

ISAS Brief

No. 300 – 15 November 2013

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Elections in Chhattisgarh: Maoists, Turnout, NOTA and Clues for India

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A crucial Indian election season began on 11 November 2013 with the first round of polling in a state where rural insurgency has claimed hundreds of lives in the past ten years and where “Maoist” groups control large, remote tracts.

To conduct polling on 11 November in 18 constituencies in the southern portion of Chhattisgarh state, the authorities deployed more than 25,000 central para-military police in addition to state forces.

Four other states — Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Mizoram and Delhi — go to the polls over this month and next; and national elections must be held before May 2014. The temptation to see these five state elections as an indicator of things to come in the national polls has some justification. The declared prime ministerial candidate of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party and Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, has thrown himself into the state campaigning. Modi has been in national-campaign mode for most of this year. His own Gujarat government has been hosting huge national conferences on key issues of development such as urbanisation and rural improvement. To invited guests from all over

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India, sometimes totalling 5,000 people, Modi has shown off his excellent Hindi oratory in lengthy speeches outlining the achievements of his state and his vision of the future.

The current state elections will give a hint of how far Modi's style resonates in the rest of the country. Will people come to hear him out of genuine curiosity or only for a free meal and a bus ride? Some argue that Modi began his run too early and will run out of steam before May. Others note that his opponents are now vigorously disputing that there is a "Modi bandwagon". In India, as in most countries, when politicians proclaim vigorously that something isn't happening, it is often because it is.

The Maoist Zone and Voter Turnout

Chhattisgarh is a very special case. Created as a state only in the year 2000, it stretches along the rugged eastern spine of India. It has become home to the Communist Party of India (Maoist), which has built no-go areas and in May this year massacred state leaders of the Congress Party. In April 2010, they killed 76 para-military police personnel in a well-planned ambush. Whether people in the 18 constituencies in the heart of this zone would vote at all was questionable since the locals fear both the police and the Maoists.

The Maoists had instructed people to boycott the elections. The conflict in the southern part of the state was the reason why the Election Commission decided on two polling days with only 18 constituencies at play in the first instalment. Those 18 constituencies were flooded with security forces. The fears of a low voter turnout, however, proved unfounded with the Election Commission estimating that a record 72 per cent polling was recorded in the Maoist-hit constituencies in the first phase. This was up 11 per cent from the turnout in the area in the 2008 polls.

The question of voter turnout is a fascinating one. Of the five states going to the polls New Delhi, the national capital with more middle-class people among its 10.7 million voters than any place in the country, recorded the lowest turnout in the last state elections — only 58 per cent of eligible voters bothered to vote. Chhattisgarh, at the very bottom of the Indian league table of development and urbanisation (23rd out of 23 major states in a recent development report), had a voter turnout of 71 per cent.

Voters will have a new option in these elections: the chance to vote for NOTA. NOTA is None of the Above, and this option will be offered, along with the other candidates and their symbols, on each of the more than 20,000 Electronic Voting Machines deployed for the election. What happens if NOTA tops the poll has not yet been made clear. This is the first time NOTA has been an option.

The state of Chhattisgarh was created to recognise a region's distinctive topography and population. It has the largest proportion of Scheduled Tribes (STs) of any Indian state outside of the small, ethnically distinctive states of the northeast. Nearly one-third of its 21 million

people belong to “tribal” groups that lie outside the Hindu traditions and caste system of most of India, and 29 of the 90 seats in the state Assembly are reserved for STs.

Protected by mosquitoes, poverty and difficult terrain, the inhabitants were largely left alone by the British, their predecessors and even the government of post-independence India! The latter, however, made constitutional provision for affirmative action for Scheduled Tribes - “reservation” in Indian terms. Jobs in government undertakings, places in educational institutions and seats in elected bodies are reserved for STs.

The Electoral Contests

In the past twenty years, however, Chhattisgarh’s long-preserved mineral riches have sailed onto the radar of Indian industrialists and economists. The state is the country’s largest coal producer and sits on large reserves of iron ore and bauxite. Isolated but self-sufficient people have collided with expanding industrial needs. The CPI (Maoist) has portrayed itself as a force protecting innocent people from ravaging capitalism.

The BJP and Chief Minister Raman Singh have governed the state since 2003. Indeed, Chhattisgarh has become a bastion of the BJP, which won nine of its 10 seats in the national parliament (*Lok Sabha*) in 2009. An ayurvedic medical practitioner and a lifetime member of the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), Raman Singh is scarcely a household name across India. In Chhattisgarh, however, he is the best known political identity, a reputation carefully cultivated through popular measures such as rice for the poor at Rs 2 a kilo (USD 0.04). He’s known as “*Chawal Wale Baba*” (the Rice Leader), not a bad reputation to have in a state where most of the electorate is classified as being below the poverty line. The first phase of polling will decide Singh’s fate in the Rajnandgaon constituency where he is considered a shoo-in for victory.

In the first phase, Dantewada, a hotbed of Maoist activity, was the site of another high-profile contest. The Congress has put up as its candidate the wife of Mahendra Karma, the man responsible for the *Salwa Judum* (a controversial and bloody movement of anti-Maoist vigilantes begun in 2005 and later declared illegal by the Indian Supreme Court) and brutally killed in the May ambush this year. The consensus, however, is that the Congress has failed to capitalise on the breakdown of law and order in southern Chhattisgarh and a possible sympathy wave in its favour. Fingers have been pointed at the wheelchair-bound former Congress chief minister of the state, Ajit Jogi, for creating disunity within the party. Recent reports suggest though that Jogi, whose son Amit Jogi is contesting from Marwahi constituency, has patched up with the Congress at Rahul Gandhi’s behest. While most seats will see a straight contest between the BJP and Congress, in some a third player, the Chhattisgarh Swabhimani Manch, might pull a few votes.

The second round of voting for Chhattisgarh’s remaining 72 seats in safer parts of the state will be on 19 November. Chhattisgarh’s capital Raipur will be going to polls in the second

phase. The BJP is on a strong wicket here with five of the seven constituencies in Raipur held by the party. The situation looks unlikely to change in this election though in two constituencies – Raipur North and Raipur South – the Congress has strong candidates including one sitting legislator.

The counting will happen only on 8 December, along with counting in the other four states going to the polls. All the opinion polls have forecast a BJP victory in Chhattisgarh though the margins of victory differ significantly. A survey carried out by CVoter for the TimesNow channel has predicted a close contest with the Congress winning 41 seats compared to the BJP's 46. Another survey carried out by the respected Centre for the Study of Developing Societies forecasts a rout of the Congress with the party winning between 16 and 24 seats and the BJP increasing its tally to above 60 seats. Going by the opinion polls Raman Singh is likely to be back as Chief Minister for a third term.

Table 1: Chhattisgarh

Population, 2011 census	20.8 million
Electors, 2013	16.8 million
Literacy, 2011	71 per cent
Polling stations	21,400
Electors per polling station	800
Scheduled Tribe pop.	31 per cent
Scheduled Caste pop.	11 per cent
Urban pop.	23 per cent

Table 2: Chhattisgarh elections, 2003 and 2008

	2003	2008
Seats in legislature	90	90
Won by BJP	50	50
Won by Congress	37	38
Voter turnout %	71	71
Seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes	29	29
Seats reserved for Scheduled Castes	10	10

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