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By-Election Blow for BJP

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Less than a month after a setback in a round of by-elections in India, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has suffered greater embarrassment in another set of bypolls, the results of which were announced on 16 September 2014. Of particular significance was the BJP's performance in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) where it won only three out of 11 Assembly seats, 10 of which were earlier held by the party. The big winner in UP was the ruling Samajwadi Party (SP) which won eight seats disproving critics who had written the party off. Elsewhere too, the BJP did much worse than expected, losing three out of four seats in Rajasthan and three out of nine seats in Gujarat. The results have come as a surprise since in all three states the BJP had done exceptionally well in the national elections held earlier this year, winning 71 out of 80 seats in UP and completing a clean sweep in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The only real bright spot for the BJP in the latest round of bypolls was the seat it won in West Bengal, making it the first time in 13 years that the party will have a representative in the state Assembly.

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The UP Debacle

There is little doubt that the UP result would have hurt the BJP the most. This was the state which had effectively ensured a majority for the BJP in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) and rocketed Prime Minister Narendra Modi's close aide Amit Shah to national fame. Shah was in charge of UP during the 2014 national polls and was rewarded with the post of BJP president following the election. Shah was seen as the brain behind the covert religious polarisation that had happened in UP before the national election and was also responsible for appointing the controversial Yogi Adityanath, the BJP MP from Gorakhpur, as chief campaigner for the by-elections.

Shah's strategy seems to have backfired this time. Adityanath in his campaigning raised the pitch on Hindutva (Hinduness) and love *jihad* – a term used by Hindu organisations to describe alleged conversion of Hindu women to Islam through marriage – instead of focussing on development, which was the theme of the BJP's campaign in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. This did not seem to have gone down well with the electorate. Of the seven UP seats that the BJP lost in the by-elections, it had considerable leads in those Assembly segments in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. That the situation could change so rapidly in four months would be a cause for worry for the BJP leadership. What would be particularly galling for the BJP is the loss of Rohanya, earlier held by BJP's ally Apna Dal, which falls under Modi's Varanasi Lok Sabha constituency. In fact, in the 11 seats the BJP and Apna Dal combine's vote share declined by 10% from the national elections.

A further worry for the BJP would be the comeback by the SP which had done very poorly in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Indeed, over the past few months the image of the SP had taken a beating with the worsening law and order situation in UP. The SP's comeback, which worked out to a huge 28% increase in vote in the 11 seats from the Lok Sabha election, has confounded most pundits. One factor that helped the SP was the absence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) which did not contest the by-elections but chose to back independent candidates. The absence of the BSP and a weak Congress probably meant that the Muslim vote did not get divided in the way it did in the national elections. Besides, unlike in the national elections the SP was careful not to project itself as a pro-Muslim party which helped it to garner lower caste voters who might have voted for the BSP and BJP earlier. In the sole Lok Sabha constituency in UP which went to

polls now – Mainpuri vacated by Mulayam Singh Yadav since he had contested and won from two seats – the SP expectedly won by a handsome margin. The winner was Mulayam’s grand-nephew Tej Pratap Singh Yadav.

The shot in the arm for the SP has fuelled some internal dissension within the Uttar Pradesh BJP with losing candidates blaming some of the recently-elected MPs from sabotaging their chances. Some of the disaffection with Shah’s choice of candidates and his ways of functioning has now spilled over into the public domain.

The Other States

The bypoll results in Gujarat and Rajasthan, both governed by the BJP, would have made the party very unhappy too. In the first election held in Gujarat after Modi’s elevation from Chief Minister to PM, the Congress managed to claw back by winning three seats. In one of the seats – Khambhalia – the Congress won for the first time after 25 years. Surprisingly the BJP’s vote share in the nine Gujarat seats went down by 11.5% from the 2014 Lok Sabha election while the Congress’ improved by nearly 14%.

There was a turnaround for the Congress in Rajasthan too where it won three seats and increased its vote share in the four seats from the 2014 Lok Sabha election by nearly 18%. In contrast the BJP’s vote share declined by 11.5%. The Congress, led by the state unit chief Sachin Pilot, has pointed to the infirmities of BJP’s Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje as a reason for their success. What the result has done, however, is encourage Raje’s detractors within the BJP of whom there are many.

The results in West Bengal and Assam would have given the BJP some cheer. The election of BJP’s first representative in the West Bengal Assembly in over a decade was not entirely unexpected. In the Basirhat Dakshin (South) constituency, where the BJP won by a slim margin of around 1,500 votes, the party had a lead of over 30,000 votes in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. Though the ruling Trinamool won from Chowringhee, the other seat where bypolls were held, it is clearly worried about the BJP’s increasing presence in the state. With the Left parties in tatters

and the Congress limited to certain pockets, the BJP is looking to occupy the principal opposition space by the next state elections.

In Assam the BJP, the Congress and the regional All India United Democratic Front (AUDF) won one seat each. Significantly, the Silchar seat, from where the BJP won, was earlier held by the Congress. In the other four states where bypolls were held – Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tripura and Sikkim – the BJP was not really in the running.

Conclusion

Of the 50 Assembly seats that have gone to bypolls since the BJP swept to power at the Centre, the BJP has won 17 seats. This does not constitute a vote of no-confidence against the Modi government by any means. It does, however, signal that the Modi factor alone won't win state-level elections for the BJP. Besides studies have shown that incumbents in the state usually have an advantage in by-elections. An analysis by Rahul Verma and Pranav Gupta of all by-elections held since 1967 found that the incumbent party in the state is more likely to win a bypoll seat. However, when incumbent parties in the state and at the Centre are different, it is twice as likely that the incumbent party in the state will win a bypoll seat. The bypoll results over the past three months have largely confirmed these findings. Only Rajasthan has proved to be a strong exception.

The other important finding of Verma and Gupta is that by-elections are not a good indicator of Assembly election results. Their analysis shows that the winner in a by-election has less than half a chance of winning the next assembly elections in the state. Another factor to be kept in mind is that voter turnout has been lower than usual in the recent bypolls, coming as they did soon after the national elections. This was particularly true for UP and Gujarat where turnout was 53% and 50% respectively. So hasty conclusions should not be drawn from the bypoll results.

The assembly elections in Maharashtra and Haryana, scheduled for 15 October, will provide a better indication of political trends. In both states the BJP is on a strong wicket because of the anti-incumbency mood against the ruling Congress. But the bypoll results have had their impact with the BJP's ally in Maharashtra, Shiv Sena, upping the ante in seat-sharing talks. The Sena

has rejected the BJP's demand that both parties contest 135 seats each in the 288-member Assembly with the rest distributed to two smaller allies. At the time of writing, the Shiv Sena wanted to contest at least 150 seats and party chief Uddhav Thackeray had also made clear his chief ministerial ambitions.

The bypoll results have somewhat dimmed the aura around Shah. There is also a debate within the BJP as to what extent the party should push the Hindutva line and polarise voters. In that sense the bypolls have had an impact beyond the immediate constituency or state.

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