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Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections:

Pivotal State braces for multi-cornered contest

Of the five Indian States going to elections in February-March 2017, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is the most important. Despite the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) having swept the 2014 national election in UP, the coming Assembly poll is likely to be a three-cornered contest between the BJP, the ruling Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, with the Congress as a fourth and minor player.

Ronojoy Sen¹

The dates for elections in five Indian States – Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur – have been announced. The most important of these elections by far is the one in Uttar Pradesh (UP) where the election will be held in seven phases from 11 February to 8 March 2017. UP is India's largest and most populous state – at 204 million people it would be the fifth largest nation if it were a country – and success in UP is often seen as a barometer for the national polls. The State assumes even greater importance since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 71 of its 282 seats in the directly-elected Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) from UP in the 2014 national elections. UP has a total of 80 seats in the Lok Sabha. Hence the party's fortunes in UP will be critical to its chances of forming government in 2019 when India hold its next national election.

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Despite the BJP having swept the 2014 national election in UP, powered by the popularity of then prime ministerial aspirant Narendra Modi, the State's Assembly polls are likely to be a genuine three-cornered contest between the BJP, the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), with the Congress as a fourth and minor player. This is apparent if one looks at the vote share of the three main parties in UP in 2014. The BJP, riding on what was termed the Modi "wave" and a committed cadre of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was way ahead with 43% of the vote, but the SP and BSP still got a significant vote share at 22% and 20% respectively despite not winning a single parliamentary seat. The Congress lagged behind at 7.5%, but won two seats from the Nehru-Gandhi pocket boroughs of Amethi and Rae Bareilly.

It must be kept in mind that the last two governments in UP were formed by the SP in 2012 and the BSP in 2007 with a relatively low vote share of 29% and 30% respectively. It is also well known that State elections in India often throw up results different from those in the national elections, with proximity to the national elections and state-specific politics playing important roles.² Finally, there is the BJP-run Central Government's radical move of demonetisation in November 2016, which is likely to have an impact on the UP verdict. Demonetisation and the government's efforts to curb black money have already featured prominently in Prime Minister Modi's recent speeches in UP. It will not only affect voting behaviour but also curtail the extent and scale of election campaigning. Thus, the 2017 UP Assembly election polls are unlikely to replicate the 2014 election.

Advantage BJP

Despite the ground reality being different from 2014, the BJP is still considered a frontrunner in the coming election. One of the primary reasons for this is its success in the recent past in getting Other Backward Class (OBC) or the lower caste vote. Though the BJP is traditionally considered a party of the upper castes, in the 2014 national election, the BJP got substantial OBC support with 27% of Yadavs, 53% Kurmis and 60% Most Backward Caste (MBC) groups voting for the party. This represented a significant jump from the 2012 Assembly election. Importantly, the BJP also won support from the Dalits (former untouchables) with 18% of Jatavs, the caste to which BSP supremo Mayawati belongs, and 45% Ati (the most backward)

² Suhas Palshikar, K.C. Suri and Yogendra Yadav eds. *Party Competition in Indian States: Electoral Politics in Post-Congress Polity* (New Delhi: OUP, 2014), 25-26.

Dalits (groups such as Balmiki, Pasi, Khatik and Kori) voting for it. This phenomenon has been termed, by one political scientist, as the “third democratic upsurge” of India where caste identities have weakened.³ But the SP’s perceived bias towards the Yadavs, who form its core support base, has also drawn the other OBC groups towards the BJP. Communal polarisation too has played its part in the BJP attracting OBC votes.⁴ This was particularly true of western UP where 77% of the Jats voted for the BJP following communal tensions in the run up to the 2014 election.

The second reason is the alliances that the BJP has forged with smaller caste-based parties such as Apna Dal (AP) and the Suheldeo Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP). The AP, which is a party of the Kurmis, had won nearly 5% of the votes in the seats it contested in 2012 and the SBSP, which represents the Rajbhar community, won roughly the same vote share. The BJP’s tie-up with these parties not only entails a vote transfer but also gives the impression that the BJP is a party that represents the lower castes.

