

ISAS Insights

No. 245 – 28 March 2014

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Youth and Aam Aadmi Party

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Introduction

In the space of just over a year, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in India has already witnessed a meteoric rise to power, having transformed from a civil society movement into a full-fledged political party with more than a million members. Its stunning performance in the Delhi Assembly elections in December 2013, securing 28 seats, just four less than the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was all the more impressive, considering that it was the first-ever election for the party. Since then, the party's journey has been more than a little shaky. Ending its 49 day-stint as a minority government in Delhi was party leader Arvind Kejriwal's resignation from the position of Chief Minister. Whether this move signals a more troubled fate for the party's future remains to be seen (though an NDTV opinion poll found '49 per cent' of its respondents saying that 'Mr Kejriwal's resignation has improved his party's prospects in the Lok Sabha elections',² due in April-May 2014).

Regardless, a closer look at last December's Delhi election results seems to present the AAP as a game-changer in the sphere of India's electoral politics. Had it not been for them, the

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² NDTV. 2014. NDTV Opinion Poll: Has Arvind Kejriwal's quitting helped AAP? *NDTV* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.ndtv.com/article/election-2014/ndtv-opinion-poll-has-arvind-kejriwal-s-quitting-helped-aap-487268>>.

BJP would have likely reached a majority in Delhi. This is evident from the fast-growing popularity of Narendra Modi, the BJP's prime ministerial candidate in the Lok Sabha polls, and the poor performance of the other main contender, Congress, which has come under attack for the problems of corruption, inflation, unemployment and the five per cent rate of growth posted in the past fiscal year 'which was the slowest pace in a decade'.³ What has undoubtedly played a significant role in the AAP's success story is the growing proportion of young voters and their increasing capability to effectuate political change through mobilising on the social media and the internet. Along with this, the youthful profiles of the party's candidates and the various platforms they have used to recruit members, such as concerts and SMSes, reflect the sense of importance with which the AAP views young people and its strategy to effectively target youth voters.

Youthful Profile of Aam Aadmi Party

A 2011 study by Patrick French shows that the majority of the 545 Members of Parliament (MPs) in the Lok Sabha fall within the late-40s to late-50s age range. Specifically, it reveals that the average age of an MP who comes from a family with a background in politics is 48 years, whereas the average age of an MP with no significant family background is 58 years'.⁴ The profiles of the Aam Aadmi Party's candidates in Delhi, on the other hand, show most of them to be within their early-30s. Out of the party's 65 candidates, 'only five are above the age of 50, and three of them are above 60'.⁵ Some are even as young as 25, such as Prakash Jarwal (contesting from Deoli), the party's youngest candidate. Similarly proving that age is no barrier to entering politics is another AAP candidate, Rakhi Birla, aged 26. Contesting from Mangolpuri, 'Birla defeated four-time MLA and former state minister Raj Kumar Chauhan by a margin of over 10,000 votes'.⁶ This suggests that the youthful profile of the AAP was most likely a significant factor in allowing the party to connect and relate to

³ Schuman, Michael. 2014. A Bad Diet. *Time Magazine*. **183** (2), p.39.

⁴ French, Patrick. 2013. Family Politics. *The India Site* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.theindiasite.com/family-politics/>>.

⁵ Nishtha, Grover. 2013. AAP is not just the youngest party, it has the youngest people. *First Post* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.firstpost.com/politics/aap-is-not-just-the-youngest-party-it-has-the-youngest-people-1201845.html>>.

⁶ Chopra, Ritika. 2013. AAP's Rakhi Birla, youngest Delhi minister who defeated four-time Mangolpuri MLA. *The Economic Times* [online]. Available from World Wide Web: <<http://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/aaps-rakhi-birla-youngest-delhi-minister-who-defeated-four-time-mangolpuri-mla/articleshow/msid-27930369.cms>>.

Delhi's voters given that the largest proportion of the Delhi voting population (28 per cent) lies within the 30-39 age group and is of a similar age to many of the party's candidates.⁷

Furthermore, the fact that many of the AAP candidates who won had little or no previous experience in politics (their backgrounds range from occupations as diverse as auto-rickshaw drivers to chartered accountants) as compared to the AAP candidates who lost, many of whom were either directly or indirectly involved in politics prior to joining the party, points to a shift away from the commonly-held perception that younger and politically inexperienced candidates would be viewed as incapable of achieving political success or effectively creating change. The desire for change that has swept across Delhi and many other Indian cities ever since the anti-corruption protests in 2011 seems to have carried with it a change in perception regarding the ability of younger candidates. The dissatisfaction with the systemic problem of corruption and the way in which it has dominated the current state of politics has led to an increased willingness among the public to see a younger generation of candidates who could present a fresh perspective and a new way of thinking about and practising politics.

