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An Overview of the November-December 2008 Provincial Elections in India

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Introduction

The outcome of the elections to the legislative assemblies of five Indian provinces or states, namely, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Rajasthan, that became known on 8 December 2008, indicates that voters in the world's largest democracy are becoming increasingly mature. Even as votes are cast in favour of candidates and political parties that provide (and not merely promise) good governance, anti-incumbency sentiments remain pronounced in many parts of the country. In addition, India's voters – poor and uneducated though many of them may be – appear to be less prone to be influenced by emotive issues related to terrorism, religion, caste and community and seem to be more concerned with what could be considered substantive issues pertaining to economic and social development. The results of the recently-concluded assembly elections have made the country's two largest political parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), introspect about their future while drawing up strategies in the run-up to the forthcoming fifteenth general elections that, it now seems, will be conducted on schedule in April-May 2009.

The Backdrop

In December 2003, the right-wing, Hindu nationalist BJP, leading the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition, which was then in power in New Delhi, was exuding confidence. That month, the party had, without the support of its allies, comfortably won the elections to the assemblies of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh (in central India) and Rajasthan (in the west). What was small consolation for the INC, then in the opposition, was that the country's centrist 'grand old party' managed to retain its hold over the government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi. At that time, a section within the BJP was rather keen on bringing forward the fourteenth general elections in India that could have been held as late as September-October 2004. This section argued that the party's 'India Shining' advertising campaign would persuade a substantial section of the electorate to return the BJP-led NDA coalition to power. It was even contended by some in the party that the BJP would have more

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members of parliament (MPs) in the Lok Sabha (the Lower House of India's Parliament) and would be less dependent on its coalition partners.

Elections were conducted ahead of schedule in April-May and on 13 May 2004, after the poll outcome was clear, leaders of the BJP were shocked to realise that their party had shrunk in size and that the NDA coalition would not be in a position to form India's federal government. A centre-left coalition led by the Congress, called the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), went on to form the government with crucial 'outside' support from a group of 60-odd MPs belonging to four Left parties led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M).

Four years down the line, the Congress went on to lose a series of state elections in different parts of the country. On 22 July 2008, the UPA won a vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha after parting ways with the Left – following a bitter dispute over the nuclear agreement between India and the United States – and after obtaining the support of the regional Samajwadi Party that currently has a notable presence in the country's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh.

Given past experience, most political observers are of the view that the November-December 2008 elections to five state legislative assemblies of Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Rajasthan should not be seen as a 'curtain raiser' or a 'semi-final' of sorts before the fifteenth general elections that are scheduled to take place in April-May 2009. (The results of the elections to the Jammu & Kashmir assembly would be known on 24 December 2008) At the same time, the outcome of the five assembly elections was closely watched for possible pointers to the political mood that would prevail in the country before the general elections.

The 26-28 November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai took place when the elections were on in particular states. The upsurge in belligerent nationalism that followed the terrorist attacks, especially among sections of the urban middle and upper classes (that had avidly viewed the live television coverage of the incidents in Mumbai) was expected to lead to more votes being cast in favour of the BJP that has accused the Congress of being 'soft' on terror. The high – in some cases, record – voter turnout in the national capital of Delhi and other states was interpreted to mean that sections of the electorate would exercise their franchise against incumbent governments. But that was not to be – not in Delhi, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.

Anti-incumbency sentiments have strengthened across India in recent years. Roughly 40 percent of the MPs and half the members of legislative assemblies (MLAs) have not been re-elected in national and state elections that have taken place over the last decade and a half. While some MPs and MLAs have been rejected by their parties as candidates, most were voted out. Each of the last four Lok Sabhas constituted in 1996, 1998, 1999 and 2004 saw around 250 new faces in a Lower House comprising 543 members. States where anti-incumbency sentiments have not been evident in recent years have been few and far-between and include West Bengal, Bihar, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

