

Elections in Haryana and Maharashtra: The BJP in Decline or Business as Usual?

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Summary

The recent election results for the state assemblies of Haryana and Maharashtra were disappointing for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) despite the fact that it formed the government in both states. Analysts saw this poor performance as a sign that the party's fortunes might be starting to decline. However, the BJP's dominance over India's political system is not in question.

In October 2019, two Indian states – Maharashtra and Haryana – held elections for their legislative assembly. Partly because of some ‘election fatigue’ in the wake of the May 2019 general elections, the two state elections did not draw much attention from analysts or the national media. One of the key reasons for this lack of attention was that very few doubted that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the incumbent in both states, would sweep the polls. However, Indian voters, once again, defied most analysts’ expectations, and gave the BJP-led alliance in Maharashtra a significantly reduced majority and only a relative majority of the seats in Haryana.

The results are surprising especially because of the absence of the so-called ‘spill-over effect’, which usually results in the party, having just won the elections nationally, to perform well at the state level too. Instead, in Haryana, where the BJP, in May 2019, [had won 58 per cent of the vote share and 79 out of 90 assembly segments](#), the ruling party secured 36.5 per cent of the votes and 40 seats. The Congress, on the other hand, performed much better than expected, maintaining its vote share at the general elections of May 2019 (28.8 per cent) and increasing its vote share by eight percentage points over the previous state elections in 2014 (the BJP also increased its share by two percentage points). The incumbent Chief Minister, Manohar Lal Khattar, was sworn in for a second term on 28 October 2019 after the BJP struck a deal with a junior coalition party, the Jannayak Janta Party.

In Maharashtra, the election results were somewhat similar. The BJP (as well as its coalition partner, the Shiv Sena), lost ground compared to the May 2019 general elections. The BJP won 44.5 per cent of the votes in the seats that it contested (as against 52.5 per cent in May 2019) and the Shiv Sena received 38.3 per cent of the votes (49.1 per cent in May 2019). The Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party, on the other hand, held their ground since May 2019 and [improved substantially their vote tally compared to five years before](#). Overall, the BJP-Shiv Sena alliance lost a total of 23 seats (17 and 6 respectively). This complicated the post-poll negotiations between the two allies. After prolonged negotiations, the situation remains confused, as the BJP declared that it will not form a government, while the Shiv Sena is in conversation with the Nationalist Congress Party and the Congress.

Analysts argued that the ‘Modi magic’, which has contributed enormously to the BJP’s electoral fortunes both nationally and at the state level since 2014, might be waning. Pratap Bhanu Mehta sees [‘cracks in the edifice’](#) of the BJP dominance, while Suhas Palshikar thinks that Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s model might have reached its ‘plateau’. Indeed, there seems to be a negative trend for the BJP if we look at the results of state elections where the BJP was the incumbent over the last few years. In 2017, the party barely won the Gujarat elections – Modi’s own state – performing much worse than expected, whereas, in late 2018, the BJP lost three Hindi belt states to the opposition Congress party (Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh). Considering that the party rules a majority of the Indian states, these clear signs of anti-incumbency feelings emerging at the state level are not good news for the BJP.

However, it is too premature to argue that the ‘Modi factor’ might not be enough to win elections any longer. In fact, a similar narrative had emerged during Modi’s first term in the wake of the disappointing results of the BJP in Delhi and Bihar 2015 state elections and indeed just before the 2019 general election. Modi’s BJP, however, won spectacularly. Modi remains widely popular and there is no evidence to show that his political style, which relies on a constant state of electoral mobilisation based on a seemingly unending list of spectacular surprise moves – from demonetisation to the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution – is any less effective. Voters might be willing to punish the BJP at the state level but its national dominance is nowhere in question. Moreover, the BJP is expected to perform well in ‘new territories’ like West Bengal and possibly become an important political force in states like Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

In short, we should not read too much in the recent electoral ‘setbacks’ of the BJP. After all, despite these ‘setbacks’, the party remains the single largest in both states. The BJP’s dominance over India’s political system is not in question and might actually be about to become even firmer if, as many expect, it will perform well at the state elections over the next few years.

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