

ISAS Brief

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The Election Scene in Uttar Pradesh

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The nine-phase Indian national elections, which began on 7 April 2014 with the results due on 16 May, are at their mid-way stage. While there will be intense contests for most of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), all eyes are on Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the first phase of polls was held on 10 April and the last will be on 12 May, the final day of polling. UP, India's largest state with a population of over 200 million, sends 80 Members of Parliament (MPs) to the Lok Sabha, making it crucial to government-formation in Delhi.

Difficulty of Predictions

Predictions for UP are notoriously difficult since the state has been the site of intensely competitive multi-cornered contests in a way many other states are not. There are at least four political parties that will be contesting most of the seats in UP. The Samajwadi Party (the governing party in the state) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) – which are for all practical purposes UP-based parties – will be contending with the national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress. The Congress has a tie-up with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) in western Uttar Pradesh, while the BJP has an alliance with a marginal player, the Apna Dal.

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The SP and BSP are going it alone. The other reason which makes UP difficult to call is the narrow difference in vote share between the major parties and how that translates into seats won. In the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, the BSP won 27% of the votes followed by SP at 23%, the Congress at 18% and BJP at 17.5%. In the 2012 UP Assembly elections, a 3.3% gap between the SP and the BSP gave the SP an extra 144 seats. Finally, the huge size of UP brings in variation in voting patterns in the four different regions of the state: western UP, central UP (Awadh), Bundelkhand and eastern UP (Poorvanchal).

In ordinary circumstances, the last Assembly elections would have been a good indicator of things to come. In the 2012 state election the SP got a thumping majority winning 224 of the 403 seats (compared to 97 in the 2007 elections), and the governing BSP's tally plummeted from 206 to 80 seats. The Congress won a mere 28 seats while the BJP did somewhat better with 47 seats. The situation has, however, changed dramatically since 2012.

The BJP Resurgence

The most fundamental change has been the decline in the popularity of the SP. While the SP's record of governance has been mediocre, what has really hurt it are incidents of communal violence. The biggest of these were the Hindu-Muslim riots in Muzaffarnagar where over 60 people were killed and hundreds fled their homes. The UP government under the SP signally failed to enforce law and order. However, Muzaffarnagar, which went to polls on 10 April, showed its faith in the electoral process by recording a high turnout of 70%.

The Muzaffarnagar riots came on the back of several low-intensity riots in UP. Both the SP, which relies heavily on Muslim voters, and the BJP are responsible for the communal polarisation in UP. The BJP's UP in-charge of the 2014 election campaign is Amit Shah, a trusted lieutenant of the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. There are many who believe that he has covertly revived the Hindutva agenda to consolidate the Hindu vote in UP. On the other hand the SP, which in 2012 won in 65 of the 133 constituencies in UP, where at least a quarter of population were Muslims, has also had a hand in the polarisation. It stands to benefit from the fear psychosis among Muslims and a consolidation of the Muslim vote. Shah had been banned from election campaigning by the Election Commission for making hate speeches as was SP leader Azam Khan. While the election panel has lifted the ban on Shah after he sent in an apology, at the time of writing Khan was still banned from campaigning.

In this election, however, the polarisation seems to be helping the BJP. This along with the popularity of Modi in parts of UP could well increase the BJP's tally dramatically. The focus of the BJP on Uttar Pradesh is apparent from the fact that Modi, in addition to Vadodara in Gujarat, is contesting from Varanasi, considered one of the holiest cities by Hindus. Besides the symbolic value attached to Modi contesting from Varanasi, which also involved the delicate task of shifting a very senior party leader and sitting MP Murli Manohar Joshi to another constituency, the BJP believes that Modi's candidature will positively impact the party's chances in eastern UP which has 32 seats. Varanasi is also going to be a closely-

watched constituency since Aam Aadmi party leader Arvind Kejriwal is contesting against Modi.

There are several other high-profile constituencies in UP including Amethi, which has Rahul Gandhi, a two-time MP from the seat and the leader of the Congress's election campaign, involved in a triangular contest. Rahul's primary opponents are television star Smriti Irani from the BJP and Aam Aadmi Party's Kumar Vishwas. In the neighbouring constituency of Rae Bareilly, Rahul's mother and Congress candidate Sonia Gandhi is also standing for re-election. BJP president Rajnath Singh is also in the fray in UP, having shifted his constituency from Ghaziabad in western UP to Lucknow, the state's capital.

Most opinion polls have forecast a resurgence for the BJP in UP where they have been on a decline since they won 57 seats (UP then had 85 seats since the separate state of Uttarakhand had not yet been carved out) in 1998 riding the Hindutva wave of the 1990s. The most recent NDTV poll gives the BJP 51 seats while CSDS-IBN pegs the BJP a little lower at between 42 and 50 seats. Both polls project the vote share of the BJP climbing to at least 36%, which would represent a dramatic turnaround for the party. The gains by the BJP will be at the cost of all three other major parties.

There are some long-time UP-watchers who believe that the opinion polls might be overestimating the BJP's strength in the state. They also believe that the BSP's strength might have been underestimated since it has chosen to remain below the radar. They might have a point since opinion polls have got it wrong before, most notably in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. But even if the BJP gets anywhere near 40 seats or above in UP, it would be a huge boost for its prospects to form the national government.

Uttar Pradesh National Elections, 2009, and State Elections, 2012

	2009 Lok Sabha	2012 Assembly
Total Seats	80	403
Samajwadi Party	23	224
Bahujan Samaj Party	20	80
Indian National Congress	21	28
Bharatiya Janata Party	10	47

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