

# ISAS Insights

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## Deciphering the AAP's sweep in Delhi

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Nobody, not even members and supporters of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), had foreseen the party's stunning victory in Assembly elections. The sweep by AAP – 67 out of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly – has virtually no parallel in India's electoral history. While most exit polls had forecast a win for the AAP not one, including AAP's internal surveys, had gauged the extent of the victory. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is in power at the Centre, was crushed with a tally of merely three seats while the misery of the Congress continued with the party drawing a blank. In terms of vote share, the AAP won 54% to the BJP's 32% and the Congress's 10%. Indeed, such was the magnitude of the victory, AAP chief and chief minister designate Arvind Kejriwal's first reaction was to label the huge majority as "scary."

### Why AAP won

There were several reasons why the AAP won in Delhi. Let me list some of the broad factors. First, the AAP was the first to begin campaigning in Delhi, well before the elections dates were announced. In fact, even after the party's debacle in the 2014 national elections, AAP members were visible in constituencies and in touch with voters. It was also the first party to announce election candidates. Indeed, even AAP leaders such as Yogendra Yadav have admitted that if

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elections in Delhi were held right after the national elections, the results could have been very different.

Second, Kejriwal underwent an image makeover in his efforts to woo the electorate. The AAP held Delhi Dialogues for nearly four months during the run-up to the polls where issues such as law and order, education, health and sanitation were discussed in different constituencies. The AAP's pet issues – the Lokpal and Swaraj Bills – were relatively underplayed during campaigning despite occupying a prominent place in the party's manifesto. Kejriwal himself adopted a moderate tone compared to his activist stance as chief minister, and repeatedly apologized for resigning after 49 days in government. He also refrained from making personal attacks on the BJP even as he was the target of abuse from BJP leaders. A CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey has revealed that for 42% of AAP voters it was Kejriwal and not the party that mattered. The moderate tone of Kejriwal's campaign and his focus on governance ensured that the AAP not only held on to its core constituency of lower income and poor voters but also reached out to middle class and upper middle class voters. The CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that 51% of middle class voters voted for AAP compared to 35% for the BJP, while 47% of upper middle class voters preferred AAP to 43% for BJP.

Third, the AAP was far more pragmatic in its selection of candidates in this election. Nearly 20% of its candidates had contested earlier on other party tickets ensuring that they already knew the ropes of election campaigning. Finally, the AAP gained considerably from the dramatic decline in the Congress's popularity, particularly among minority voters. The CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that 77% of Muslims voted for the AAP compared to only 20% for the Congress. This was a sea change from the 2013 Assembly elections where the Congress had won 53% of the Muslim vote and the AAP only 12%. In addition, the AAP won 68% of the Dalit (the former untouchables) vote in this election compared to 36% in 2013.

### **Why BJP crashed**

The BJP could not have foreseen this kind of a verdict even in its worst nightmare. Though initially complacent, having won all seven Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in Delhi during the national elections, once polling dates were announced the party realized that the AAP had a huge head start. The BJP's nervousness was apparent when in a departure from party tradition, it announced as its chief ministerial candidate Kiran Bedi, former police officer and one-time comrade of Kejriwal. What seemed like a masterstroke at the time by the BJP president and strategist Amit Shah backfired. Shah's rationale was probably that an outsider would be a safer bet given the in-fighting within the Delhi BJP; he also believed that Bedi's clean image and her role in Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement, of which Kejriwal was also a part of, would neutralise the AAP.

But things did not play out as Shah had planned. Bedi was consistently behind Kejriwal in popularity ratings. The CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that on all issues, with the exception of women's security, voters rated Kejriwal significantly higher than Bedi. Further, Bedi's elevation deepened the divide within the Delhi BJP with several veteran leaders miffed at having been sidelined in the decision-making process. Worse, not only did Bedi alienate BJP workers with her high-handed way of functioning, she was decidedly unimpressive during campaigning. That Bedi herself lost from her constituency of Krishna Nagar, a BJP bastion, was testimony to the fact that the BJP workers did not possibly campaign wholeheartedly for her.

### **Impact of the result**

While the impact of the Delhi election on the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity should not be exaggerated, it does have important ramifications. The BJP itself seemed to have upped the ante in the Delhi elections by projecting Modi as the face of the campaign, especially during its publicity blitzkrieg during the last leg of campaigning. Following the Delhi loss, however, the BJP has maintained that the verdict was not against Modi but in favour of Kejriwal as chief minister. This has some truth to it. Many Delhi voters seem to be comfortable with the idea of having Modi as PM and Kejriwal as CM. This might explain why the BJP's vote share did not differ significantly from 2013 whereas, according to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, as much as 39% of the BJP's vote in the 2014 national election shifted to the AAP in 2015.

Despite the BJP's logic, the Delhi result has had the effect of halting the winning run of the party and puncturing the aura of infallibility around Modi. Following the 2014 national election, the BJP had won in the three states of Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand and had done remarkably well in the Jammu region of Jammu and Kashmir. The Delhi election has taken some of the momentum out of the BJP. While this will energise the opposition parties, it also shows that Modi alone won't ensure electoral success for the BJP. More importantly, the Delhi verdict possibly signals that eight months after the BJP came to power at the Centre, voters might be seeing a gap between Modi's rhetoric and actual results on the ground. Within the BJP, too, there are murmurs of dissent against the stranglehold of Amit Shah over the party.

### **Looking ahead**

With a historic verdict in its favour, the expectations of the AAP are now immense. The AAP had made several promises during the election campaign, including slashing of electricity bills, free supply of 700 litres water daily to every household, opening of 500 new schools and 20 colleges, greater safety for women and full statehood for Delhi. Delivering on these promises would mean a heavy burden on the exchequer. Unlike full states, the Delhi government cannot

also borrow from the market. Any elected government in Delhi is handicapped by lack of control over the police, law and order and land, all of which are under the central government. Changes in these provisions as well as full statehood for Delhi will require a constitutional amendment, which will require the backing of the BJP in parliament. Besides, the inexperience of AAP's elected legislators and its ministerial team is another disadvantage that the party has to overcome.

Though the AAP's victory in Delhi has national implications – as a warning to the BJP and inability of the Congress to recover from its defeat in the 2014 national elections – the party is not likely to repeat its mistake of trying to expand too quickly. Although AAP leaders have spoken of making forays into Punjab, where it already has four elected members of parliament, it is for the moment going to focus its energies on governing Delhi. In his second term as chief minister, Kejriwal will have the luxury of an overwhelming mandate but not much room for error.

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