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Polling Begins in Uttar Pradesh: No Clear Winner in Sight

Polling has begun in the seven-phase Assembly election in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh, which will be completed on 8 March 2017. The election remains a triangular contest between the Samajwadi Party, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. The ruling Samajwadi Party has, however, received a fillip with Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav having emerged stronger after an end to months of feuding within the party and an electoral alliance with the Congress.

Ronojoy Sen¹

Two of the seven phases of the Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh (UP), where 140 out of the State's 403 constituencies went to the polls, have been held on 11 and 15 February 2017.² Since the Election Commission (EC) on 4 January 2017 announced the election schedule,³ political developments in the State have been moving at a rapid pace. While the contest still remains a triangular one between the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the SP is in a stronger position than it was earlier. The primary

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² The voter turnout for the first phase, where 73 constituencies went to the polls, was 64% and for the second phase, where 67 constituencies went to polls, it was marginally higher at 65%.

³ http://eci.nic.in/eci_main1/current/PN1_04012017.pdf.

reason for that is the patch-up between the father and son duo of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Akhilesh Yadav after months of public squabbling over who controlled the party and the distribution of election tickets. Mulayam is the founder of the SP and its long-time president while Akhilesh is the incumbent Chief Minister of UP. The mending of fences happened after the Election Commission (EC) on 16 January 2017 handed the control of the party symbol to Akhilesh after both he and his father had approached the EC. While this considerably strengthened Akhilesh's position, since he already had the support of a majority of the party's legislators, it also forced Mulayam to accept the changed reality. The real loser in this family saga was Shivpal Yadav, Mulayam's brother and former president of the Uttar Pradesh unit of the SP. The second reason for the SP's strength is its electoral tie-up with the Congress which Akhilesh was always keen on. Under the alliance, the Congress has been allotted 105 seats while the SP is contesting 298 seats. The combined vote share of the two parties in the 2012 UP Assembly elections was a significant 41% while in the 2014 national elections it was 29%. The numbers for the alliance are formidable considering that the last two governments in UP were formed by the SP in 2012 and the BSP in 2007 with a vote share of 29% and 30% respectively.

A Two-horse Race?

While the BJP was the frontrunner in UP before the election dates were announced, thanks to an early start in campaigning and the confusion in the SP ranks, the SP and the BJP are now on an even footing. As is their wont, opinion polls have thrown up different predictions. There are at least two opinion surveys that have put the BJP in the leading position followed by the SP and the BSP.⁴ But another, and possibly a more reliable one, conducted by Lokniti-CSDS over two rounds in 2016, has put the SP ahead although still falling short of a majority. The most recent survey by Lokniti-CSDS was conducted in December before the SP had sorted out its internal feud or tied up with the Congress.⁵ It reported that the SP was expected to get 30% of the vote share compared to 27% for the BJP and 22% for the BSP.

⁴ See, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-today-axis-poll-uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-bjp-sp-congress/1/849636.html> and <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh/news/bjp-will-win-202-seats-in-uttar-pradesh-assembly-election-predicts-timesnow-vmr-survey/articleshow/56877189.cms>.

⁵ <http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/Uttar-Pradesh-Pre-Election-Tracker-Survey-December-2016.pdf>.

One of the reasons for the SP's lead, according to Lokniti-CSDS, was the popularity of Akhilesh, who is the preferred choice for Chief Minister among respondents by a significant margin. In fact, all opinion surveys have found that Akhilesh is the top choice for chief minister. Akhilesh's virtual coup against his father and uncle seems to have worked in his favour since it has given the impression to voters that he is keen to chart his own course unencumbered by the SP's old guard, particularly the criminal elements (*goondas*) that have traditionally been associated with the party. Some commentators believe that Akhilesh has been able to craft a makeover of the party and, much like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has tried to position himself as a representative of development and not sectarian interests. While the absence of a chief ministerial candidate on the BJP's part has helped push up Akhilesh's popularity, he has also been able to connect with UP's younger voters. Significantly, 29% of UP's voters is under 30 years.⁶ According to Lokniti-CSDS, 33% of voters in the 18-25 age group are backing the SP compared to 27% for the BJP and 17% for the BSP. The enormity of the task before Akhilesh, however, should not be underestimated. If he is re-elected as chief minister of UP, this would be the first such instance since Govind Ballabh Pant's re-election in the 1950s.