The November-December 2008 assembly elections witnessed anti-incumbency sentiments prevailing in all the states that went to the polls barring one, that is, Chhattisgarh. These sentiments were, however, not strong enough to dislodge the ruling party in three out of the five states, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, while in Rajasthan and Mizoram, the

incumbent regimes were replaced by the Congress. The number of MLAs belonging to the ruling parties came down in each of the five states with the notable exception of Chhattisgarh. One way anti-incumbency sentiments were countered was by refusing tickets to sitting MLAs considered less than capable or responsive to their constituents. In both Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, the BJP Chief Ministers, Dr Raman Singh and Shivraj Singh Chouhan (respectively), denied tickets to over a third of the legislators who had been elected in 2003 – this strategy considerably helped the governments in these two states retain power. A similar strategy has in the past assisted the ruling Left Front led by the CPI-M in West Bengal and the BJP government in Gujarat headed by Narendra Modi.

Delhi

The biggest surprise of the recently-concluded assembly elections was the victory of the incumbent Congress government in Delhi led by Sheila Dikshit. No Chief Minister of Delhi has served two full terms like Dikshit, leave alone three terms. Few within the Congress – not to mention the BJP – could have imagined that she would lead her party to a third straight victory and join the ranks of venerable chief ministers of the country with long terms – these include individuals such as Jyoti Basu (West Bengal), Gegong Apang (Arunachal Pradesh), Mohan Lal Sukhadia (Rajasthan), M. G. Ramachandran (Tamil Nadu) and Manik Sarkar (Tripura). Clearly, many voters in the national capital believed that her administrative capabilities would be superior to those of her political rival from the BJP, Dr Vijay Kumar Malhotra, who had earned a reputation of being a ‘giant killer’ after he defeated (current Prime Minister) Dr Manmohan Singh from the South Delhi Lok Sabha constituency in the 1999 general elections.

Dikshit’s victory also reinforced the point that a tall leader can make voters repose faith in a political party that may not exactly be becoming more popular. Delhi’s voters were also able to distinguish between local issues, regional issues and even larger national issues. If the BJP could have replicated its performance in the April 2007 elections to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi – when it won 168 out of 272 wards with the Congress winning in only 64 wards – the party should have won the 2008 assembly elections with a comfortable majority. But this did not happen, surprising many political observers. An important factor that helped Dikshit was divisions in the BJP; the party’s general secretary Arun Jaitley was first selected as the BJP’s Chief Ministerial candidate for Delhi but Malhotra was selected after Jaitley decided he was not interested in aspiring for the post.

In 1993, the BJP won 49 out of the 70 seats in the assembly while the Congress won 14 seats; in 1998, the Congress won 52 seats and the BJP 15, while in 2003, the Congress won 47 seats and the BJP won 20. The number of Congress MLAs in the Delhi assembly has come down to 42; the party’s vote share declined from 48.1 percent in 2003 to 40.3 percent in 2008. The number of seats won by the BJP went up by three to 23; the party’s vote share rose from 35.2 percent to 36.4 percent. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by Mayawati (currently Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh), opened its account in the Delhi assembly with two seats, the party’s vote share more than doubling from 5.8 percent in 2003 to 14 percent in 2008. The BSP played ‘spoiler’ to both the Congress and the BJP in over a dozen seats.

Chhattisgarh

In November 2000, when Chhattisgarh became a separate state, the Congress held 62 seats in the Vidhan Sabha or state assembly, the BJP had 22 MLAs while five seats were held by

other parties. In December 2003, after assembly elections were held in the new state for the first time, the BJP swept the polls with 50 seats while the Congress obtained only 37 seats. The BJP was able to repeat this performance, thanks to Chief Minister Dr Raman Singh's relatively non-controversial image. More importantly, what clinched the election for the incumbents was the state government's decision to provide poor families rice at Rs 3 per kg – the public distribution scheme was strengthened considerably and corruption reduced.

