

# ISAS Brief

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## **Bypolls in India: Gains for the BJP amid a mixed picture**

*By-elections were held in the second week of April in 10 Assembly and two parliamentary constituencies, including Srinagar, across 10 Indian States. The results, by and large, confirmed the national strength of the Bharatiya Janata Party, but that was only part of the story.*

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### **Introduction**

Within a month of the announcement of the results of Assembly elections in five Indian States, including Uttar Pradesh, by-elections were held in the second week of April in 10 Assembly and two parliamentary constituencies across 10 states. The election in one Assembly constituency – Radhakrishnan (RK) Nagar in Tamil Nadu where the AIADMK supremo, the late J. Jayalalithaa, was the sitting member – was rescinded due to charges of electoral fraud<sup>2</sup> and the parliamentary poll in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)’s Anantnag constituency was postponed due to the worsening

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<sup>2</sup> [http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main1/current/ByeElectionTN\\_09042017.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/ByeElectionTN_09042017.pdf).

law and order situation in the state.<sup>3</sup> The results, by and large, confirmed the national strength of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, the results did not entirely conform to studies which have found that the incumbent party in Indian States was more likely to win a bypoll. The notable exceptions to this rule in the just-concluded by-elections included the result in Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir, where polling took place amid widespread unrest and was marked by a historically low turnout.

## **Where incumbents won**

In Assam, Karnataka, Rajasthan and West Bengal, the party in power won the by-elections. However, the bypolls in each state had its own particular narrative. In Assam, the BJP won in the Dhemani constituency by a margin of over 9,000 votes. But the Congress increased its vote share in the constituency from 30% in the 2016 Assembly election to 41%, something which has brought some cheer to the party in Assam.

In Rajasthan's Dholpur constituency, where Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje had contested her first election in 1985, the ruling BJP won comfortably by a margin of over 38,000 votes. The by-election was necessitated due to the conviction in a murder case of the sitting Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) legislator, B.L. Kushwaha. The contest was a two-cornered one since the BSP did not contest the election and Kushwaha's wife fought on a BJP ticket. In the absence of the BSP, the BJP candidate won 62% of the vote.

Karnataka was a bright spot for the ruling Congress where it retained both the Nanjangud and Gundlupet seats despite talk of anti-incumbency. In fact, the Congress increased its vote share in both constituencies leading to speculation that it might bring forward the Assembly election in Karnataka which is scheduled for mid-2018. In both constituencies, the regional party, Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], did not contest, which has fueled talk of an alliance between the Congress and the JD(S) in the next Assembly election.

In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress easily retained the Kanthi Dakshin seat. But the real story was the rise in vote share of the BJP in the constituency from 9% in the last election to 31%. The

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<sup>3</sup> [http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main1/current/ByeElectionJK\\_10042017.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/ByeElectionJK_10042017.pdf).

vote share of the other major contestant, the Communist Party of India, dropped from 34% to 10% confirming that the opposition space in parts of West Bengal, occupied by the Left parties and the Congress, is being taken over by the BJP.

### **Anti-incumbency vote**

In Delhi, Jharkhand, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh, opposition parties scored wins. The victory of the BJP in Delhi's Rajouri Garden constituency could have an immediate impact with civic elections in the city around the corner. The BJP-Akali Dal joint candidate won the seat with a margin of over 14,000 votes. The ruling Aam Aadmi Party, which had held the seat earlier, placed third behind the Congress with its vote share plunging to 13%. The result does not augur well for the AAP in the coming elections for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

In Jharkhand, the regional party, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, retained the Litipara constituency. The BJP, however, improved its vote share in the constituency, which is in the tribal and backward belt of the state and where the BJP has been trying to make inroads. In Madhya Pradesh, the ruling BJP and the opposition Congress won one seat each while in Himachal Pradesh, where Assembly elections are scheduled in end-2017, the BJP retained the Bhoranj seat sending a warning to the ruling Congress. Finally, in Kerala the Indian Union Muslim League, a member of the Congress-led United Democratic Front, retained the Malappuram parliamentary seat by a huge margin of over 170,000 votes. The candidate from the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which is part of the ruling Left Democratic Front, came a distant second.

### **Jammu and Kashmir**

The by-election in Srinagar has to be seen in a different context from the other bypolls across India. The Srinagar election was held in the backdrop of increasing violence and anti-government sentiments in Kashmir. On the day of polling on 9 April 2017, at least eight people were killed and several injured in violent clashes between protesters and security forces. The unrest was reflected

in the abysmal voter turnout which stood at just above 7%.<sup>4</sup> A repoll was ordered in 38 polling stations where the voter turnout was even lower at 2%. In the last two elections held in Srinagar in 2014 and 2009, the turnout was significantly higher at around 25%.

Though the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference patron and former Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah defeated the candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), which heads a coalition government with the BJP in the state, the result itself was less important than the environment in which the poll took place. The situation was such that the Election Commission (EC) postponed to 25 May 2017 the by-election in the Anantnag Assembly constituency, which was earlier held by the J&K chief minister Mehbooba Mufti and was being contested this time by her brother. The EC said the law and order situation was not "conducive" for a free and fair poll. Clearly the hopes raised by the PDP-BJP coalition government when it formed the government in J&K in 2015 have been belied, leading a prominent political analyst to note that Kashmir is "looking at an abyss."<sup>5</sup>

## **Tamil Nadu**

The RK Nagar by-election has enormous symbolic significance since this was the constituency from where Jayalalithaa had been elected twice. It was equally significant that two factions of the AIADMK, which had split following Jayalalithaa's death, were contesting the election. Both factions had, however, been denied the use of the AIADMK's electoral symbol of 'two leaves.' The faction headed by Jayalalithaa's aide and the party's interim general secretary Sasikala, contesting under the name AIADMK Amma, had nominated Sasikala's nephew and the party's deputy general secretary T.T.V. Dinakaran as its candidate.<sup>6</sup> The opposing faction, led by former chief minister O. Panneerselvam, had given the ticket to AIADMK veteran E. Madhusudhanan, who had represented the RK Nagar constituency in 1991-96. However, the EC, in its order of 9 April 2017, postponed the election saying that the electoral process had been "seriously vitiated

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<sup>4</sup> [http://eci.nic.in/eci\\_main1/ByeElec2017/Results/2-Srinagar\\_PC.pdf](http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/ByeElec2017/Results/2-Srinagar_PC.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 'Sinking Valley,' *The Indian Express*, 15 April 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Sasikala is serving a jail sentence in a disproportionate assets case. Dinakaran is currently being investigated on several charges, including an attempt to bribe an EC official to get the 'two leaves' symbol for the AIADMK Amma.

on account of unlawful activities of the candidates and political parties and their workers by bribing the electors.”

Since the postponing of the election, there have been efforts by the two factions of the AIADMK to bury differences and merge. One of the conditions for the merger set by the Panneerselvam faction is the ejection of Sasikala and her family members from the AIADMK. If the merger happens, the political situation in Tamil Nadu, which has been in a state of flux ever since Jayalalithaa died, will once again see a dramatic shift.

## **Conclusion**

Too much should not be read into the bypoll results, except for the one in Srinagar, since they do not always capture the political situation in a State let alone the country. In fact, a study of by-elections held since 1967 shows that the winner in a bypoll has less than half a chance of winning the next Assembly elections in the state. However, the results in States that will have elections over the next year, such as Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, hold more significance as does the result in Delhi, where municipal elections were held on April 23.

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