Third, the policies of the Central Government could have a positive impact on the BJP’s prospects. In particular, the government’s narrative around the demonetisation move seems to have gone down well with the electorate despite the disruption and inconvenience it has caused. Indeed, a recent opinion poll conducted by India Today-Axis, released the day the Election Commission (EC) announced the polling dates, reported that 76% of the respondents supported demonetisation though 58% said they had been inconvenienced.⁵ It also found that the BJP would win over 200 seats in the 403-seat UP Assembly.

One of the drawbacks of the BJP’s campaign, however, is the lack of a chief ministerial candidate. The BJP seems to have gone back to the strategy of banking on Modi’s appeal, which worked in States like Haryana and Maharashtra but not in Bihar. For the coming election, Modi has used the demonetisation drive to cast himself as someone fighting on behalf of the poor against the corrupt and the rich. Interestingly, the first round of the Lokniti-CSDS pre-election survey conducted in mid-2016 found that Modi enjoyed fairly high ratings though over 50% of the respondents also felt that he had not delivered on his promises.

³ A.K. Verma, “Third Democratic Upsurge in Uttar Pradesh,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 31, 2016.

⁴ Sudha Pai and Avinash Kumar, “Understanding the BJP’s Victory in Uttar Pradesh,” in Paul Wallace ed. *India’s 2014 Elections: A Modi-led BJP Sweep* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015).

⁵ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-today-axis-poll-uttar-pradesh-demonetisation-modi/1/849637.html>.

Beleaguered SP

The ruling SP is possibly facing its worst ever crisis in the run up to the election. Since October 2016 the party has been in the midst of a public factional fight with the ageing SP president Mulayam Singh Yadav, along with his brother and senior party leader Shivpal Singh, pitted against his son and UP Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav.⁶ Things took a turn for the worse when on 1 January 2017, Akhilesh declared himself party president, backed by a majority of party legislators and members, in response to his expulsion by Mulayam from the party a day earlier. Since Akhilesh's announcements, which virtually amounted to a call to split the party, there have been hectic efforts for a patch-up between the warring factions. But the rivalry has, in fact, escalated with both factions staking their claim to the party's electoral symbol – the cycle – with the EC.⁷ On 16 January, the EC granted the disputed symbol to the Akhilesh faction dealing a huge blow to Mulayam.⁸

If it had not been for the internal crisis, the SP, despite a certain degree of anti-incumbency, would have been a much stronger contender. In fact, the Lokniti-CSDS survey, conducted before the public squabbles began within the SP, found that the party with 30% of the vote share was slightly ahead of both the BJP and the BSP.⁹ However, the in-fighting within the party has dented its chances. The latest India Today-Axis opinion poll found that the SP would win around 100 seats compared to the 224 that it won in 2012. The latest round of the Lokniti-CSDS survey, conducted in December 2016, came to a more nuanced conclusion saying the SP could still win around 150 seats if the party did not split. But if a split occurred, the party tally could drop below 100 seats, which is similar to the India Today-Axis findings.¹⁰

The SP, however, has two factors in its favour. First, Akhilesh has a relatively clean image and enjoys a good reputation among the voters. His government has undertaken several schemes to improve infrastructure and benefit the rural poor, such as the Samajwadi Pension Scheme. The latest India Today-Axis opinion poll reported that Akhilesh remains the top choice for chief minister among the respondents. The earlier Lokniti-CSDS survey also had similar findings.

⁶ Ronojoy Sen, "UP's Ruling Party a Divided House," *ISAS Brief No. 454*. See <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/ISAS%20Reports/ISAS%20Brief%20No.%20454%20-%20UP's%20Ruling%20Party%20a%20Divided%20House.pdf>.

⁷ <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/samajwadi-party-fight-for-cycle-mulayam-meets-election-commission-akhilesh-next-4466060/>.

⁸ http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/SP_16012017.pdf.

⁹ <http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/findings-of-the-survey.pdf>.

¹⁰ <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/D2nYulpGcGdTmcwFMRrEXO/Advantage-BJP-say-LoknitiCSDSABP-and-India-TodayAxis-pre.html>.