The number of BJP MLAs in the Chhattisgarh assembly remained constant between 2003 and 2008 at 50, with the party's share of the total votes cast going up marginally by one percent, from 39.3 percent to 40.3 percent. The number of Congress MLAs in Chhattisgarh went up by one, from 37 in 2003 to 38 after the 2008 election although the party's vote share rose by nearly two percent from 36.7 percent to 38.6 percent.

What hurt the Congress was factionalism – former Chief Minister Ajit Jogi did not see eye-to-eye with former leader of the opposition in the assembly Mahendra Karma on the issue of supporting the 'Salwa Judum' force in the southern part of the state dominated by left-wing extremists (Maoists or Naxalites). Supporters of the 'Salwa Judum' grouping of 'special police officers' describe it as a spontaneous response of local villagers against violence by underground Maoists while its critics describe it as a government-sponsored vigilante group. Unlike Karma, a former Communist who spearheaded the formation of the group, Jogi concurs with the view of civil rights activists who claim that the 'Salwa Judum' represents a failure of the state administration to enforce law and order, and curb left-wing extremism in the tribal-dominated Bastar division of the state. Eventually, the BJP ended up gaining by winning key assembly constituencies in the division.

Madhya Pradesh

The Congress won 174 seats and 172 seats in the undivided 320-member Madhya Pradesh assembly in 1993 and 1998 respectively, while the BJP won 117 seats and 119 seats in the elections held in these two years. In November 2000, the state was bifurcated. Chhattisgarh became a separate state and the number of members in the Madhya Pradesh assembly shrunk to 230. Digvijay Singh of the Congress had served as Chief Minister for two terms from December 1993 to December 2003. In the December 2003 elections, the BJP won as many as 173 seats in the 230-member assembly while the number of seats with Congress drastically shrunk to 38 seats.

After the December 2008 elections, the number of BJP MLAs in the Madhya Pradesh assembly fell from 173 to 143; the party's vote share came down from 42.5 percent to 37.6 percent or a fall of almost five percent. The number of seats won by the Congress rose from 38 to 71, although the party's vote share increased by less than one percent from 31.6 percent to 32.4 percent. The BSP increased its tally from two to seven, its share of the vote rising from 7.3 percent to 9 percent; the party had 11 MLAs in the undivided Madhya Pradesh assembly in 1993 and 1998.

The Ladli Lakshmi scheme to provide education grants to young women made Shivraj Singh Chouhan popular as Chief Minister in Madhya Pradesh. Similar schemes had been initiated in different states, including in Uttar Pradesh during the Mulayam Singh Yadav government. However, the difference was that the scheme was implemented efficiently in Madhya Pradesh. Chouhan took a leaf out of the book scripted in 2004 by Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y. S. Rajshekhar Reddy by making direct contact with people in rural areas. In the

process, many voters chose to ignore a scandal involving purchases of road rollers and dumpers by a firm close to the Chief Minister's family.

Chouhan became Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh three years ago in November 2005 after the BJP leadership made Babulal Gaur step down from the post. In August 2004, Gaur had replaced Uma Bharti after she was sworn in as Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh after the December 2003 elections. Bharti later rebelled against her party's leadership and formed her own party, the Bharatiya Janshakti Party. It won five seats in the latest round of polling in 2008, though she herself lost the elections.

The BJP in Madhya Pradesh under Chouhan could not have performed as well as it did had it not been helped greatly by deep divisions in the Congress that had various factions led by former Chief Minister Digvijay Singh, Union Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, MP Jyotiraditya Scindia (son of prominent Congress leader, the late Madhavrao Scindia) and Ajay Singh, son of Union Human Resources Development Minister Arjun Singh (who was Chief Minister of the state between June 1980 and March 1985 and again between February 1988 and January 1989). As if these factions were not enough, Congress President Sonia Gandhi and her confidantes 'parachuted' Suresh Pachauri to Bhopal (capital of Madhya Pradesh) from New Delhi to head the party in the state. Pachauri, a former minister in the Union government in New Delhi and member of the Rajya Sabha (the Upper House of India's Parliament) for four six-year terms, could not rejuvenate the Congress in the state and acknowledged responsibility for the party's poor performance.

