ISAS Insights

Uttar Pradesh Sweep Boosts BJP and Modi

The highlight of the election result for the five Indian States that went to polls in February-March 2017 was the huge win for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP's victory in India's largest State is a clear signal that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his party are undisputed frontrunners in 2019 when the next general election are scheduled to be held. Though the Congress won in Punjab, it is losing ground across the country, raising questions about its ability to challenge the BJP in 2019.

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No one, including a slew of exit polls, had predicted the magnitude of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s victory in India's biggest and pivotal State, Uttar Pradesh (UP). While the BJP was seen as a frontrunner in UP, the party's tally of 312 out of 403 seats in the UP Assembly would have surprised many in the BJP itself.[2] The ruling party in UP, the Samajwadi Party (SP), was way behind with 47 seats and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was virtually decimated, winning only 19 seats. The Congress, which fought the election in alliance with the SP, won a mere seven seats. In the four other States that had gone to polls along with UP – Punjab, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa – the results were not so one-sided. Whereas the BJP won by a huge margin in Uttarakhand, the Congress won a convincing victory in Punjab. The

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two smaller Sstates of Goa and Manipur saw hung verdicts, but at the time of writing the BJP, despite not having a majority, had manoeuvred to form the government with the help of smaller political parties and independent candidates.

Before analysing the reasons for the BJP's spectacular victory in UP, one needs to briefly assess the impact of the election results. First, the BJP's performance in UP, which sends 80 members to India's Lower House of Parliament (Lok Sabha), is a signal that the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are undisputed frontrunners in 2019 when the next general election are scheduled to be held. Second, the UP result is a clear indication that Modi's charisma and popularity remains undimmed, at least in the Hindi heartland. Third, the win gives Modi enough political capital to put in place economic reforms in the remaining two years that the BJP is in government at the Centre. However, the hurdles for the government's legislative agenda in the Upper House (Rajya Sabha), where the BJP has 56 out of 245 seats, will remain since only 10 out of UP's 31 Rajya Sabha seats will come up for re-election before the 2019 national election. Fourth, the UP result will give a boost to the party's ambition to appoint a President of its choice once the current Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's tenure ends in July 2017.[3]

The BJP's Triumph in UP

The simple explanation for the BJP's victory in UP is that it virtually replicated its performance in the 2014 national elections, when it won 42% of the vote share and 71 seats in the state and forged a broad coalition of voters. This was, of course, way higher than what it had won in the 2012 Assembly election in UP where the party had won only 47 seats and 15% of the vote share. In 2017, the BJP got marginally less votes than 2014 at 40% of the vote share, but more or less managed to retain the constituency that had voted for it in the national elections. In contrast, none of the other parties managed to significantly increase it vote share from 2014. The SP won 22% of the vote share, the same as what it had won in 2014 (if the SP's vote share is calculated for the 305 seats it had contested as part of its alliance with the Congress, it rises to 28%, which was roughly what it had won in the 2012 Assembly election); the BSP won 22% of the vote share, marginally higher than what it had won in 2014; and the Congress at 6% was a little lower than what it had achieved in 2014. Indeed, the gap between the winning BJP

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[3]   The Indian President is elected by an electoral college comprising members of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, as well as elected members of all State legislative assemblies.

candidates and their opponents heightened the disproportionality of India's first-past-the-post electoral system. According to the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, the BJP's 40% share translated into 77% of the seats in UP, while the SP's 28% vote share (in the constituencies where it contested) yielded just 11% of seats.[4]

The BJP's victory in 2014 was based on Modi's charisma as well as stitching together of a broad social constituency. In 2017, the BJP banked on the same strategy. The BJP did not name a chief ministerial candidates in UP, which was seen as a weakness by many. That tuned out to be its biggest asset, with the BJP making the Prime Minister the face of its campaign. As in 2014, Modi was the party's biggest vote-getter. Addressing 23 election rallies across UP, Modi hammered home the message that he was the only person who could bring development to the State. Despite mixed feedback on demonetisation, which sucked out 86% of India's currency, Modi was also able to convince UP's voters that he stood against corruption and black money.

