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India's New President and Vice-President: The Elections and their Impact

The recently-held presidential and vice-presidential polls in India were a formality, given that the ruling National Democratic Alliance had the numbers in its favour. However, the margins of victory illustrated the disunity in the opposition ranks and could be seen as a precursor to the 2019 national elections.

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As in the case of the presidential elections in India in July 2017, there were no surprises in the vice-presidential elections in August 2017. On both occasions, the candidates put up by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) – Ram Nath Kovind for president and M Venkaiah Naidu for vice-president – won rather easily. Kovind won 66 per cent of the votes in the electoral college while Naidu garnered 516 out of a potential 785 votes.

In spite of the ease with which both Kovind and Naidu won, there were differences in the two elections. The first was procedural. Unlike the presidential elections, where the electoral

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college comprised both central and state legislators; for the vice-president, the electors comprised legislators in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) and Lok Sabha (Lower House) of the parliament. This potentially meant that the election for the vice-president could have been closer, given that the NDA is well short of majority in the Rajya Sabha. In reality, this did not happen, as shall be explained later. Second, there was a difference in the candidates put up for the two posts by the NDA. Kovind, who was elected president, was a virtual unknown whose caste identity – that of a Dalit or former untouchable – was his strongest suit. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BJP has been making a concerted effort to reach out to the Dalits and other lower castes. The appointment of a Dalit president was part of that effort. Besides, the anonymity and non-controversial nature of Kovind is likely to come in handy for the government on the occasions that the president's decision can make a difference, particularly during fragmented mandates, assent to contentious legislation and imposing president's rule in states. In contrast, Naidu is a well-known BJP veteran who is a former party president and has held several important portfolios, the latest being Union urban development minister. His vast experience and popularity with politicians, cutting across party lines, will be an asset for the government.

Divided Opposition

The high margin of victory for the NDA's candidates in both elections was due to a divided opposition. For the presidential elections, the delay in naming of Meira Kumar, a former speaker of the Lok Sabha, by the opposition might have been a factor. Indeed, the defection of the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] to the BJP camp had been presaged before the presidential election when JD(U) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar refused to endorse Meira. In addition, there was cross-voting by opposition members in several states, including Gujarat and Maharashtra. For the vice-presidential election, the opposition named Gopalkrishna Gandhi as vice-presidential candidate before the NDA proposed Naidu. However, that too did not help since the opposition could not unite behind Gandhi. This becomes clear when one analyses the voting in the vice-presidential polls.

Eighteen opposition parties, led by the Congress, had together fielded Gandhi. They included the Biju Janata Dal, with 28 members of parliament (MPs), and JD(U), with 12 MPs, both of

which had switched to the opposition camp despite supporting the BJP candidate in the presidential election. In addition, the Aam Aadmi Party, with four MPs, had extended its support to Gandhi. Some independents and nominated members too were said to have backed Gandhi. However, Gandhi ended up getting only 244 votes, which was around 30 votes short of what he should have gotten if the MPs of all the 18 opposition parties had voted for him. The shortfall was partly due to the absence of nine opposition MPs, including two from the Congress, during voting as well as cross-voting.

Managing the Rajya Sabha

Unlike the president who plays an important role in certain situations, the vice-president's role is fairly limited. Perhaps the only crucial responsibility that the vice-president has to shoulder is that of being the presiding officer of the Rajya Sabha. This is currently critical given that the BJP is well short of majority in the Rajya Sabha even though, in July 2017, it became the single largest party in the Upper House with 58 seats, which is one more than the Congress' tally. The NDA, including its recent ally, the JD(U), now has 86 members in the Rajya Sabha, which is still 37 short of a majority in the 245-member House.

The lack of a majority for the NDA in the Rajya Sabha has proved to be a hurdle for the government in pushing through legislation. As recently as 31 July 2017, it suffered an embarrassment when the opposition successfully moved an amendment to a crucial legislation granting constitutional status to the National Commission for Backward Classes. The unseemly situation in Gujarat where the BJP tried its best to stop the Congress from sending one member to the Rajya Sabha illustrated the high stakes involved in the Upper House. Before the elections on 8 August 2017 for three seats in the Rajya Sabha, the Congress members of the Gujarat Assembly had to be sequestered elsewhere to stop them from being poached by the BJP. The Congress did manage to win one seat but not before alleging malpractice during the Gujarat vote and moving the Election Commission.

With the NDA unlikely to get a majority in the Rajya Sabha before 2019, when the next national elections are scheduled, Naidu will have an important role to play in shepherding the

Rajya Sabha. Having earlier served as parliamentary affairs minister and with good relations with politicians across party lines, he is possibly the best person for the job.

Conclusion

The presidential and vice-presidential polls were a formality given that the ruling NDA had the numbers in its favour. However, the resounding margins of victory highlighted the disarray in the opposition ranks. The defection of Nitish Kumar to the BJP camp, which was foreshadowed in the run-up to the presidential polls, has dealt a further blow to the opposition. The two elections have only gone to show that the BJP and Modi are extremely well placed for the 2019 national polls.

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