

ISAS Brief

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The Uttar Pradesh State Election – Will It Change The Political Equation At The Centre?

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India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, elected a new Chief Minister in its recently-concluded election. Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) won 206 seats in the 402-member state assembly, becoming the first political outfit in the last 14 years to obtain an absolutely majority in the state.

In the election held from 7 April to 8 May 2007, the northern Indian state, with a population of 180 million, witnessed uniformed polling, with a voter turnout of 46.13 per cent. This was about 7.67 per cent lower than that in the last assembly election in 2002.

This election results have raised several important questions, not only in the Uttar Pradesh circles alone, but also at the national level. Are the leading parties, the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress Party losing their popular votes in Uttar Pradesh? If so, can we expect changes in the political equation at the national level? Are the results reflective of anti-incumbency of the earlier government headed by former wrestler Mulayam Singh? How important are issues of caste and religion in the state? Are the results a setback for India's reform programmes?

Playing the Caste and Ethnic Cards

The BSP had an impressive showing, winning 30.51 per cent of the votes. This represented a 7.32 per cent positive vote swing when compared to its vote share of 23.19 per cent in the last election in 2002.

On the other hand, the SP, the BJP and the Congress Party won only 97 seats, 50 seats and 22 seats respectively. There was also no significant difference in their vote share – they retained almost the same vote share as in the 2002 assembly election. However, it is significant that, while the SP's total vote share of 25.71 per cent was close to its 25.37 per cent in 2002, it lost 46 seats from the last election. Nonetheless, as its winning margins in 60 out of 97 seats are much higher than its opponents, the SP was able to retain the same vote share. While one

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could point to low voter turnout for the SP's defeat, allegations of corruption and the deteriorating law and order situation were, no doubt, significant factors in the SP's fall from power in Uttar Pradesh.

The Congress Party's vote share reduced by only 0.27 per cent – it had 8.69 per cent of the votes as opposed to 8.96 per cent in 2002. Rahul Gandhi was in charge of the Congress Party's campaign in the state. He addressed nearly 156 public meetings and road shows during his party's campaign while the Congress Party's President, Sonia Gandhi, addressed 23 public meetings and the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, five public meetings. Still the Congress Party failed miserably. It had very little grassroots support and its workers were not able to create a channel for support and an electoral vote bank. This was evident from the fact that the Congress Party was not able to garner more than 5,000 votes in 170 out of the 393 constituencies it contested.

However, the biggest loser of the election was the BJP. It obtained only 17.16 per cent votes as compared to 20.08 per cent in the 2002 election. The negative swing of 2.92 per cent was largely due to the upper caste (*Thakurs* and *Brahmins*), which have been the traditional vote bank of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, switching camps to the BSP.

It is interesting to note that the BSP has maintained around 21 per cent of vote share between 1980 and 2002. This *Dalits* (a category of the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe), a traditional *base-electorate* for the BSP, make up 21.2 per cent in the state's population. Prior to this election, the BSP did not win more than 98 seats in the state. So what turned the tide in its favour? In a shrewd move, the BSP courted the upper castes such as the *Thakurs* and *Brahmins* as well as the ethnic groups such as the Muslims. One in two Muslim candidates fielded by the BSP emerged victorious in this election. The religion card brought the BSP 30 seats compared to 20 seats for the SP.

Often accepted as features of Indian politics, the caste and religion cards, coupled with aspirations of the weaker and minority groups to seek political identity, provided the impetus for the BSP's triumph in Uttar Pradesh.

Implications of Results

The Uttar Pradesh election results dealt a further blow to the Congress Party. It has, since 2004, lost power in Punjab, Uttarakhand and Kerala. It also fared badly in the municipal elections in states it rules, namely, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Delhi.

The left coalition partners in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) have used the poor showing in of the Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh to pressure the government to slow down the reform programmes. If they get their way, such legislations as the Amendments to the Insurance Bill, which calls for an increase of the financial cap for foreign investors from 26 per cent to 49 per cent, as well as those relating to the banking and legal sectors, and the implementation of value-added tax system at state levels, will not see the light of the day. These are crucial for better governance and economic competitiveness for India.

In the light of the political blow suffered by the larger parties in Uttar Pradesh, it would be little surprise if the BSP decides to seek a greater role at the national level. If so, it could change the political equation at the centre. An electoral college, comprising Members of the Legislative Assembly and Members of Parliament, whose total vote strength is about 1.05 million, elects the president of India. Uttar Pradesh alone has about 0.163 million votes, most

belonging to the BSP. The larger parties, be it the UPA or the National Democratic Alliance, thus, need Mayawati's support for India's presidency. She could effectively play a critical role in the choice of the next Indian president.

Uttar Pradesh has the highest electoral college of 80 seats in the Indian parliament. Given the BSP's vote share in the state, it will control around 48 to 55 parliament seats, which will be crucial in the next general elections due in 2009. The BSP has also been making inroads into neighbouring states, which further fuels the belief of the BSP seeking national prominence. In addition, despite being a relative newcomer to Indian politics, the BSP has been able to lock horns with the likes of the BJP, the Congress Party and the SP and come out on top.

It would perhaps, however, be too premature to conclude that the BSP is a position to threaten the UPA. Its leader, Mayawati, has to contend with the courts on two cases, namely, the Rs.1750 million Taj corridor scam and disproportionate wealth asset case. Whatever the outcomes of these cases, they would quite inevitably cast serious doubts on her integrity and character.

Also, Mayawati has her work cut out for her in Uttar Pradesh. In the last four years, Uttar Pradesh has been turned from a revenue deficit into a revenue surplus state, with better collection of state tax revenue, rise in petroleum prices and an increased plan size. Recently, the World Bank agreed to fund three big projects, each worth around Rs.70 billion. It is also one of eight states in India to be earmarked for foreign direct investment promotion. This has brought in investments amounting to US\$124.67 billion. Despite these developments, Uttar Pradesh has failed to figure among the better performing Indian states. It has also failed miserably in delivering such public services as healthcare, education, water supply, sanitation and electricity.

Although the election was fought chiefly on the four "Cs" (caste, communalism, criminalisation and corruption) rather than on developmental issues, Mayawati is expected to fulfill the aspirations of the socially-polarised groups in the state. This would be her greatest challenge as chief minister. In taking office, she is also probably acutely aware of the fact no chief minister, other than Sucheta Kripalani in the mid-1960s, has completed a full term in Uttar Pradesh. What fate awaits her will be highly dependent on her ability to turn the state around and in her ability to manage the expectations of the castes and ethnic groups on whose shoulders she has risen to power.

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