Buttressing the Modi effect was the carefully crafted electoral strategy of the BJP. Party president Amit Shah, who oversaw the elections in UP in both 2014 and 2017, selected candidates in such a manner so as to tap into the widest social base. It was also meant to neutralise the SP, whose base is the Muslim-Yadav combination, and the BSP, which relies on the Dalits (former Untouchables), particularly the Jatavs. The caste break-up of UP's electorate is 41% Other Backward Classes (OBC), of which Yadavs are the most numerous at 8%, 21% Dalits, of which the Jatavs are 11%, 19% Muslims and 19% upper castes, which makes the OBCs critical to the strategy of any party to win an election in UP.

Shah's aim was to recreate BJP's voter base of 2014 where the upper castes, the non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs voted in large numbers for the BJP. 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. 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 Dalits (groups such as Balmiki, Pasi, Khatik and Kori) voting for it.[5] Accordingly in 2017, the BJP handed out tickets to 160 upper castes, 140 OBCs and 83 Yadavs. It also tied up with smaller parties such as the Apna Dal, which has strong support among the Kurmis, and Suheldeo Bharatiya Samaj Party, which represents the Rajbhar

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[4] https://scroll.in/article/831675/uttar-pradesh-2017-these-13-charts-examine-the-bjps-surge-in-indias-heartland.

[5] A.K. Verma, "Third Democratic Upsurge in Uttar Pradesh," *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 31, 2016.

community. This strategy seemed to have worked exceedingly well for the BJP and has been termed a "third democratic upsurge" by one political scientist.

Alongside the successful social engineering, there was an attempt to consolidate the vote along religious lines both at the ground level and in the campaign rhetoric of BJP leaders. Prime Minister Modi himself set the tone in his speech on 19 February 2017 at an election rally in Fatehpur when he declared, "If a village has a *kabristan* (Muslim graveyard), it should have a *shamshan* (site for Hindu crematorium). If there is uninterrupted electricity during Ramzan, it should be the same during Diwali." The fact that the BJP did not field a single Muslim candidate in a State where one out of every five persons is a Muslim would have also sent out the message that the party is capable of winning elections even without Muslim support.

The Other States

Of the four other States that went to the polls, Punjab was the most significant one. It was also the only State where the Congress managed a convincing victory winning 77 out of 117 seats. The ruling Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which fought the election in alliance with the BJP, won 15 seats and the Aam Aadmi Party, of whom much was expected, won 20 seats. The Congress' win was primarily due to three factors. First, there was strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the SAD. Second, the AAP, which had done well in Punjab in the 2014 national election, seems to have largely eaten into the SAD's votes but not into Congress's vote share. Third, the Congress had a strong chief ministerial candidate in Amarinder Singh, one of the few regional leaders that the party can boast of.

Of the three smaller States there was a convincing mandate only in Uttarakhand where the BJP rode to power on anti-incumbency sentiments against the ruling Congress, which had been hit hard by dissidence in the run-up to the election. Goa and Manipur threw up hung mandates with the Congress being the single largest party in both States but short of a majority. However, the BJP, which was the second largest party in both Goa and Manipur, cobbled together a majority by getting on board smaller parties and independents, many of whom had campaigned against the BJP in the election. Both Goa and Manipur were important in their own way to the larger narrative of the BJP dominance across India. Manipur was representative of the BJP's strong push into India's northeast, where the party had virtually no presence till recently. Over the past year, however, the party has formed governments in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

Goa was an instance where the BJP's political opportunism came to the fore. Despite the Congress having won the most number of seats in Goa, the BJP formed the government by tying up with smaller parties, including the Goa Forward Party which had campaigned on a plank to oust the BJP. Defence minister Manohar Parrikar was sworn in as Goa chief minister, a post that he had held earlier, on 14 March 2017 and former Congressman, N Biren Singh, as Manipur's first BJP chief minister on 15 March.

Conclusion

The resounding victory for the BJP in UP shows that Prime Minister Modi's star shines as brightly as it did in 2014. Despite the perception that he has not delivered on many of his election promises as well as scepticism in many quarters about moves such as demonetisation, which caused hardship but did not achieve much, ordinary voters continue to repose their faith in Modi. The Congress, on the other hand, continues to be in free fall in spite of having won in Punjab. Unless the party radically re-invents itself, something which looks unlikely, it will not be in any position to challenge the BJP in the 2019 general elections. It's only the regional parties that could mount a credible contest in States where they are strong, but as the UP elections showed they too are finding it difficult against a dominant BJP. The opposition parties, particularly the Congress, are in desperate need for a new narrative to counter Modi. As of now they seem to be incapable of finding one.

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