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Strong Showing by BJP in Maharashtra and Haryana

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The results of the latest Assembly elections in the Indian states of Maharashtra and Haryana have not come as a surprise. Given the performance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the two states in the 2014 national election, it was expected that the BJP would emerge as the single largest party in both states. But the number of seats won by the party and the decimation of the Congress, which was in power in both Maharashtra and Haryana, surprised many. In Maharashtra, the BJP, which contested on its own for the first time in 25 years, won 123 seats in the 288-member Assembly, up from 46 seats in 2009; in Haryana the jump was even more dramatic for the BJP from 4 out of 90 seats in 2009 to 47 seats. The decline for the Congress was equally steep. In Maharashtra the Congress's seat tally nearly halved from 82 in 2009 to 42 while in Haryana it fell from 40 to 15.

Since the BJP won an outright majority in Haryana, it has wasted no time in appointing Manohar Lal Khattar, a first-time MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) and an active member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), as Chief Minister. In Maharashtra the situation is more complicated with the BJP short of an outright majority. At the time of

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writing, the BJP was weighing its options of either tying up with its estranged ally, the Shiv Sena, or taking outside support from the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), both parties having well over the 22 seats that the BJP needs to cross the halfway mark in the state Assembly.

The Maharashtra Result

The performance of the BJP in Maharashtra, where it failed to gain a majority on its own, must be seen in the context of the party contesting without its long-time ally the Shiv Sena. The Sena, the senior partner in the 25-year alliance, after falling out with the BJP over seat sharing contested 282 seats and won only 63. In contrast, the BJP on its own contested the same number of seats and ended up winning nearly double the Sena's tally. In terms of vote share, too, the BJP did much better winning 28% of the vote compared to the Sena's 19%. One of the striking features of the election results is the strong performance of the BJP in all the regions of Maharashtra, except for the Konkan belt, showing that it has managed to build an independent support base in Maharashtra.

In contrast, the Congress and the NCP, which had governed Maharashtra in alliance for the past fifteen years but separated before the 2014 election, did poorly across the state. Like the Congress the NCP saw its tally decline sharply from 62 seats in 2009 to 41 in 2014. Both parties won roughly the same vote share of 18%.

While anti-incumbency played a role in the Maharashtra result, the BJP has naturally enough stressed the impact of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi campaigned extensively in the state, addressing 27 election rallies, and this appears to have paid dividends. This was in contrast to the set of by-elections held in 2014 following the national elections, where Modi did not campaign and the BJP performed poorly.

A Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey has provided some insights into the Maharashtra result. One of the findings is that 41% of the respondents believed that it is important for the same party to be in government at the state and the centre. This is a message that Modi had been hammering home during his campaigning both in Maharashtra and Haryana. If voters across India feel the same way, the BJP will be on strong wicket in the coming state elections.

Regarding the voting pattern, the survey has thrown up some encouraging findings for the BJP. While the BJP unsurprisingly won 52% of the upper caste vote and 38% of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) vote, it did not do too badly with the Scheduled Castes winning 19% of the SC vote. While the Congress won 53% of the Muslim vote, the BJP made some gains winning 13%. The Muslim vote got further divided with the Hyderabad-based Majlis-e-Ittihadul Muslimeen (MIM) for the first time winning two seats in Maharashtra.

For the Congress, the Maharashtra result was an unmitigated disaster. While it did not expect to win, a joint third place finish with the NCP is something that few would have anticipated. Letting aside anti-incumbency and corruption scandals, the Congress was a divided house in Maharashtra. Several Congress leaders had publicly stated that they were opposed to outgoing Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan. Besides, there was little by way of support from the Congress national leadership which went missing during the election campaign. If Modi crisscrossed the state, Rahul Gandhi showed up for hardly five election meetings. The elections were a blow to the NCP, which performed poorly in all regions except to some extent in Western Maharashtra, the party's traditional base. The NCP has, however, tried to keep itself politically relevant by offering outside support to the BJP to form government.

Even though the Shiv Sena won over 60 seats it, too, may be a loser in the long run. The election verdict showed that the Shiv Sena's narrow nativist agenda is losing its appeal. The Sena won the bulk of its seats from the Mumbai-Thane metropolitan area and the Konkan region. But what would be worrying for the Sena is the inroad made by the BJP in the Greater Mumbai area, traditionally a Sena stronghold, where the BJP won 24 seats to the Sena's 21. The worst blow was dealt to the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), which won only one seat, making its leader Raj Thackeray marginal to the state's politics.

The Haryana Outcome

Though the Haryana verdict was on expected lines, the dominant performance of the BJP has come as a huge boost for the party in its ambitions to govern states without being burdened by recalcitrant regional allies. The BJP's decision not to enter into an alliance with the Haryana Janhit Congress (HJC) paid off since the latter won only two seats. The other regional party, the Indian National Lok Dal led by Om Prakash Chautala and his son Ajay

Chautala (both of whom are in jail), also did not do well. It ended up winning 20 seats, 12 less than what it had won in 2009.

As in Maharashtra, the anti-incumbency mood against the Congress government was a factor in the BJP victory. However, in addition to the sentiments against the Congress there was strong resentment against outgoing Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda for nurturing the Jat belt of Rohtak-Jhajjar-Sonepat to the neglect of the rest of Haryana.

Though Jats constitute roughly a quarter of Haryana's population, a notable aspect of the BJP's victory was its stitching together a non-Jat social coalition. According to the Lokniti-CSDS findings, besides a strong upper caste support the BJP won 40% of the OBC vote and 20% of the SC vote. As in Maharashtra, the BJP did exceptionally well in urban areas winning over 51% of the urban vote share.

Though the third place finish for the Congress in Haryana will hurt the party, the difference in vote share between the Congress and INLD was only 3%. What will give some hope to the Congress is that over 40% of the respondents in the Lokniti-CSDS survey felt that basic services had improved in the last five years. But the national mood against the Congress and in favour of Modi seems to have swayed many voters.

Conclusion

Local factors and anti-incumbency notwithstanding, the BJP victories in Maharashtra and Haryana are a testimony to Modi's charisma and popularity. In both states the BJP did not have a particularly strong grassroots organisation or a mass leader; neither did the party name a chief ministerial candidate during the election campaign. But despite these handicaps the BJP did very well. As of now, voters seem to be buying the Prime Minister's line that it is important to have a BJP government in their state if they want to reap the benefits of Modi's economic vision for India. This is likely to encourage the BJP to contest forthcoming state elections on its own. Against a rudderless Congress and regional parties, many of whom are not in the best of health, the strategy is likely to pay off. For Modi, too, it is important to have as many BJP-ruled states as possible, if he is to push through economic reforms. After its victory in Maharashtra and Haryana, the BJP is in power in seven states which account for

roughly 37% of India's GDP. In the next two state elections in Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir, scheduled to be held within three months, the BJP is expected to do well.

Talks are on between the BJP and Sena to form a coalition government in Maharashtra and a mending of ties looks likely. There seems to be a pattern in Modi's appointment of chief ministers. Khattar, who will be sworn in as Haryana CM on 26 October, is a low-profile organisational man and is likely to follow the central leadership's line. So too in Maharashtra the BJP's first choice is Devendra Fadnavis, the young president of the party's state unit, who might not have a mass following but has a clean image and Modi's backing. Though 39 BJP MLAs from the Vidarbha region have expressed support for Union Minister Nitin Gadkari as chief minister, the party high command is unlikely to bend to their request.

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