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The Road Ahead for Aam Aadmi Party

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There were very few who had foreseen the stunning debut of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) or the Common Man's Party in the 2013 state elections in Delhi, where it won 28 of the 70 seats and nearly 30 per cent of the votes, and its subsequent formation of government. But now it is accepted that AAP, which grew out of the anti-corruption movement spearheaded by activist Anna Hazare and was officially formed as a party in end-2012, has brought about a churning in Indian politics the likes of which have not been seen in recent years.

The Delhi Success

The question now is whether AAP can replicate its success in Delhi in other parts of India in the coming general elections. The answer to some extent depends on whether AAP can duplicate its Delhi strategy. For the Delhi elections AAP successfully reached out to voters through an intensive door-to-door campaigning. The party made detailed campaign plans for each seat to the extent of framing constituency-specific manifestos. Unlike the other political parties, AAP depended on its volunteers, numbering around 100,000, many of them students

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and professionals. Some of them were initially part of the Hazare movement whose epicentre was Delhi.

AAP benefited too from the extensive use of the social media, intensive coverage from the traditional media and a huge cohort of first-time and young voters who were disillusioned with mainstream political parties. AAP's method of raising funds was also radically different from the opaque practises of other parties. It raised money amounting to Rs 180 million from individual donors, roughly one-third of whom were non-resident Indians (NRIs). Of the NRIs, Indians living in the United States contributed one-third of the total funds followed by Singapore which accounted for roughly 10 per cent.

Many analysts felt that AAP would attract only middle class voters. However, in reality, it won votes in middle class colonies as well as the poorer slums and resettlement colonies of Delhi. In fact, the party virtually swept the seats with predominantly lower middle class and poorer voters. The party also attracted a significant lower caste vote share, which would normally have gone to the Bahujan Samaj Party. Much of this support came because AAP was seen as sympathetic to the cause of the poor and the marginalised. At the same time, voters looking for an alternative to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) or the Congress saw no harm in giving AAP a try.

The Perils of Power

Given AAP's genesis as a protest movement against corruption, questions were bound to be asked about its staying power and more crucially its behaviour when in power. The answer to the latter has come quicker than expected. Though it is generally believed that the AAP leadership was reluctant to form the government in Delhi, the party's hand was forced by the outside support extended by the Congress which has eight legislators in the Delhi Assembly. AAP went through an exercise of holding meetings or *jan sabhas* with its constituents and online polling to take the decision to form the government headed by Arvind Kejriwal.

The transition from activism to holding the reins of power has expectedly not been smooth. In the short time that AAP has been in government it has, however, moved rapidly in delivering on its electoral promises. Besides tackling corruption, the two other major promises made in the AAP manifesto was providing 700 litres of free water daily to Delhi households and

halving electricity bills. One of the first things that the AAP government did was to announce 20 kilolitres of free water supply every month to households with metered connections. Soon after, the Chief Minister waived the dues of those who had defaulted on paying electricity bills since March 2013, around the time when AAP launched a campaign against the distributors of electricity in Delhi. The Delhi government has cleared a 50 per cent reduction in electricity tariffs for households that consumed up to 400 units. On corruption the government announced a helpline, which would be open for 14 hours a day, for reporting corruption cases. It even encouraged citizens to conduct sting operations on corrupt officials.

The strong element of populism in AAP's policies is not very different from other state governments. Besides, given that it is dependent on outside support from the Congress and with the general elections around the corner, AAP would like to do as much as possible to boost its track record. While the measures are likely to go down well with a section of voters, they have raised serious concerns about their long-term viability. One concern is the jump in the subsidy bill that such measures entail. The other is that the AAP government has not shown any intent in addressing more fundamental issues such as the enormous losses of water and electricity that occur during distribution.

The direct democracy espoused by AAP has got off to a rocky start. The Delhi government had announced a *janata durbar* (people's meet) every Saturday where citizens could directly come with their grievances to the chief minister and his cabinet. But the first meeting was chaotic and had to be called off. Subsequently the people have been asked to report their grievances online or by calling. Though there has been an enthusiastic response to the corruption hotline, whether it will work in curbing corruption is not known.

The inexperience of AAP and the difficult journey from activism, and even sensationalism, to governance is evident in the style of governing by some of its ministers. Law Minister Somnath Bharti, who has been the subject of some controversy after being indicted by a court for tampering with evidence, has taken on the role of a vigilante demanding the arrest of alleged criminals without following proper procedures. Far from distancing himself from Bharti, the Chief Minister has stood by him deciding to stage a public demonstration against the police in front of the federal home ministry office in Delhi. Cracks have appeared within the party too, with a legislator, who was denied a berth in the Delhi ministry, hitting out against Kejriwal and calling him a dictator.

Prospects for the General Elections

AAP's biggest impact on the political system has been its attack on corruption and privileges of power and its promise of an alternative to mainstream political parties. This has held enormous appeal for the urban middle class many of whom have been backing AAP. Ironically, however, AAP's left of centre agenda, with its emphasis on subsidies and nationalisation, might not go down well with this segment. In fact, AAP's manifesto is far better suited to woo the urban poor and the lower classes, who did vote for the party in large numbers in Delhi.

Even as its agenda is nebulous and untested, as of now AAP lacks the organisational muscle to make an electoral impact across India. The party has made public its intention to contest 300 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), including all 80 in the most populous Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. AAP is best placed in urban centres. Today, there are 53 Indian cities with one million residents or more, and this is where AAP can hope to make the maximum impact. Several thousands have enrolled as members of AAP in these urban centres in the wake of the party's electoral success in Delhi. AAP is also hopeful of doing well in Delhi's neighbouring state of Haryana which has 10 Lok Sabha seats.

Whether the buzz around AAP will translate into national electoral success remains to be seen. But both the BJP and the Congress are wary of the electoral damage that AAP can inflict on them. It is likely that AAP will hurt the BJP more since there is an overlap between the former's potential voters – educated, urban, socially networked and young – and those inclined to vote not so much for the BJP but for its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi.

Two recent opinion polls by media organisations provide some clues to the performance of AAP in the general elections. The first conducted for the *Times of India* in the country's eight most populous cities reported that 44 per cent of those polled said they would vote for an AAP candidate if there was one in their constituency. It also found that Modi was the most-preferred candidate for prime minister with 58 per cent of the votes followed by Kejriwal at 25 and Rahul Gandhi a distant third at 14. The respondents felt that the BJP would be hit marginally more by AAP than the Congress. The second poll conducted in the greater Delhi and Mumbai area for ABP News predicted that AAP would win six out of the seven Lok Sabha seats in Delhi and two in Ghaziabad and Gautam Budh Nagar in the National Capital

Region; in the greater Mumbai area AAP was predicted to win one seat. The preferred candidate for PM in greater Mumbai was Modi followed by Rahul and Kejriwal while in Delhi it was a close race between Modi and Kejriwal with Rahul way behind. Both the polls, however, were limited by their sample size.

The actual number of seats that AAP could win is difficult to predict. But if it can win 20 urban constituencies or more it could well have a say in the formation of the next government, given the fragmentation of Indian politics. But for that to happen the party can't afford too many missteps between now and the elections.

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