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ISAS Workshop: The State of Uttar Pradesh: Indian State Elections and Their Implications

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The importance of the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh (UP) to Indian politics cannot be overstated. UP is India's largest and most populous state and success in UP is often seen as a barometer for the national polls. The State assumes even greater importance today 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. The number of members that UP sends to the Lok Sabha is 80, the largest for any State, out of a total of 543. Hence, the BJP's overwhelming victory in the 2017 UP Assembly elections holds important lessons for national politics as well as for the BJP's prospects in the 2019 national elections. The Institute of South Asian Studies organised a workshop on "The State of Uttar Pradesh: Indian State Elections and their Implications" in Singapore on 12 April 2017 to discuss the UP elections.

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Introduction

The Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, convened a workshop on 12 April 2017 with the objective of assessing the implications of the 2017 UP Assembly election results on the national polity. The BJP had swept to power in UP. During the workshop, the panellists spoke on several broad areas. They analysed the election results in UP and deliberated on the importance of UP to national politics. A key question asked was whether its importance had changed over time. This question was important in the light of the fact that the Congress, which had steadily lost ground in UP, formed the government at the Centre in 2004 and 2009 with nine and 21 seats respectively from the State. It had failed again to make any political headway in the UP State elections in 2017. The panellists also dwelt on the factors driving politics in UP. While religion and caste continued to be important in UP, they had begun to be constituted and mobilised in different ways over the past decade. Further, there was a perception that the message of development, delivered by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, might have been a game-changer in the State. Finally, the panellists looked ahead to the 2019 national elections in their prognosis.

The Changing Discourse of Politics in India and UP

The first session focussed on the changing discourse of politics in India and UP. The two speakers were Professor Suhas Palshikar, Co-Director, Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, India, and Professor Ravi Srivastava, Professor of Economics, Centre for the Study of Regional Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Professor Palshikar, in his paper titled, “BJP’s Struggle for all-India Status: How long States will be the Centre?”, analysed the UP election results in the context of national politics. He underlined that the electoral surge of the BJP in UP had overshadowed other state elections that took place simultaneously. The BJP’s victory in UP was neither merely based on anti-incumbency nor limited to removing the Samajwadi Party (SP) government. In fact, despite mildly favourable sentiments towards the SP and its young chief minister, the voters overwhelmingly voted for the BJP.

Professor Palshikar also touched on the larger implications of the UP elections. He underlined that, as a framework of competitive politics, the post-1990 phase had made Indians accustomed to the central role of the States in shaping all-India politics. However, the UP elections brought that phase to an end. The narrative that the BJP, under Modi, had constructed clearly aimed at all-India as the key layer of political contestations. In that sense, the UP outcome, while underscoring the ‘uniqueness’ of the state level outcome, paradoxically signalled the beginning of a phase in which the State, as a theatre of politics and the basis of agenda setting, would take a beating. Further, this development tied well with the plebiscitary nature of Modi’s populist leadership and the grand narrative of nationalism and Hindutva that the BJP aimed to push as the central theme onto the national theatre of politics in contemporary India. The UP outcome, thus, reiterated what the 2014 elections did. It also drew attention to the trends that would only become stronger through the coming years.

During his presentation on “Running with the Hare and Hunting with the Hound: Interrogating the Role of ‘Development’ as Electoral Strategy in Uttar Pradesh”, Professor Srivastava spoke about the central role of the developmental agenda in UP and dwelt upon BJP’s multi-pronged and multi-level strategy. He said that the elections in UP were fought on the strong pitch of development in the State. The SP-Congress alliance staked its claim on the basis of the performance of the State government headed by the SP with its key slogan “*Kaam Bolta Hai*” (Work Speaks For Itself). The BJP campaign, led by the prime minister and BJP president Amit Shah, entered the fray with the party’s 2014 election slogan of inclusive development, “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*” (Collective Effort, Inclusive Growth). As the elections progressed, each major political formation in the State elaborated on its own development achievements and critiqued the record of the others. In many ways, the UP elections mirrored the election campaigns in the other States (Punjab, Goa, Manipur and Uttarakhand), which also went to the polls in 2017 – in these States, the debates of development also appeared to have assumed centre stage. In the last several years, there emerged the view that “performance” and “development” were becoming important benchmarks by which the Indian electorate decided its voting behaviour. A corollary to this view was that, other factors, especially caste and religion, had now receded into the background. However, there was no firm evidence or analysis to confirm this contention.

Professor Srivastava also discussed the development narrative played out in the UP elections and situated it among the other important narratives which were used by the different parties to develop their electoral strategies. These narratives built up to a long-term multi-layered electoral strategy, which was not fully reflected in the din of the final campaign but which contributed to the final outcome. He also analysed the basis of voter preferences in UP using available data. He underlined the point that the BJP had an effective political strategy and implemented it successfully. He particularly emphasised “bovine economics” and the politics around cow slaughter. He looked critically at economic populism and loan waivers and cautioned against reading too much into the UP results as they were not a pan-Indian outcome.

