

ISAS Brief

No. 454 – 14 November 2016

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



UP's Ruling Party a Divided House

India's most populous State, Uttar Pradesh, is due to go to the polls in early 2017. But months before the elections, the State's ruling party, the Samajwadi Party, has been riven apart by internal conflict, thereby denting its chances of returning to power.

Ronojoy Sen¹

With the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly election due in early 2017, the ruling party in the State, the Samajwadi Party (SP), is embroiled in an ugly factional conflict. For the past few weeks, the UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav has been publicly trading charges with senior party functionaries, including his uncle Shivpal Singh, who is currently the president of the Uttar Pradesh unit of the SP, and making insinuations against his father and former UP Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav.

While the rumblings within the party were present ever since Akhilesh was appointed Chief Minister in 2012 after the SP won a thumping victory in the last Assembly election, the conflict became public on 24 October 2016. That day, at a party meeting, Akhilesh and Shivpal accused each other of working against the SP in the presence of Mulayam. This had followed the removal of Akhilesh as party president in September 2016, who in turn had divested Shivpal of key portfolios, prompting the latter to temporarily resign from all posts in the party and government. Following the public confrontation in October, there were efforts by the ageing

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

party patriarch Mulayam, who is popularly known as ‘Netaji’ (the ‘Leader’), to bring the warring factions together. However, at a function on 6 November in Lucknow to mark the silver jubilee of the SP, Akhilesh and Shivpal once again made jibes against each other going to show that the internal conflicts continue to simmer.

The squabbles within the SP – which involves other members of the extended Yadav clan, including Ram Gopal Yadav, a cousin of Mulayam and Member of Parliament, who has sided with Akhilesh as well as an outsider Amar Singh, a close ally of Mulayam whom Akhilesh accuses of meddling in party affairs – has shades of the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. But it is also a stark reminder of the frailties of political parties run by families or political dynasties. While the Congress is most often held up as the prime example of a dynastic party, there are several such regional parties across India where one family has a firm hold on the party. These include bigger regional parties such as the DMK in Tamil Nadu as well as smaller ones like Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh. A common factor among these regional parties is the virtual absence of institutional structures, which has led to a concentration of power in one leader or a family.

The SP, which was formed in 1992, grew out of the socialist movement led by Ram Manohar Lohia,² the agrarian party, Lok Dal, led by Charan Singh,³ and the backward caste movements of the 1960s. However, by the mid-1990s the SP, under Mulayam, had little of its ideological trappings and had been transformed into a party drawing its support from the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), primarily the Yadavs, and Muslims. Over a quarter of the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in the SP are currently Yadavs and the figure was as high as 49.6% in 1993.⁴ The SP has also acquired a reputation as a party with a substantial number of musclemen and criminal elements. Though Mulayam was the party supremo, there were till the early-2000s others such as Janeshwar Mishra, co-founder of the SP, who could keep him in check. But with the passing of the founders, Mulayam and his family wrested the control of the party. Indeed, the SP can be distinguished from other dynastic parties by the number of family members in leadership positions, who preside over a complex patronage system. By one count, the SP currently has 16 members from Mulayam’s family active in the party.

The appointment in 2012 of Akhilesh, at 38 years of age the youngest Chief Minister in India, was in part to connect with the youth in UP as well as to shed the unsavoury image that the

² Ram Manohar Lohia (1910-67) is credited with coming up with a distinctly Indian version of socialism.

³ Charan Singh (1902-87), a peasant leader, was briefly Prime Minister of India in 1979-80.

⁴ Gilles Verniers, “Samajwadi Party, family, continuity,” *The Indian Express*, 30 September, 2016.

party had become associated with. Akhilesh was successful to some extent in getting the party to acquire a pro-development image. But throughout his tenure as Chief Minister he has had to contend with a recalcitrant senior leadership, including his relatives who have been uneasy about Akhilesh's popularity, as well as factionalism within the party. His efforts to combat the criminalisation of the party also faced resistance. Before the 2012 elections, Akhilesh had spoken up against the induction a well-known mafia don into the party. In fact, one of the sticking points in recent times between Akhilesh and his uncle Shivpal was the proposed pre-poll merger of the SP with a small outfit, the Quami Ekta Dal, led by Mukhtari Ansari, a jailed mafia don.

When the internal contradictions within the party spilled out into the public in October 2016, there was talk of Akhilesh splitting the party, a charge that was made by Shivpal himself. However as of now such talk had died down and there is an uneasy truce between the different factions in the SP. While the fragile peace might hold till the elections, there is little doubt that the ugly squabbling within the party has severely dented the chances of the SP in the coming election. It is also likely to boost the SP's rivals. The Bahujan Samaj Party, headed by former UP Chief Minister Mayawati, is best placed to benefit from SP's troubles and could well win over part of the lower caste and Muslim vote bank of the SP. At the same time, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which won a landslide victory in UP in the 2014 national election, is likely to attract a chunk of the OBC vote making both these parties the frontrunners in the 2017 state polls.

.