Role of Youth in the Success of AAP

The increasing significance of youth as political actors can be seen from the fact that 'the number of first-time voters more than doubled from 98,000 during the municipal election in 2012 to over 3.5 lakh'⁸ in the 2013 Delhi elections. This huge increase in the number of first-time voters, much of which is driven by the rising political participation of young people (making up only 0.7 per cent of the total electorate in 2012, they increased to 3.1 per cent in 2013),⁹ has certainly played a part in the success of the AAP. Out of all the respondents who indicated their desire to vote for the AAP in a pre-poll Delhi survey in 2013, the largest

⁷ Government of Delhi. 2009. *Economic Survey of Delhi 2008-09: Chapter 3 - Demographic Profile*. New Delhi: Department of Planning, Government of Delhi, p.23.

⁸ PTI. 2013. Delhi Elections: More first-time voters but not easy to woo. *The Economic Times* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-11-12/news/43981214_1_jnu-students-union-political-parties-youth-voters>.

⁹ Bhatnagar, Gaurav Vivek. 2013. Election Commission for more youth in the booth. *The Hindu* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/election-commission-for-more-youth-in-the-booth/article5066608.ece>>.

proportion (37 per cent)¹⁰ were aged between 18 and 25 years, conveying the party's strong support among the youth.

The party's ability to gain credibility among the growing proportion of first-time voters could be linked to several factors, one being its strong presence in the youth-dominated domain of social media. In fact, the party's social media following is likely to soon eclipse that of its rivals, including the BJP which has been particularly successful in integrating technology into its campaigning strategy. While the BJP's Facebook page (which was created on 29 May 2010) has over two million followers, the AAP (which is just over a year old) has already gained more than a million followers. This suggests that youth support for the AAP, at least online, is rising at a rate much faster than is the case for other parties. Furthermore, combined with the growing political action of Indian youth, is the increasing popularity of social media in India. It is the combination of these two factors in particular that has been powerful in generating support among the youth for the AAP.

The growth in Facebook usage among Indians has risen at an extremely rapid pace over the last year where it 'recorded a growth of 37.4 per cent'¹¹ in India. This wave of interest in social media is unlikely to slow down anytime in the near future, as a report in the *Economic Times* predicts that India will 'develop the largest Facebook population of any country in the world by 2016'.¹² The growing use of social media has arguably facilitated the ability of young people to voice their political opinions, and perhaps in some cases, even compelled them to do so. This is because Facebook serves as a space for self-expression and discussion. It provides an outlet for young people to make political statements and initiate or respond to political discussions with friends. Furthermore, a young person would be relatively familiar with his or her 'friends' on Facebook, would be in a similar age group as them and would be likely to face the same issues. Consequently, he or she would feel not only more confident about being taken seriously but also more comfortable expressing political opinions to 'friends' within Facebook rather than to elders in a public setting. Also, the 'shared' nature of content on Facebook, in which posts and comments can spread extremely quickly across friends and groups, has meant that the online buzz surrounding the AAP has contributed to its growing popularity. Whether this has translated into actual votes, however, is difficult to say.

¹⁰ Lokniti. 2013. *Delhi Pre-Poll Survey 2013 Findings*. Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, p.5.

¹¹ BBC. 2013. Indian media: Facebook's popularity. *BBC News* (online). Available from Worldwide Web: <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-25029574>>.

¹² Ibid.

Some of the AAP's other efforts to capture the youth vote in Delhi have included uploading 'many of its constituency specific manifestos online for people to view before voting'¹³ and using text messaging as well as music as a way of mobilising young voters. A 'Rock the Ballot' concert featuring popular Bollywood musicians such as Vishal Dadlani and Swanand Kirkire was organised on behalf of the party and took place on the 23 November 2013 in the run-up to the Delhi elections. Regarding technology, some of the options available to those who want to join the AAP include giving a missed call or sending an SMS. The success of the move to use SMSes and phone calls as a way of recruiting new members is evident from the heavy traffic that was experienced on the original number that was made available. To deal with the public demand for joining the party via this route, they 'launched two new numbers'.¹⁴

Victory Margins in Delhi Poll: Signs of AAP as Game-changer?

