

# ISAS Brief

No. 96 – Date: 22 January 2009

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## **Sukhbir Badal as Punjab's Deputy Chief Minister – Implications and Prospects for the Akalis**

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Sukhbir Singh Badal, son of Punjab Chief Minister, Parkash Singh Badal, was sworn in as Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab on 21 January 2009. At 46, the former represents the modern generation of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a Sikh-dominated party which is a constituent of the National Democratic Alliance, headed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He is an industrialist by profession and obtained a Master in Business Administration from the United States. Junior Badal has served as Minister of State for Industry during the Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government from 1998 to 1999.

During his father's previous tenure as Chief Minister from 1997-2002 and then in the current tenure since 2007, it is said that Sukhbir has been the driving force behind many decisions of the government – both administrative and political. During the 2007 elections, Sukhbir handled the election campaign and was quite successful in introducing new techniques of campaigning for the SAD. Apart from this, it is believed that, due to his insistence, 'development' was made an important slogan of the SAD campaign.

If one were to look at the political significance of Sukhbir's appointment as Deputy Chief Minister, first of all, it would be important to clarify that, not only is his appointment a step further towards ensuring that he does not have any difficulty in succeeding his father as Chief Minister of the border state, it is also to silence many of the critics in the party and in the opposition who are unhappy with the undue interference by Sukhbir in the government's functioning, in spite of having no official position. Earlier last year, Sukhbir was made President of the SAD so as to allow him to be more active in the affairs of the party and to build a rapport with the rank and file of the party.

### **Reaction to Sukhbir's Appointment**

What has been quite surprising and interesting is that there has not been any real opposition to Sukhbir's appointment from either within the SAD, a party known for its internal democracy, or the BJP. In fact, nobody has objected to the fact that, with Sukhbir's inclusion, there are now four ministers from one family in the Punjab cabinet. They are the Chief Minister, Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal (Sukhbir's cousin), and Minister for Excise

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and Taxation and Information Technology Adesh Partap Singh Kairon (Sukhbir's sister's husband). Bikramjeet Majithia (Sukhbir's wife's brother), Minister for Information and Public Relations submitted his resignation to the Punjab Governor on 18 January 2009.

The only quarter to raise some sort of objection to Sukhbir's appointment is the State Unit of the BJP, a crucial ally of the SAD – the former has 19 seats. However, after a few statements against Sukhbir's appointment, it too has gone quiet, after the BJP high command's acceptance of the appointment. The BJP high command is in no mood to annoy the top brass of the SAD. While the numerical strength of the SAD in the Lok Sabha is only eight, it is an important ally for the BJP for a number of reasons. Firstly, within the state of Punjab, the SAD's rural Sikh vote complements the BJP's urban Hindu vote. Secondly, the SAD has good relations with some other regional parties, such as the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) of Haryana, and has been instrumental in the INLD joining the National Democratic Alliance. Thirdly, for the BJP, even outside Punjab, the alliance with SAD is an illustration of Hindu-Sikh unity and amity.

As far as the SAD itself is concerned, there has not been even a murmur of discontent in public, at least. In fact, erstwhile rebel Akalis have welcomed Sukhbir's appointment. Apart from Bikramjeet, certain ministers in the cabinet have also offered to step down in his favour.

### **Party Politics and Acceptability**

It is too early in the day to analyse what impact Sukhbir's elevation will have on the functioning and performance of the government, especially with regard to governance and economic policies. His first test will be to galvanise the workers of the SAD for the forthcoming Lok Sabha elections. If he could ensure a good performance of the party and garner the support of the youth, that would be a big shot in the arm for him and increase his acceptability, both within his party and, to some degree, within the state, especially the younger generation of Punjabis.

Sukhbir's handling of the SAD's campaign in the 2007 Assembly elections clearly brought out the fact that he is an excellent public relations manager, aggressive and extremely pragmatic and ready to incorporate new paradigms into the Akali agenda. Sukhbir has also shown a desire to expand the support base of the SAD beyond its traditional vote bank – the Sikh peasantry. To ensure this, he has been focussing on getting more and more non-Sikh members into the Akali fold.

His other focus has been to attract younger Punjabis to the SAD. For this purpose, he has been focussing on strengthening the youth wing of the Akali Dal. He has also been taking up issues on drugs and unemployment – two issues which will affect the youth of the state in the long run. It remains to be seen how certain fence-sitters and the youth who Sukhbir is trying to win over will react to his overtures.

### **Punjab's Economy**

Beyond the election agenda, if one looks at the policy sphere, Sukhbir does not have much to show during his stint in the centre. Both as a minister and parliamentarian, Sukhbir was not able to raise any issues relevant to Punjab.

Ever since the formation of the current Akali government in Punjab however, Sukhbir, behind the scenes (in his unofficial capacity as ‘defacto Chief Minister’ as his critics say) has been trying to woo industrial houses such as the Vedanta Group and G. V. K. Industries, to invest in Punjab. Last year, he was also the brain behind the organisation of a convention of non-resident Punjabi businessmen.

Being a successful businessman himself, Sukhbir is a partner in The Trident Hotel, Gurgaon. While speaking to the media and giving speeches, Sukhbir gives the impression of having a clear understanding of what the state needs for industrial development. By now, being part of the government, Sukhbir has a chance to convert his words into reality by building a sound economic policy, which should not only attract investment to the state (which had a disappointing six percent growth rate in 2008) but should also stop the flight of industry from Punjab to other states.

Sukhbir did not commit himself earlier to populist issues such as subsidies and free power to the farmers since he was not in any official capacity. Now he needs to take a clear stand. Some hard decisions on these issues and a break from the policies of the past could play a crucial role in rebuilding the state’s fledging economy. His cousin and Finance Minister, Manpreet, has been quite vocal in his plea to remove all freebies for the farmers.

## **Conclusion**

At the moment, Sukhbir has been able to ensure that there is no dissidence to his appointment. However, in the days to come, the SAD’s performance in the forthcoming parliamentary elections and Sukhbir’s performance as Deputy Chief Minister will decide whether the SAD and, more importantly, the people of Punjab are ready to accept yet another Badal to lead them.

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