This is especially so among young voters. That is perhaps why Akhilesh has decided to stand his ground against his father and uncle even though the elections are around the corner. The EC's recognition of the Akhilesh faction as commanding more support within the party has vindicated the Chief Minister's move to break away.

Second, the Muslims, who constitute 19% of UP's population, have backed the SP in large numbers in previous elections. Indeed, it was the Muslim-Yadav (M-Y) combination that was the basis of the SP's electoral victory in 2012. In 2014, too, Muslim support for the SP stood at 58% though some of the Yadav vote had drifted away. Despite the rift within the SP, a large number of Muslims are still likely to vote for the party. According to the India Today-Axis opinion poll, 71% of the Muslims polled said that they would vote for the SP. Similarly the earlier Lokniti-CSDS survey found that two-thirds of Muslims would go with the SP. One should caution here that Muslims do not vote always as a bloc, and Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph have argued that Muslims tend to cast their vote strategically.¹¹ This point has been reiterated in a recent article which not only looks at Muslim voting behaviour in UP but also the cleavages within the Muslim community.¹²

BSP under pressure

The BSP is the third major contender in the UP elections. The party believes, with some justification that opinion polls tend to underestimate its electoral chances. But the fact remains that since the BSP lost power to the SP in UP in 2012, its electoral strategies have not been working too well. The BSP's victory in the 2007 UP Assembly elections, when it formed government with a majority, was premised on an alliance between the Dalits, who form the BSP's core constituency, and the upper castes. This combination has hit hurdles, and the BSP in this election is banking on a Dalit-Muslim coalition to win votes. In its bid to woo Muslim voters, Mayawati has given tickets to around 100 Muslim candidates. This strategy, however, might not work since Muslims are still largely inclined to support the SP and the earlier Lokniti-CSDS survey found that only 18% of Muslims supported the BSP. The numbers could change if the Muslim voters see the BSP as a more viable option in comparison to the divided SP.

¹¹ Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi: The Political Economy of the Indian State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 195.

¹² Rahul Verma and Pranav Gupta, "Facts and Fiction about How Muslims Vote in India: Evidence from Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 31, 2016.

The other disquieting trend for the BSP has been its loss of votes among Dalits who do not belong to the Jatav caste (Mayawati herself is a Jatav). The BSP has also not been doing too well among the OBCs with prominent OBC leaders like S P Maurya and B S Kushwaha having quit the party.

Mayawati herself, despite widespread disaffection against her for building grand monuments with public money during her tenure as Chief Minister from 2007-12, remains reasonably popular. In the India Today-Axis opinion poll Mayawati has the second highest rating as chief ministerial candidate and also has the highest approval ratings when it comes to law and order. That might, however, not be enough to overcome her party's other deficiencies.

Conclusion

In sum, the BJP has its nose ahead in UP in what will largely be a triangular fight. The Congress, despite the 2,500 km *kisan yatra* (farmers' roadshow) by party vice-president Rahul Gandhi in September 2016 and the hiring of election strategist Prashant Kishore, is at best a marginal player. The India Today-Axis opinion poll predicts that the Congress's seat tally might fall to below 10 seats. However, if the Congress and another regional party, the Rashtriya Lok Dal, tie up with the SP, something which Akhilesh seems keen on, the picture could change.¹³ The EC's backing of Akhilesh has boosted the chances of this alliance being formed. Finally, the impact of demonetisation, despite the high approval in opinion polls, is still uncertain and could have a distinct bearing on the result.

Uttar Pradesh 2012 Assembly Elections and 2014 National Elections

	2012 Assembly (Seats/Vote Share)	2014 Lok Sabha (Seats/Vote Share)
Total Seats	403	80
Samajwadi Party	224 (29%)	0 (22%)
Bahujan Samaj Party	80 (26%)	0 (20%)
Bharatiya Janata Party	47 (15%)	71 (42%)
Indian National Congress	28 (12%)	2 (7.5%)

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¹³ Some media reports suggest that Akhilesh has firmed up plans for joint campaigning, though a formal announcement is yet to be made. See <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh/news/rahul-gandhi-akhilesh-yadav-set-to-kick-off-joint-sp-congress-campaign/articleshow/56465068.cms>.