

ISAS Brief

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There's Something About Maya: Changing Politics In India's Largest State

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Uttar Pradesh is India's largest state. In fact, with a population of around 180 million, it is also larger than most countries across the globe. It's no wonder then to hear the epithet, 'When Uttar Pradesh sneezes, India catches a chill'. And what a sneeze it was as the voters of Uttar Pradesh elected the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of, by and for the formerly untouchable *dalits*, to govern the state with the first single party majority since 1991. The BSP is led by the inimitable Mayawati, who has just taken oath as the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for the fourth time but, for the first time, with a majority for her own party.

The meteoric rise of the 51 year old *dalit* leader, daughter of a low ranking civil servant, and formerly a school teacher herself, from humble beginnings to the top post in India's largest state is a tribute not only to her personal but also to the vibrancy of India democracy. Even a decade ago, it would have been difficult to imagine that a woman and a *dalit* would be elected with such a clear mandate in the Hindi heartland.

Mayawati's huge victory also sends a stark warning to India's larger national parties, whose base in Uttar Pradesh continue to shrink, and without which they can never hope to gain a majority at the central level. The Congress Party, which was led in this election by Rahul Gandhi, the great-grandson of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, and scion of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, the result was nothing short of a humiliating defeat. Far from its aim of increasing their tally of seats, the Congress Party actually lost some amount of the popular vote that it had polled the last time around. The party is in urgent need of reinventing itself. Politics in the Hindi heartland has moved beyond feudal considerations.

If the election result was humiliating for the Congress Party, it was nothing short of a meltdown for the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which was hoping to gather some of the ground it had lost in the national elections of 2004. The party turned in its worst performance since 1991, winning just around 50 seats out of 400 in a state which had help catapult it to national significance in the first place. The BJP, in its Hindu (some would say

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Hindi) nationalist *avatar*, had its political base set right in the Hindi heartland of Uttar Pradesh and the rest of north India.

With this rout in Uttar Pradesh, the chances of the BJP regaining power at the centre looks more distant than it did some time ago. It too needs to urgently reinvent itself as a more moderate rather than reactionary and communal outfit.

The defeat of the incumbent Samajwadi (Socialist) Party (SP), led by the former wrestler, socialist and backward caste (different from *dalit*) leader Mulayam Singh Yadav, and his socialite henchman Amar Singh, signals the voters' frustration with poor governance, typified in Uttar Pradesh by a constantly deteriorating law and order situation and cronyism and corruption of the worst kind in every other sphere of policy making. It also sends out a dire warning to those who revel in the political complacency of getting their 'electoral arithmetic' right. The SP thought its solid base of the Muslims-backward castes as unsurpassable. Passed comfortably it was.

Perhaps the greatest irony and lesson of this election is the Mayawati-led BSP's reinvention of itself. From a party meant exclusive to voice and express the interests of the *dalits*, it has now acquired the image of somewhat Nehruvian 'rainbow coalition', with Brahmins, *dalits* and Muslims. The only difference is that this formation was then led by the Brahmins. It is now led by a *dalit*. Mayawati campaigned astutely to bring Brahmins, a marginal political force during the rule of the SP, into her fold. She helped her cause by fielding a number of Brahmin and other upper caste candidates as well as Muslims in these elections. And thus she succeeded in weaning away votes from both the BJP and the SP. The Congress Party may have also been in a position to win some of these disillusioned and discontent voters but Mayawati beat it to them.

At the national level, the election result in Uttar Pradesh bodes well for a future 'third force' made up various smaller parties, each drawing its support from different regions and community groups. At this moment in Indian political history, these parties seem more adept at forming broad-based social coalitions than the two main national parties, in steady decline, do. Still the numbers' game makes it unlikely that a third front government, consisting of disparate parties, will be formed at the centre without the support of the BJP or the Congress Party. But that is for 2009, and two years is a long time in politics.

Right now, in Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati has an historic opportunity to turn the ill fortunes of the state around. The mandate is with her. She must now govern well and for every community and caste. The people of Uttar Pradesh must hope and, indeed demand, that her 'rainbow coalition' deliver the sunshine of development to the state, after years of roaming in the darkness of misrule.

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