Politics of Caste, Class and Religion in UP

The second session focussed on the politics of caste, class and religion in UP. The panellists for this session were Dr A K Verma, Director, Centre for the Study of Society & Politics, Kanpur, India; Dr Hilal Ahmed, Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, India; and Dr Satendra Kumar, Assistant Professor GB Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, India.

During his presentation on “Democratic Upsurge led to Saffron Sweep in Uttar Pradesh”, Dr Verma analysed factors that led to the spectacular victory of the BJP in UP. He said that the 2017 Assembly election results in UP were not as surprising as they were made out to be. The signals were loud and clear as early as December 2016. The State was undergoing a democratic upsurge that was being reflected in empirical studies. Dr Verma elaborated on the capitalisation of that upsurge by the BJP and explained the reasons for the Congress-SP alliance and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) completely missing the signals. Among the reasons for the BJP’s success was Modi’s rural push, the BJP’s alliance with small and marginal parties such as Apna Dal and Suheldev Samaj, an Other Backward Class-centric strategy and the integration of the subalterns into the BJP. The SP-Congress alliance was undone by ideological contradictions and ineffective transferability of votes. The BSP’s attempts at social engineering by trying to create a Dalit-Muslim alliance also failed.

Dr Ahmed, in his presentation titled “Politics of Muslim Political Representation: UP Election 2017”, discussed the question of Muslim representation. The electoral success of the

BJP in the UP assembly elections rekindled one of the most unsettled political debates of postcolonial India: the question of Muslim political representation. The opponents of the BJP questioned the politics of polarisation by which the Muslims of the State eventually become a significant other – a threat to the country. It is argued that the BJP's clear refusal to give tickets to Muslim candidates, the prime minister's Eid and Kabristan remarks during the campaign,² the alleged tampering with electronic voting machines and, finally, the fragmentation of Muslim votes led the victory of the BJP. The BJP's opponent also contended that only 24 Muslims have been elected in the UP Assembly this time which does not go well with the 'proportional' demography of the State.

The BJP's response was also very interesting. The BJP leaders continued to stress the idea of winnability. It was claimed that the party did not think in narrow caste-religion terms and preferred those candidates who had the capacity to secure winnable votes. The success of the party, in this framework, was explained precisely in terms of 'secular' credentials of the candidates as well as the voters. The BJP's victory from a few known 'Muslim seats' was shown as a revealing example of the party's version of inclusiveness – "*Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas*". Dr Ahmed discussed the intrinsic Muslim homogeneity thesis to question the assumption that if the Muslims were given an opportunity, they would eventually vote only for Muslims. One of the myths that he wanted to debunk was the idea of a 'Muslim vote bank'.

During his presentation on "After 'Silent Revolution': Politicisation of Most Backward Classes (MBCs) in Western Uttar Pradesh", Dr Kumar discussed the politics of emergent classes in western UP in the wake of economic reforms and the rise of low caste political parties. Dr Kumar argued that the expansion of formal education, extension of reservations in local governments, agrarian transformation and the economic rise of the marginalised groups over the last decades had changed the local power relations and politics in western UP.

² Campaigning in Fatehpur during the UP elections, Prime Minister Modi accused the Samajwadi Party government of discrimination on the basis of religion and caste, and suggested that it was the biggest problem facing the state today. If there is a kabristan (graveyard) in a village, the prime minister said, then it must have a shamshan ghat (cremation ground) too. If there is electricity during Ramzan, it should be there on Diwali as well; if there is electricity during Holi, it should be there on Eid too. For details, see "If a kabristan can be constructed, a shamshaan too should be built: PM Modi", *Hindustan Times*, Haider Naqvi, 20 February 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/if-a-kabristan-can-be-constructed-so-should-a-shamshaan-pm-modi/story-obPfbdpUwPZm98wBKdZmTN.html>

Drawing on longitudinal and long-term ethnographic research conducted between 2005 and 2016 in Khanpur village in Meerut district, he underlined that emerging local politics was deeply shaped by new communication technologies, entertainment and mobility, the aspirations of new classes and supra-local connections. Further, he also discussed ways in which recent economic and political changes generated the space to re-articulate the demands of deeper democratisation of representation and recognition, albeit in new ways, at the grassroots level, shaping the political mobilisation of the hitherto excluded groups such as the MBCs. Dr Kumar elaborated the linkages between caste, class and religion on the one hand, and local, national and global on the other, in the new formations. Among the other issues that he raised were conflicts between the MBCs and Jatavs as also between the Yadavs and Gujjars, and the discontent within the Jats, who had been affected by the agricultural crisis and the lack of access to government jobs.