The Delhi constituencies with incredibly close vote margins involved a strong fight between AAP and BJP candidates. In four of the constituencies, AAP members won seats 'with margins of less than a thousand votes'.¹⁵ These include Surender Singh, who contested at Delhi Cantonment (winning by margin of 335 votes), Mahendra Yadav at Vikaspuri (winning by 405 votes), Som Dutt Sharma at Sadar Bazaar (winning by 796 votes) and Dinesh Mohaniya at Sangam Vihar (winning by 777 votes).¹⁶ This marks a significant change from the previous Delhi Assembly elections in 2008 where all these constituencies, except for Vikaspuri, had wide victory margins. In 2008, Delhi Cantonment and Sangam Vihar saw the BJP claiming major victories over Congress. In the former constituency, the BJP scored 55.58 per cent of the votes as opposed to Congress which took only 38.55 per cent.¹⁷ In the

¹³ Pahwa, Nikhil. 2013. Aam Aadmi Party Seeks Mobile & Online Referendum on Forming Govt in Delhi State. *Medianama* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.medianama.com/2013/12/223-aam-aadmi-party-seeks-mobile-online-referendum-on-forming-govt-in-delhi-state/>>.

¹⁴ PTI. 2014. 10 lakh new members in four days, claims Aam Aadmi Party. *The Times of India* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/10-lakh-new-members-in-4-days-claims-Aam-Aadmi-Party/articleshow/28791744.cms>>.

¹⁵ PTI. 2013. Delhi polls: Ilmi loses by whisker of 326 vote margin. *Business Standard* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/delhi-polls-ilmi-loses-by-whisker-of-326-vote-margin-113120800698_1.html>.

¹⁶ Dhapola, Shruti. 2013. Delhi result 2013: close races are testament to AAP's phenomenal groundwork. *First Post* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <<http://www.firstpost.com/politics/delhi-result-2013-close-races-are-testament-to-aaps-phenomenal-groundwork-1275571.html>>.

¹⁷ Election Commission of India. 2008. *Statistical Report on General Election, 2008 to the Legislative Assembly of NCT Delhi*. New Delhi: Election Commission of India, p.99.

latter, the BJP took 27.37 per cent while Congress took 22.54 per cent.¹⁸ Sadar Bazaar saw the Congress emerge as the winner with a share of votes ('53.44 per cent') far larger than the BJP ('37.56 per cent'¹⁹), its closest competitor. These differences in results between 2008 and 2013 elections reveal the remarkable performance of the AAP – it was able to succeed in some of the constituencies that were previously BJP or Congress strongholds.

Furthermore, the advent of the AAP has intensified competition among parties. Although she lost in R K Puram constituency to the BJP's Anil Kumar Sharma in the 2013 elections, the AAP candidate Shazia Ilmi's loss conveys the closeness of competition between the BJP and the AAP in Delhi. She lost the seat by only 326 votes – the smallest margin in the Delhi Assembly elections. The strong performances of both parties, both in terms of the number of seats won in Delhi (32 for the BJP and 28 for the AAP) and the small victory margins in many of the Delhi constituencies, reveals the divide amongst the electorate. This was likely due to the fact that the AAP cut into the vote banks of both the BJP and Congress, thus denying the BJP of what would otherwise have been an easy win.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the AAP has attempted to differentiate itself from other parties through deliberately selecting younger candidates, ensuring they have a criminal-free record and publicly listing on its website the details of all its donors, even those who give as little as 100 rupees, despite the fact that the Indian law only 'requires donations above 20,000 rupees to be made public'.²⁰ Its tagline on projecting itself as a youth-focused, transparent, credible and corruption-free party has allowed it to garner a strong appeal amongst young voters. The arrival of the AAP comes at a time when young people are more politicised than ever before, evident from their mass participation in protests against corruption in 2011 and rape in 2011 and 2012, and when the popularity of social media in India has skyrocketed, providing a new platform for young people, in particular, to articulate their political views and engage in political affairs. The effects of this may have contributed to the party's impressive

¹⁸ Ibid, p.103

¹⁹ Ibid, p.92

²⁰ Bagri, Neha Thirani. 2014. As Donations Pour In, Aam Aadmi Party Tries To Transform Campaign Finance. *The New York Times* (online). Available from World Wide Web: <http://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/01/07/as-donations-pour-in-aam-aadmi-party-tries-to-transform-campaign-finance/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0>.

performance in the Delhi Assembly elections last year. It even managed to gain a majority in some constituencies that featured easy victories by the Congress or the BJP in the previous 2008 elections. The party has set its sights beyond Delhi. In preparations to contest in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, it is conducting membership drives in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka, just to name a few. Whether the AAP will be able to create the same sort of impact elsewhere in India as it has managed to do in Delhi, whether it can sustain its popularity (especially among the youth who may be more susceptible to treating the party as a ‘fad’ rather than a long-term interest in comparison to elder voters), and whether it will be able to deliver on its promises, are all questions that India’s youth are undoubtedly waiting to hear the answers to.

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