

ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239
Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



What India's By-Elections tell Us

Ronojoy Sen¹

After a national election that was held in nine phases over several weeks there is something of a poll fatigue in India. But the electoral cycle never really ceases in India and there is hardly a month that goes by without an election of some sort. The latest round of elections held on 21 August was not part of the normal electoral cycle, but one necessitated by either the death of an incumbent or the seat having been vacated for some other reason. What made the by-elections significant was that 18 seats spread across the states of Bihar, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka went to polls. The results, announced on 25 August, were disappointing for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which will soon complete 100 days in government at the Centre. The BJP and its allies won eight seats while the Congress and regional parties won 10.

Re-alignment in Bihar

Of the 18 seats where elections were held, the eastern state of Bihar had the lion's share with 10 seats. Bihar was also important for another reason. A new political formation, with rival leaders

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), and at the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at NUS. He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS.

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)'s Lalu Prasad and Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)]'s Nitish Kumar teaming up, has taken shape in the state following the 2014 general election. Of the 10 seats in Bihar, the new alliance, which also had the backing of the Congress, won six. The RJD ended up winning three, the JD(U) two and the Congress one. The remaining four went to the BJP.

The results in Bihar are a reminder to the BJP that the positive perception of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is likely to run up against local factors in state elections. It also represents a turnaround of sorts for the JD(U) and the RJD from their performance in the national election. In the national election the BJP in an alliance with two smaller outfits – the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), led by Ram Vilas Paswan, and Rashtriya Lok Samata Party – had performed exceedingly well in Bihar winning 31 out of 40 seats. But the recent election marked a drop in the performance of the alliance since in the national election it had polled more than the newly-formed RJD-JD(U)-Congress combination in eight out of 10 seats, or state assembly segments which were part of larger Lok Sabha (lower house of national parliament) seats, that went to polls. The BJP-LJP alliance has also seen a drop in its vote share from 45.3% in the 10 assembly segments during the national election to 37.3% in the by-elections. In contrast, the RJD-JD(U)-Congress combination saw its vote share increase from 40.3% to nearly 45%.

The coming together of Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar, both former chief ministers of Bihar, is interesting for more than one reason. Lalu and Nitish started out together in politics when both were part of J P Narayan's 'Total Revolution' movement in the 1970s. Both of them were also part of the Janata Party and its successor, the Janata Dal, through the 1980s. In the 1990s they parted ways with Lalu forming the RJD and Nitish joining the Samata Party and later the JD(U). It might be added that the JD(U) was an ally of the BJP till 2013 when Nitish snapped ties over the selection of Narendra Modi as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate.

The re-uniting of the two most prominent leaders of Bihar could pose a serious challenge to the BJP in the Bihar state elections which are scheduled for next year. The two leaders have a formidable constituency of lower caste and Muslim voters despite both of them being not in the best of political health. While Lalu is facing a host of corruption charges and is currently barred from contesting elections, Nitish has had to face internal party dissension and voter backlash on his decision to break with the BJP. Despite this the two parties combined to win nearly 36% of the vote share in Bihar in the 2014 national election, which was the same as the BJP-LJP combine's

vote share. There are of course questions on whether Lalu and Nitish will be able to stick together till the state elections and to what extent they will be able to keep intact their flock.

A Mixed Story

The results from the other states were a mixed bag. In Punjab the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal, an ally of the BJP, won one seat and the Congress the other. Significantly, the Aam Aadmi Party, which had won four seats in Punjab during the national elections, fared poorly coming third in all three constituencies. In Madhya Pradesh, the ruling BJP won two seats and the Congress managed to wrest one. In Karnataka, a Congress-ruled state, the Congress won two and the BJP one. But the results were a shot in the arm for the state Congress since it won the Bellary Rural seat, which has been a BJP stronghold for the past few years.

Too much should not be read into the by-election results since they do not capture the political situation in a state let alone the entire country. Besides voter enthusiasm was low as was evident from the turnout of 44% in Bihar. The only takeaway is that the Modi effect, which was a strong factor in the BJP's win in the national elections, is unlikely to be a deciding factor in state elections. For the Congress the message is that strong leaders in the states will pay electoral dividends. This is true for Chief Minister Siddaramaiah in Karnataka as well as for Harish Rawat in Uttarakhand, where the Congress won the by-election to all three seats held in July.

All eyes will now be on the by-elections to 11 Assembly seats and one parliamentary seat in Uttar Pradesh scheduled for 13 September, where the BJP is pulling out all stops to achieve victory. The same day there will be by-elections in several other states, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Rajasthan and West Bengal. As for the clutch of state elections coming up later this year in Maharashtra, Haryana, Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir, the BJP holds the upper hand. Again this is less due to any national happenings but the mood in all four states which seems to be distinctly against the incumbent governments, whether they are the Congress in Maharashtra and Haryana or regional parties in J&K and Jharkhand.

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