

469A Bukit Timah Road  
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770  
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239  
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447  
Email: [isassecc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isassecc@nus.edu.sg)  
Website: [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)



## **State Polls and National Echoes in India**

**Ronojoy Sen<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The Congress was the biggest loser in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) elections. Its poor showing has come as a blow to the Congress' prime ministerial aspirant, Rahul Gandhi, who led the election campaign in the state. It also showed up a campaign that did not send out the right message as well as the poor organization of the party at the grassroots. Though the big win of the Samajwadi Party in UP confounded analysts, it won on an anti-incumbency wave where the voters saw it as the only viable alternative to form a stable government. The national implications of the poll result are likely to be more assertive regional parties and policy gridlock.*

It couldn't have got much worse for the governing Indian National Congress party in India. When results to the five state elections (Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Manipur and Goa) — dubbed a mini general election by some — was announced on March 6, the Congress had only one victory to show for in the tiny north-eastern state of Manipur<sup>2</sup> and the possibility of forming the government in the hill state of Uttarakhand.<sup>3</sup>

The most crushing blow, however, for the Congress was in India's largest state Uttar Pradesh (UP) — which not only has a population of around 200 million, but is also home to 8 per cent of the world's poorest people — where it was not supposed to win, but was meant to be a litmus test for the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, Rahul Gandhi, who had concentrated his

---

<sup>1</sup> Ronojoy Sen is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at [isasrs@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasrs@nus.edu.sg). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the institute.

<sup>2</sup> In Manipur, the Congress won 42 seats in the 60-seat Assembly.

<sup>3</sup> At the time when the results were announced, the Congress had won 32 seats and the BJP 31. Latest reports suggest that the Congress might be able to stake a claim to form government with the help of three independent legislators, a legislator from the Uttarakhand Kranti Dal (P) and three BSP MLAs.

energies on the state for the past few years. But for all of Rahul's efforts and his vigorous campaigning during the election, the Congress won a mere 28 seats in the 403-seat UP Assembly, an increase of just six from its 2007 seat tally and a change of 3 percent in terms of votes from the last elections. But what was even more disturbing was the inability of the Congress to win a majority of the seats even in their pocket borough of Amethi and Rae Bareilly, the two constituencies that Rahul and his mother Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, represent in Indian Parliament. The Congress lost all five seats in Rae Bareilly and won two out of five in Amethi, bringing into question the popularity of the Nehru-Gandhi brand.

The reasons for the Congress' poor showing are as complex as the state of UP with its multiple caste, class, religious and regional cleavages. But if it had to be boiled down to a couple of reasons they were: one, the Congress' lack of organization on the ground, which has gradually eroded over the years, and an over-reliance on Rahul; two, the rejection of Congress' negative campaign and its electoral promises such as quotas or reservations in government jobs and educational institutions for Muslims which did not wash with the electorate.

If the UP result was a shocker for the Congress, it equally surprised most analysts who had predicted a hung verdict in the state. In the event, it was a regional party and the original frontrunner, the Samajwadi Party (SP), which won a thumping majority, the likes of which haven't been seen in the state since 1977. The wide margin of victory for the SP, which won 224 seats (compared to 97 in the 2007 elections), and the abysmal performance of the governing Bahujan Samaj Party, whose tally plummeted from 206 to 80 seats, can be explained by a few factors.

First, unlike in some states like Orissa, Gujarat, Bihar and, most recently, Punjab — to name a few — which have bucked anti-incumbency trends, the incumbent government in UP led by Mayawati had become unpopular due to several reasons, the primary being widespread corruption charges, inability to deliver on electoral promises as well as high-cost projects to build statues of the chief minister, other Dalit icons and her party symbol, the elephant. The SP, which has been a key player in UP politics since the early 1990s, was the best placed to reap the advantages of anti-incumbency unlike the national parties, which lacked the organizational strength. As the frontrunner it also promised stability that the other parties were unlikely to provide. Second, because of multi-cornered contests a relatively small percentage swing in votes can bring about huge changes in the number of seats won. Hence, a 3.3 percent vote advantage of the SP over BSP gave it 144 extra seats.<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, in the last elections, the BSP had a 5 percent advantage over the SP but the difference in seat between the two parties was smaller at 109. Third, the SP had a relatively fresh face in Akhilesh Yadav, son of three-time UP chief minister Mulayam Yadav and a sitting member of Parliament, who seemed to have connected with voters. He cycled (the cycle is SP's electoral symbol) his way across the state and was instrumental in putting together a slick ad campaign for this party with the tagline: "Umeed ki Cycle" (Cycle of Hope). His promise of a "cleaner" administration, despite SP's poor track earlier, struck a chord with voters. He

---

<sup>4</sup> The SP won 29.2 percent of the votes while BSP won 25.9 percent.

emphasized English education and use of technology as key to the state's growth, something which his father and the old guard of the party had been antithetical to.

Fourth, the Congress efforts to woo the Muslims, who constitute 18 per cent of the state's population, by promising a quota for 'backward' Muslims seem to have backfired with the SP winning 65 of the 133 seats in UP which have a population of at least 25 per cent Muslims. Indeed, this time the UP assembly will have the most number of Muslims ever. Fifth, it seems that some of the core Dalit support base of the BSP, who constitute around 21 per cent of UP's population, might have deserted it. A telling statistic is that of the 84 reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes or Dalits, the BSP won only 17 whereas the SP won 54. And unlike the last election, Mayawati's efforts of forming a coalition cutting across castes was not successful with her five-year tenure having alienated many of the upper castes as well as OBCs who felt she had been partial to Dalits, and particularly her own sub-caste, the Jatavs.

The larger story of the election results, however, was not only the failure of the Congress but also the decline of its rival national party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which scored 47 seats in UP, down four from the last election. Though the BJP had more reason to be cheerful since it convincingly won the coastal state of Goa and will form the government in the north Indian state of Punjab as a junior partner to the Shiromani Akali Dal,<sup>5</sup> these elections were a triumph of regional parties over the national. This trend has gathered momentum in the last two decades and does not bode well for both national parties in the next general election expected to be held in 2014.

Several analysts have pointed out that the election result was a watershed verdict in that the parties which spoke the language of aspiration and development were rewarded, and the Indian voter had also shown great maturity in rising above identity politics. There is some substance to this since anti-incumbency has seen a decline in India. At the same time, too much should not be read into this verdict. Lest we forget, the SP was the same party that in its last term from 2003-2007 in government in UP had a terrible record with regard to law and order and practised the worst kinds of crony capitalism. Whether Akhilesh, who is going the next chief minister of UP, will be able to give his party a radical makeover and deliver on promises remain to be seen.

The medium-term implications of the election don't look good for India. The Congress-led federal government has been in a state of paralysis for the past several months, hit by corruption scandals and troublesome allies who have blocked most major policy initiatives. This election result makes the situation even more grim for the Congress which had hoped to play a decisive role in the formation of government in UP and pick up a pliant ally in the federal coalition. But now the Congress is condemned to bargaining with assertive regional parties for the rest of its term, making big-ticket reforms extremely difficult.

The outlook for the Congress in the 2014 elections doesn't look too bright at the moment. However, it is also true that people vote differently in state elections, which are dominated by

---

<sup>5</sup> In Goa, the BJP and its allies won 24 seats in a 40-seat Assembly while in Punjab the BJP won 12 seats, which along with Akali Dal's 56 seats, gave the alliance a majority in a 117-seat Assembly.

local issues, as opposed to national elections. So it would be foolhardy to make any predictions about the 2014 elections based on the results in UP and the other states. What is certain, however, is that difficult times lie ahead for the Indian government.

.....