, less they suffer further defeats in the coming elections.

The eight-plus per cent economic growth did not seem to pay dividends to the Congress Party at the polls. The simple reason is that the economic miracle is being felt primarily by the upper half of the population. The lower half of the population has been largely untouched by this miracle. It is also a well known fact that capitalism has never gone down well in India. As such, the idea of progress without giving up the concept of welfare-ism is a challenge for the Congress Party. Cutting down petrol and diesel prices were insufficient and too late to help the Congress Party from defeat in Punjab and Uttarakhand. This shows that the increasingly literate and informed Indian population is not going to cast vote based on petty communal interest. The Congress Party needs to do more. It needs to look at issues of rural employment, health, education, water and electricity, if it is to win the hearts and minds of the people.

At the end of this round of moderately significant assembly elections, the net loser is clearly the Congress Party. The key issues of anti-incumbency, in-party feuding and the drastic rise in the prices of essential commodities eventually brought defeat for the Congress Party. It would be interesting to see how it picks itself up for the battles that lie ahead.

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