Caste and religious equations will, of course, play their part in the UP verdict. In that respect not too much has changed since the election dates were announced. The SP, which has banked on a combination of Muslim-Yadav (M-Y) votes, is likely to not only retain that vote bank but also marginally increase it due to its alliance with the Congress. According to Lokniti-CSDS, 75% of Yadavs and 54% of Muslims will vote for the SP; of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), leaving aside the Yadavs, 34% will vote for the BJP followed by 23% for the SP; nearly three-fourths of the Dalits (former untouchables) are behind the BSP; and more than half the upper castes are with the BJP. The caste break-up of UP's electorate is 41% OBC, 21% Dalits, 19% Muslims and 19% upper castes.

While the BSP was expected to provide strong competition to the SP and BJP, the BSP's campaign might be losing steam. This despite BSP supremo Mayawati being the first to announce candidates for all 403 seats. For the 2007 election, Mayawati had pulled off a remarkable feat of social engineering when she brought together Dalits and upper castes voters. For the 2017 election, her strategy was to forge a coalition of Dalits and Muslims, but this might not be working as well as she would have hoped for. Despite having given tickets to

⁶ <http://indianexpress.com/elections/under-30-voters-per-seat-more-than-last-times-average-winning-margin-4506924/>.

close to 100 Muslim candidates, Muslim voters still seem to have more faith in the SP. Mayawati has also been handicapped by the fact that many of the BSP's Muslim candidates are not well known names. It would, however, be a mistake to write off the BSP since surveys and analysts usually underestimate the party's electoral prospects. Besides, there are seats where Muslims will strategically vote for the BSP if they believe that the BSP candidate is the best person to defeat the BJP.

Beyond Caste and Religion

While the caste-community matrix will play its part, there are other factors that will determine the outcome of the UP elections. The first is the impact of demonetization, which was carried out by Prime Minister Modi in end-2016. While the opinion poll conducted by India Today-Axis reported that three-fourths of the respondents supported demonetization,⁷ according to Lokniti-CSDS only 35% said it was the right move. Second, the BJP, as in 2014, is banking on the popularity of Modi rather than projecting a chief ministerial candidate. The Lokniti-CSDS survey reveals that Modi still remains very popular though nearly half the respondents also said that the PM had failed to deliver on his promises. Third, despite the SP and Congress having tied up, it is uncertain how well the alliance will work on the ground. For instance, in many of the seats in Amethi and Rae Bareilly, pocket boroughs of the Nehru-Gandhi family, the SP and Congress have fielded candidates against each other. Finally, despite Akhilesh having come out on top after the bitter internal feud within the SP, there are elements within the party that are working against him. In particular, Shivpal has even hinted at floating a new party after the elections although he is contesting as a SP candidate in the ongoing polls. Mulayam, too, has hardly campaigned during the first two phases of the polls except for the odd election rally for his brother Shivpal.

Conclusion

The stakes for the BJP are extremely high in UP. A good showing in the State, which sends 80 members to the Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha), will boost the party's prospects in

⁷ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/india-today-axis-poll-uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-bjp-sp-congress/1/849636.html>.

the 2019 national elections. It would also add to the BJP's numbers in the Upper House (Rajya Sabha), where its lack of a majority has stymied many of the government's initiatives. Importantly, the polls would be a test of Modi's popularity, three years into his tenure as Prime Minister. Modi's closest aide and BJP president, Amit Shah, would be under the scanner too after having failed to win for the party the crucial state of Bihar in 2015. For the two regional players, the SP and BSP, the elections will be an examination of their relevance at both the State and national level. For Akhilesh, the elections will bear out whether his decision to steer a course distinct from his father's was a right one. For Mayawati, a second successive defeat in UP could be disastrous. For the Congress, which has been reduced to a supporting actor behind the SP, even a decent showing might not signal a real revival of the party in UP.

The answers to the many questions swirling around the UP elections will be available on March 11, when the results of the UP polls, along with those in four other States, are announced.

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