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## **Forthcoming Assembly Elections in India's Punjab: A challenge to the Ruling Coalition**

*The Legislative Assembly elections in the sub-national Indian State of Punjab are slated for 4 February 2017<sup>1</sup>. At stake are 117 seats, and the ruling alliance, consisting of Shiromani Akali Dal and the Bharatiya Janata Party (SAD-BJP), is seeking a third term in office after having won the last elections in 2012. This paper argues that the SAD-BJP alliance is likely to face an uphill task now. The reported surge in anti-incumbency sentiment is due to the ruling coalition's inability to deal with social ills such as high unemployment, the drug menace and the plight of debt-ridden farmers. The family of the incumbent Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal has also come under fire for allegedly using its political connections to advance its business interests. These factors may dampen the ruling party's vote in the upcoming elections, according to observers.*

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### **Background**

Punjab, one of India's most flourishing and fertile States, has a geographical area of 50,362 sq. km. and population of 27,704,236.<sup>3</sup> The northwest State shares a domestic border with Jammu

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<sup>1</sup> Election Commission of India, "Press Note", 4 January 2017, p3

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<sup>3</sup> "Punjab Location Map", Maps of India, Available at: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/punjab/punjablocation.htm>

and Kashmir to the north, Rajasthan to the southwest, Haryana to the south and southeast and Himachal Pradesh to the northeast. Punjab also shares an international border with Pakistan's Punjab province.<sup>4</sup> The Union Territory of Chandigarh is the capital of both Punjab and the neighbouring state of Haryana.<sup>5</sup>

After the 1947 Partition of India, Punjab was split between India and Pakistan. In 1966, parts of Indian Punjab were separated to create new States of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. Punjab is the only State in the country with a predominately Sikh population.<sup>6</sup> The regional outfit Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) has identified itself as the premier organisation that safeguards and advances the political and religious interests of the Sikh community.

The agricultural sector forms the backbone of Punjab's economy which generates the most revenue for the State. Agricultural expansion in Punjab is commonly associated with the Green Revolution (1956 to 1978)<sup>7</sup> where high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of food crops were used to increase output. The State saw wheat production increase extraordinarily from 1.9 million tonnes to 5.6 million tons between 1965 and 1972.<sup>8</sup> Other main industries in Punjab include textile manufacturing, sewing machines, sporting goods, starch, fertilisers, bicycles, scientific instruments, electrical goods, machine tools and the processing of sugar and pine oil.<sup>9</sup>

Gone are the days when Punjab was hailed for revolutionising its farm sector and being a leader of the Green Revolution. The northwest State is fast making headlines for its social ills – high unemployment, drug abuse and farmer suicides. It was stated in 2014 that four out of 10 men in Punjab are addicted to some drug or other (half of them are minors and farmers).<sup>10</sup> A study commissioned by the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi (AIIMS) revealed that more than Rs. 7000 crores (approx. US\$ 1.03 million; S\$1.47 million)<sup>11</sup> are spent on drugs each year

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises Development Institute, Ministry of MSME, Government of India, "State Industrial Profile of Punjab 2015-2016", p2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p2

<sup>7</sup> McGuirk & Mundlak, "Incentives and Constraints in the Transformation of Punjab Agriculture", International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), Research report 87, 1991, p37

<sup>8</sup> Singh & Kohli. "The Green Revolution in Punjab India: The Economics of Technological Change", revised version of a paper presented at a conference on Agriculture of the Punjab at The Southern Asian Institute, Columbia University, September 1997, p2

<sup>9</sup> Department of Rural Development and Panchayats, Punjab, "About Punjab" 11 January 2017. Available at: [http://www.pbrdp.gov.in/hidden/-/asset\\_publisher/3GWdFFxVf8Oy/content/about-punjab/6205745](http://www.pbrdp.gov.in/hidden/-/asset_publisher/3GWdFFxVf8Oy/content/about-punjab/6205745)

<sup>10</sup> Gupta, Shishir. "Four out of 10 men addicted to drugs in Punjab", *Hindustan Times*, 14 August 2014

<sup>11</sup> The exchange rates used here are from the websites of the Reserve Bank of India and the Monetary Authority of Singapore, respectively, on 18 January 2017.

in this State. Punjab is also grappling with the plight of debt-burdened farmers where many are resorting to suicide. In 2015 there were 449 farmer suicide cases reported.<sup>12</sup>

## **2012 Legislative Assembly Elections**

The 2012 Legislative Assembly elections led to a second consecutive victory for the SAD-BJP coalition in the 117-member Assembly. It was for the first time that an incumbent alliance had retained power in the State.<sup>13</sup> Since 1966 the Punjab electorate has unseated the incumbents and swept the opposition to power (except 2012 elections).