Rajasthan

The electoral contest in Rajasthan in 2008 was quite close. The Congress did not obtain a majority in the 200-member state assembly – it won 96 seats – and depends on the support of a number of independent MLAs. The party's vote share went up a bit over one percent, from 35.7 percent in 2003 to 36.8 percent. The number of BJP MLAs in the Rajasthan assembly declined from 120 to 78; the party's vote share came down significantly by nearly five percent from 39.2 percent to 34.3. The BSP's vote share rose from four percent to 4.6 percent while the number of its MLAs went up from two to six.

After Mohan Lal Sukhadia, who was Chief Minister of the Rajasthan continuously from November 1954 till July 1971, the only individual to have served two consecutive terms as Chief Minister was Bhairon Singh Shekhawat between March 1990 and November 1998 – he had earlier served as Chief Minister of Rajasthan between June 1977 and February 1980. Shekhawat went on to become the Vice President of India. Ashok Gehlot, the current Chief Minister, had served as Chief Minister of the state between December 1998 and December 2003. In the Rajasthan assembly, the Congress won 76 seats in 1993, 153 seats in 1998 and 56 seats in 2003 while the number of BJP MLAs was 95, 33 and 120 respectively in these three elections.

Former BJP Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje was perceived as 'feudal', 'haughty' and 'imperious' in her style of functioning. She apparently sought the support of BJP veterans in the state, Jaswant Singh (former Union Minister who held the External Affairs and Finance portfolios) and Shekhawat, rather late in the day. Besides the fact that factionalism was rampant in the state, what made Raje's government unpopular was the fact that police fired on members of the Gurjar community and farmers in the state on more than 20 occasions

during her tenure as Chief Minister. Large sections of Gurjars had disrupted normal life in Rajasthan during 2007, agitating for Scheduled Tribe status for the community.

The pattern of voting during the current round of elections in Rajasthan seems to have cut across what is often described by political analysts as ‘vote banks’. Whereas political parties put up candidates belonging to particular castes and communities in specific constituencies, social formations like the Brahmins, Rajputs, Jats, Yadavs, Gurjars and Meenas did not vote along party lines in Rajasthan. This is a clear indication of voters becoming politically mature.

Mizoram

After the June 1986 agreement between the then-Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and the one-time underground Mizo leader Laldenga (one word), Mizoram has been relatively free from the influence of violent insurgency that has prevailed in most other states in north-eastern India. Mizoram is also among India’s most literate states. The Congress had dominated the polity of Mizoram from the mid-1980s till the late-1990s. In December 1998, Zoramthanga of the Mizo National Front became the state’s Chief Minister after his party won 21 out of the 44 seats in the state assembly. He was re-elected five years later. The 2008 assembly elections in Mizoram saw the Congress return to power with an impressive majority obtaining 32 out of 40 seats with the party’s vote share going up from just over 30 percent to nearly 39 percent. The decline in the vote share of the MNF was relatively small, from 31.7 percent to 30.6 percent, but the number of MLAs belonging to the party fell drastically from 21 to three with former Chief Minister Zoramthanga himself losing the elections. The current Chief Minister of the state, Lalthanhawla, had earlier held the same position on two occasions between May 1984 and August 1986 and again between January 1989 and December 1998.

Conclusion

The message emanating from the outcome of the five assembly elections is that politicians and political parties are supported when they deliver on their promises – when they not merely announce programmes and schemes for economic and social development but ensure that these are actualised and executed efficiently.

In the four states in north India where assembly elections took place, the battle was between the two largest political parties in India, the Congress and the BJP. A similar situation exists in only four other states (Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and to a lesser extent, Karnataka). In each one of the 20 other states in India, there is at least one other important political party of consequence. The aggregation of outcomes of elections in these 28 states put together has brought about a fragmentation of the country’s polity. It would, therefore, be simplistic to look at the 2008 assembly elections for indicators to the likely outcome of the forthcoming general elections that are scheduled for April-May 2009.

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