Looking Ahead to 2019: The Impact of State Polls on National Elections

The third session looked at the impact of state polls on the 2019 national election. The panellists were Dr Seshadri Chari, National Executive Member, BJP; Professor Suhas Palshikar, Co-Director of Lokniti, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, India; and Mr Ajoy Bose, Author and Resident Political Commentator, CNN News18.

Dr Chari discussed the BJP's strategy for the 2019 national elections. He remarked that BJP had come a long way since 2014 and, in 2019, it would be "Modi versus No One". Reflecting on 2019 being promising for the BJP, he believed that the BJP would aim to win more than 300 seats in 2019. Dr Chari discussed the voter behaviour and the major transformation and metamorphosis in Hindu society. According to him, centricism was the essence of voting behaviour. Further, he felt that the opposition's behaviour had also knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the strengthening of the BJP. The BJP had a three-point strategy: appeal to the majority; recognise the metamorphosis in Hindu society; and strategise and implement.

Professor Palshikar focussed on three issues: the importance of regional parties; the inability of the Congress to be the nucleus of an anti-BJP force; and the link between Hindutva and development.

Mr Bose shared his perspectives on the role of regional parties, particularly the BSP. He raised several questions regarding the BJP's UP election strategy. At the same time, he explained the BSP's unexpected defeat in the UP elections and the likely implications of the defeat on the national elections in 2019.

Political Parties and Leadership in UP

The last session focussed on political parties and leadership in UP. The session comprised Ms Seema Chishti, Deputy Editor, The Indian Express; Dr Gilles Verniers, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Ashoka University, New Delhi, India; and Mr Bose.

Discussing the rise and fall of Dalit leader Mayawati, Mr Bose remarked that Mayawati epitomised both the opportunities and limitations for the subaltern groups to achieve political power in India's largest State and political heartland. When a young Dalit woman became the ruler of UP in 1995 as head of a minority government with the help of high-caste Brahmin leaders of the two national parties, the BJP and the Congress, the then-Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, also a Brahmin, celebrated it as "a miracle of democracy". Since then, the successes and failures of Mayawati's turbulent career had been largely influenced by the support or opposition of Brahmins who wield huge influence across civil society in UP.

Mr Bose emphasised that it was a telling paradox that a leader of a party of the lowest caste with an overtly anti-Brahminical ideology was catapulted to power with the help of the highest caste and rapidly declined without that backing in the past few years. Mr Bose also pointed out how Mayawati's social engineering project had unravelled ever since the tug of war, during her stint as chief minister from 2007 to 2012, between her political sponsors, the Brahmins, and the core social base of the Dalits. Her subsequent efforts to ally with the Muslim minority in UP had met with palpable failure exemplified by the rout of her BSP in the 2017 Assembly polls. This had underlined the difficulties in electoral politics of two subaltern groups joining hands to make a bid for power on their own without support from higher up in the social hierarchy. Mr Bose also examined the legacy of Mayawati and the future of Dalit politics at a time when the BJP held sway in UP.

Speaking through video-conferencing, Ms Chishti focussed on her experience as a journalist who had been covering elections in the western and eastern parts of UP for the last two and a half decades. Sharing her field experience, Ms Chishti remarked that it was interesting to see the BJP campaign in 2017 built and developed on its themes from the 1990s. Powered by a clear majority at the Centre, the intensity and scale of the BJP campaign in UP was something to reckon with. She delved into the BJP's campaign themes in 2017 and how development was twisted to fit into a 'Hindutva-shaped bottle'. The BJP, after its spectacular victory in UP, put Yogi Adityanath in the chief minister's chair with the hope that it could use this as a model for several large States. She also reflected on the consequences of the 2017 election in UP and elections in general in UP on India.

Dr Verniers focussed on the changing sociological profile of the SP and BSP in UP. In the wake of the 2017 elections, the BJP sought to build a social coalition of voters that excluded the groups that are traditionally associated with its two main opponents: the Jatav Dalits, associated with the BSP, the Yadavs, linked to the SP, and the Muslims, connected to both parties. By doing so, the BJP sought to encourage and harness resentment against the groups that they perceived as having unduly benefitted from their association with the parties in power over the past 15 years. Dr Vernier remarked that, beyond the BJP's campaign rhetoric, there was actually some ground to qualify both the BSP and the SP as parties representing the 'new elites' of UP. Through an analysis of the changing profile of UP legislators and party cadres, Dr Vernier dissected the mechanisms and political processes through which 'backward' parties had acquired their new elite reputation. He raised questions about the plebeian aspects of the BJP's victory, the election of more businessmen and criminal elements and the nature of the anti-elite vote.

Conclusion

The one-day workshop provided an important platform for an in-depth understanding of the UP elections. The discussion of the various factors that contributed to the BJP's strong showing in the 2017 elections in the State, following its initial triumph in 2014, seem to indicate that the Modi government might be destined for an equally good showing in the elections at the national level in 2019.

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