The BJP won 12 seats, the SAD (also known as Akalis) 56, the Indian National Congress (INC) 46, and the Independents (IND) won three seats in the Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly).<sup>14</sup> The Akalis not only retained their main political and ideological constituency but expanded their support base by winning eight more seats in the 2012 elections (48 seats in 2007 and 56 in 2012). Akali leader Parkash Singh Badal helmed the chief ministerial seat for the fifth time.<sup>15</sup> He has served as the chief minister in 1970, 1977, 1997, 2007 and 2012.<sup>16</sup>

The 2012 polls also saw his nephew Manpreet Singh Badal contesting through his newly formed People's Power Party (PPP) which, however, failed to make concrete gains. The SAD-BJP alliance won for a multitude of reasons. First, the SAD's manifesto, which promised the continuance of the prevailing subsidies through schemes such as pensions, complimentary electricity and water, appealed to the masses. Second, the SAD started preparing for the polls in advance as it was afraid that the PPP might make inroads into its vote bank.<sup>17</sup> Third, the INC lost due to poor leadership. The party also did not make use of the services of the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in its campaigning. During the 2009 General Election across the country, the INC received a tangible number of votes by projecting his performance as prime minister.

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<sup>12</sup> "Agri crisis: Punjab saw 449 farmer suicides in 2015", *Hindustan Times*, 1 March 2016

<sup>13</sup> Mahaprashasta, Ajoy. "Marking a change in the electoral dynamics of Punjab, the SAD-BJP alliance comes back to power", *Frontline*, 24 March - 6 April 2012

<sup>14</sup> *Election Commission of India*. "Statistical Report on General Election, 2012 to the Legislative Assembly of Punjab", 6 March 2012, p8

<sup>15</sup> Randhawa, Manpreet, "Badal sworn in as Punjab CM for 5th time", *Hindustan Times*, 14 March 2012

<sup>16</sup> "Parkash Singh Badal Profile", *The Indian Express*, Available at: <http://indianexpress.com/profile/politician/parkash-singh-badal/19/>

<sup>17</sup> Garewal, Naveen, "Punjab polls 2012: Badal makes history in Punjab, retains power", *The Tribune*, 16 November 2016

## Upcoming Elections

The upcoming 2017 State Assembly elections are highly anticipated; there is intense competition between the ruling alliance and the opposition parties. It is generally believed that the SAD and the BJP would not part ways for whatever reason, now that the elections are around the corner. The Badal family has come under fire for its alleged leveraging of its proximity to power in order to advance its business interests; this is an accusation which the family has strongly rejected. The opposition has also accused the Badals of nepotism and concentration of power within the family.

As for the BJP and the SAD, they cannot rely on their triumphant victory during the national General Election that took place nearly three years ago. The BJP won two parliamentary seats from Punjab, the SAD four, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) four and the INC bagged three during the 2014 national General Election.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the BJP's recent victory during the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation elections (BJP won 20 and the INC five) may not be of much help now, because the politics of state-wide elections and that of local polls are different.

The recent Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process (HoA-IP) summit was held in Amritsar to showcase Punjab internationally ahead of the coming State election. The main election plank of the BJP, which is in power at the Centre, is the “surgical strikes” on Pakistan and the projected advantages of demonetisation of a few denominations. The BJP has featured the “surgical strikes” in its election posters for the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections as well.<sup>19</sup> The recent “surgical strike” by the Indian Army is a critical issue considering that Punjab is State that borders Pakistan. The earlier terrorist attack on the Indian Air Force Station in Pathankot had heightened security concerns in Punjab.

The demonetisation of currency where 500- and 1,000-rupee notes were pulled out of circulation overnight on 8 November 2016 was a risky move by the BJP. This sparked off nationwide demonstrations on the streets, and has given the opposition parties an opportunity to criticise the BJP.

The SAD-BJP government in Punjab has also received flak from agricultural unions for their inability to deal with the worsening plight of debt-ridden farmers. A three-day demonstration

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<sup>18</sup> “Punjab General Election Results”, Maps of India, Available at <http://www.mapsofindia.com/parliamentaryconstituencies/punjab/general-election-results.html>

<sup>19</sup> Shukla, Ajai, “Army silent as soldier, surgical strikes feature in BJP election posters”, *Business Standard*, 8 October 2016

was orchestrated in July 2016<sup>20</sup> to pressure the government to waive their loans and give Rs 5 lakh (US\$ 7,360; S\$10,452)<sup>21</sup> compensation to families of farm suicide victims.

