

ISAS Insights

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SIGNIFICANCE OF BIHAR ELECTIONS RESULTS ON INDIA'S POWER PLAY

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Introduction

Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar led the National Democratic Alliance to a clear victory in the Bihar Assembly elections, the results for which were announced on 22 November 2005. Mr Kumar's combine won 143 seats in the 243 member assembly, with the JD (U) securing 88 seats and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 55. Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) managed to win only 54 seats. Last February, JD (U) won 55 seats whilst the BJP took 37 seats. In the recent elections, the Congress won nine seats, one less than in February while the RJD-led alliance saw a decrease of 24 seats, when compared to the February polls. Lok Jan Shakti party chief Ram Vilas Paswan, who is also the Union Steel Minister, fared the worst, with his party winning only 10 seats.

Significance of Elections Results

The election results point to a significant decline in the influence of the RJD and its leader, Mr Yadav, who had ruled the state for 15 years. That there was disaffection with Mr Yadav's politics and the lack of development in the state was evident in the February elections, but the decisive swing by the electorate is certainly indicative of the maturity of the democratic process.

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The change can be attributed to several factors. A key strategy of Mr Kumar was to woo oppressed caste groups long neglected by the RJD. A good proportion of the votes of the most backward classes shifted to JD (U)-BJP's upper caste base, tilting the balance against the RJD. The declining appeal of Mr Paswan and the lack of credibility for his pro-Muslim image reduced his strength at the polls, with loss of the Muslim votes. Mr Kumar's careful stance away from the hardliner Hindu stance of his ally BJP won him several constituencies that have significant Muslim influence. Disenchantment over the midnight decision to dissolve the earlier House, elected in February, and the perception that in the interregnum, Mr Yadav was the proxy ruler, manipulating the Governor's regime, added to the alienation of the electorate. Finally, the Election Commission has to be complimented on a strict, non-partisan conduct of the elections, closely monitoring the process, and making it the most free and fair election in Bihar in recent decades. Though overall voter turnout was low, the progressive increase in turnout in each succeeding phase (the elections were conducted in four phases) indicated a returning confidence in the administration and the law and order machinery as the process went forward.

Mr Yadav is not to be underestimated, as he still retains a considerable support among the lower castes. He is likely to need the Congress at the Centre to protect him against charges of corruption and the cases in courts that he is facing. It is unlikely that he would invite confrontation of any kind with the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). From the point of view of the Congress, it is clear that their base in Bihar remains very poor, and they are also unlikely to invite any confrontation. However, Mr Yadav may seek Mr Paswan's exit, a move that could cause the Congress some serious reflection. The CPI (M) may make a case for throwing him out of the government but the Congress may not agree to this. There would be the fear that once the alliance starts to erode, there may be no stopping it. Mr Shibu Soren and his Jharkhand Mukti Morcha party are already disenchanted with being kept out of power and there are growing strains between the Andhra Pradesh Congress and the Telengana party.

The Left may also not like to push the Congress as much as it has been doing of late, for it would not want to do anything that could bring the BJP back to power even accidentally. It would like to wait for an opportunity to look for a Third Front coalition, and that does not seem likely in this Lok Sabha. In any case, the Left would think of destabilising the Congress only if the latter is getting stronger, which is not the case. In fact, it is quite the reverse.

Lessons for Congress

There are also important lessons for the Congress and for Mrs Sonia Gandhi. They miscalculated Mr Yadav's strength and the strength of the sentiments against the rule marked by extortions, abductions and the breakdown of law and order. More importantly for Dr Manmohan Singh, the UPA's pro-poor programmes – for rural employment, for tribals, or the Right to Information Act – have not cut any ice with the people.

The Left, CPI (M) in particular, is likely to be concerned with the tightening of the electoral process, and the implications for the West Bengal and Kerala elections. 'Scientific' poll management has been the basis of CPI (M) victories in West Bengal, and close monitoring and correctives could weaken this strategy.

In sum, it is unlikely that the Bihar results would have any immediate repercussions for the UPA government at the Centre or for the Congress, nor is the BJP in any shape to offer any alternative. It is important for the Congress that it gets its act together, if merely to strengthen its position in the coalition.

The Road Ahead for Bihar

Mr Kumar has his task cut out. Bihar could not have remained a stranger to the larger process of growth and development that characterizes much of the rest of India. A considerable section of the Bihar population opted to migrate out to other parts of India in search of security and stability. They have managed to do well in the civil services, private sector and academia outside Bihar.

A majority (most of them poor), however, had to stay put, most of the time on Mr Yadav's terms. But those who stayed back were not oblivious to the change and growth in the rest of the country. In these times of ever-increasing connectivity, the Bihar voter was in a position to have a fairly good idea of how growth, development, and governance were changing people's ambitions and aspirations. In many ways, this is a mandate for change, for economic development, stability and for a better life for the citizenry.

It is early to estimate whether Mr Kumar would be able to deliver on the voter's desire for change. It is important to move away from the cult of private armies and of settling scores to a rule bound, safe and secure state while simultaneously addressing issues of development. Priorities would thus be restoration of law and order, focus on infrastructure and communications, delivery of basic services like education, health and welfare services, and to leverage the natural resources available for investment and growth.

ISAS Study

It is interesting that the results of this election validate the hypothesis set out in the Institute of South Asian Studies' recent work on governance and development in Indian states. It was argued that expectations of the citizenry would determine the role of reforms in governance. No political leader or party can ignore the obligation to undertake some basic tasks of governance. A strong, well-oiled party machine helps electoral mobilisation; an emotional pitch may work magic temporarily; but the business of democratic politics has to centre on governance and delivery.

Democratic politics, especially if it insists on seeking its very legitimacy from the welfare of the masses, cannot sustain for long a leadership style that ignores minimum needs. In Bihar, caste loyalties created political elite impervious to economic development. Once the external environment, the development in other states and the opportunities arising from these were evident, the citizenry opted, at the earliest opportunity, for the political leadership that promises them growth, rather than caste politics.

The ISAS study further argues that this would be sustained only if growth and economic transformation can be delivered, and that now would be the responsibility and mandate of the executive, administrative machinery. The success of this change rest substantially on whether this organ can perform, and that is the most major task before the new government.