The ruling coalition is expected to face a fierce battle from the opposition INC led by Captain Amarinder Singh who enjoys wide popularity in Punjab. He defeated the BJP leader Arun Jaitley in Amritsar during the 2014 national General Election.<sup>22</sup> The captain is connecting with the public through schemes such as as Coffee with Captain and Halke Vich Captain (Captain in every district).<sup>23</sup> Given all these factors, a palpable degree of anti-incumbency sentiment poses a challenge to the SAD-BJP alliance.

Meanwhile, a third political contender, the AAP, has entered the race turning the current Punjab polls into a three-cornered contest. The AAP received a boost when it won four parliamentary seats (all from Punjab) during the 2014 national General Election. Moreover, the party's landslide victory during the 2015 Delhi Assembly elections is still fresh in the mind of the electorate. The AAP is working diligently to expand its voter base with the support of volunteers. In its maiden attempt in Punjab, the AAP is espousing populist issues in its 31-point 'Kisan Manifesto'<sup>24</sup> that may appeal to certain demographics in Punjab.

New political alignments have also been formed lately. Politicians Navjot Singh Sidhu, Navjot Kaur Sidhu and Pargat Singh recently defected from the ruling alliance to join the INC.<sup>25</sup> Navjot Kaur won in the Amritsar East constituency during the 2012 elections in Punjab under the BJP umbrella; Pargat Singh had won the 2012 Assembly elections from Jalandhar Cantonment under the SAD mantle.<sup>26</sup> However, the induction of these new members into the INC may make a marginal difference to the overall strength of the party in Punjab. Cricketer-turned-politician Navjot Singh Sidhu joined politics on a BJP ticket from Amritsar during the 2004 national General Election.<sup>27</sup> He resigned from the BJP in September 2016 and

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<sup>20</sup> HT Correspondent, "Punjab farmer unions to go on three-day statewide protest", *Hindustan Times*, 2 July 2016

<sup>21</sup> The exchange rates used here are from the websites of the Reserve Bank of India and the Monetary Authority of Singapore, respectively, on 18 January 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "Major setback for BJP, Jaitley loses to Amarinder Singh in Amritsar", *News18*, 16 May 2014

<sup>23</sup> Ghose, Debojrat, "Congress' Captain Amarinder Singh goes for a makeover before Punjab Assembly polls 2017", *F Politics*, 8 July 2016

<sup>24</sup> "AAP releases 'Kisan Manifesto' in Punjab", *The Indian Express*, 11 September 2016

<sup>25</sup> Bhajwa, Harpreet, "Both Navjot Kaur Sidhu & Pargat Singh join Congress", *The New Indian Express*, 28 November 2016

<sup>26</sup> HT Correspondent, "Former BJP MLA Navjot Kaur Sidhu, ex-Olympian Pargat Singh join Congress", *Hindustan Times*, 29 November 2016

<sup>27</sup> Vasdev, Kanchan, "Navjot Singh Sidhu joins Congress just 20 days ahead of Punjab Assembly polls", *The Indian Express*, 16 January 2016

officially joined the INC on 15 January 2017.<sup>28</sup> Sidhu formed a new party named Awaaz-e-Punjab in September 2016 – this party, too, is contesting now.

The opinion polls are not looking good for the ruling coalition. The latest India Today-Axis opinion poll conducted by *Axis My India* for the India Today Group in January 2017 revealed that the INC was likely to secure 56-62 seats followed by the AAP with 36-41 seats. Both parties may fall short of the 59-mark to form an absolute majority in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, according to that survey. The opinion poll showed that the SAD-BJP combine would receive just 18-22 seats.<sup>29</sup> If this prediction comes true, one probable scenario is for the INC to form a post-poll alliance with the AAP. Alternatively, if Awaaz-e-Punjab manages to gain a few seats, the INC can form a coalition with the newly formed party. In these circumstances, the challenge for the SAD-BJP alliance becomes more complicated.

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<sup>28</sup> HT Correspondent, “Ahead of Punjab polls, Navjot Singh Sidhu joins Congress, meets Rahul Gandhi”, *Hindustan Times*, 16 January 2017

<sup>29</sup> Kanwal, Rahul, “India Today-Axis My India opinion poll: Punjab poll big takeaways”, *India Today*, 5 January 2017