

Voters hand major parties a surprise in India state assembly elections

by Ramtanu Maitra

In November, five Indian states, with a combined population of over 270 million, went through their state assembly elections. Although the results have failed to gladden the hearts of any of the three major national parties—Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Janata Dal (JD)—there is convincing evidence that the Indian electorate is undergoing a phase change. This became particularly obvious in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state, which, if it were a country, would be the sixth largest nation in the world.

State assembly elections in four states—Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan—became necessary after the dismissal of all four state governments in December 1992, when they were all under BJP rule, following the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya. The government of Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao was forced to dismiss them because of allegations that the BJP had implicitly helped, through its campaign to build a Hindu temple on the site where the mosque is situated, in bringing down the 16th-century mosque. A fifth state, Delhi, went to the polls because its status had been upgraded from a union territory surrounding the national capital of New Delhi, not unlike the District of Columbia, to a full-fledged state.

From the very outset, it was evident that the main tussle was between the Congress Party and the BJP. While the Congress-ruled national government is keen to prove that its interim policy and its decision to dismiss the four state governments had met the approval of the Indian electorate, the BJP was out to prove that New Delhi's act itself had given BJP a political momentum and the party was in the process of growing. The third party, Janata Dal, which had undergone multiple fragmentation since 1991, in order to survive, had recombined in order to fight at the polls. From the end of October to almost the end of November, campaigning for the polls was the sole preoccupation of the political big-wigs. One estimate indicates that the election campaign consumed about 10 billion rupees, close to \$30 million.

However, the results have failed to convince anyone that the objectives of the major parties have been met. In Delhi, the traditional stronghold of the BJP and Congress, the BJP won most convincingly, routing the Congress party. In Hi-

machal Pradesh, the tables were turned, and the BJP could muster no more than one-third of the total seats, making way for the Congress party to take control. In Rajasthan, another traditional stronghold of the Congress and BJP, the verdict was split, with the BJP coming out as the single largest party, but without an absolute majority: As it stands now, the BJP is in the process of wooing a few independent candidates who won at the hustings, to form the state government. As in Himachal Pradesh, the BJP received a drubbing in Madhya Pradesh, and the Congress is now poised to form the state government.

Shocker in Uttar Pradesh

The biggest surprise of them all, however, was in store in Uttar Pradesh, where a recently formed coalition of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), the latter a breakaway faction of the Janata Dal, won an astonishing 177 seats out of the 421 assembly seats contested. The BJP came in second with 176 seats. Since both the Congress and the JD had campaigned primarily to stop the BJP juggernaut in that important state, both these parties with about 60 seats between them, have thrown their support behind the new combine to deny the BJP power in Uttar Pradesh.

From every angle the election result was a shocker. The BJP was spending freely to keep control of this vital state, and the Congress, which previously held 46 seats, was keen to prove that it had made a comeback. The Janata Dal, which had 90-odd seats before the election, had regrouped primarily to do well in Uttar Pradesh. But the strategies of all these major parties failed, and it is evident in hindsight that none of them had any feel for what voters were thinking.

Instead, the outcome suggests a very different development. The Bahujan Samaj Party, led by a former scientist in the Defense Research Organization and a member of a scheduled (i.e., lower) caste community, is a party of scheduled castes, demanding political power for this vast majority which has been overtly exploited by the major political parties over the years. Scheduled castes had in the past studiously backed the Congress, except in 1989 and 1991 when the caste-based politics of former Prime Minister V.P. Singh of

Janata Dal had taken them into his party's fold. However, they soon realized the phony caste politics of the Janata Dal and had shifted their allegiance to the Bahujan Samaj Party, which preaches political power for the scheduled castes. In addition, the Muslims in Uttar Pradesh, frightened by the growing might of the *Hindutva*, or Hindu soul, preaching of the BJP, voted *en bloc* for the BSP-SP coalition to give them the edge.

The return of the Samajwadi Party at the center of power is also a surprise. In 1990, when BJP leader L.K. Advani led the chariot procession across northern India which culminated in Ayodhya for the purpose of building momentum on behalf of constructing a Hindu temple where the Babri Masjid mosque was located, the Uttar Pradesh chief minister was Mulayam Singh Yadav, now the supremo of the Samajwadi Party. During the 1990 incident, Mulayam Singh had fired upon the BJP volunteers, causing a massive stampede and innumerable deaths. At the time, many political analysts who were gazing at the crystal ball projected a groundswell for the BJP in the coming years and wrote Mulayam Singh's political obituary. It is astounding that the former chief minister, still campaigning against the BJP, has been voted overwhelmingly back into power.

An affirmative vote, not a backlash

There is no question that what happened in Uttar Pradesh is a phenomenon that requires close observation. For the first time, according to some eyewitnesses, thousands and thousands of scheduled caste members marched on poll day to exercise their franchise, something which had never been seen before. This implies that the scheduled castes have confidence that they can gain political power and that an environment in which a free and fair poll could be conducted has been created.

The growth of the Bahujan Samaj Party rings the death knell for both the Congress and Janata Dal, and to a certain extent for the Bharatiya Janata Party. The Congress party, helped by its unique role in the Independence movement, had over the years formed a grand alliance of scheduled castes, Muslims, and caste Hindus. Although in the years of the anti-Congress backlash—as in the post-emergency election in 1977 and Rajiv Gandhi's defeat in 1989—this alliance was broken temporarily, it was nonetheless evident that such distortions were caused by the general dislike of the Congress policy and the vote was simply anti-Congress. This time, however, there was no anti-Congress or anti-BJP wave: In other words, the scheduled castes and Muslims did not vote against one party or another, but voted *for* the BSP and SP with a positive prospect in mind.

Another important aspect of the Uttar Pradesh election is the way Muslims voted. Long captive to the mullahs and manipulated by the major political parties, the Muslims remained without leaders. The diktat of which way to vote was given from the mosque, and a majority followed it without

identifying with the party or the party's leadership. This time around, however, the Muslims identified themselves with a vast majority of socially downtrodden Hindus and with leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Kanshi Ram, the BSP chief. This development, given the frequently tense Hindu-Muslim relations in India, is a most refreshing development, and it indicates that the Muslims are now willing to play a role in the future political development of the country.

Firm rejection of BJP

The other lesson from the five state elections is a clear verdict against the Bharatiya Janata Party. Not only could the BJP not recapture the states it had hitherto ruled, but it also simply failed to generate enthusiasm about the party's goals. One of the reasons for the poor showing of the BJP is the decision of the party leadership not to change its posture as a Hindu chauvinist party. Like some of its own leaders, the electorate was expecting the Bharatiya Janata Party to "grow up" and act as a responsible national party. While few Indians will disagree that the partition of India was hideous, and was perhaps the cause of most evils that haunt the subcontinent today, the electorate wanted the BJP to address the bread-and-butter issues—its policy toward industry, labor, and foreign policy—in a more cogent and serious manner. As one senior Bharatiya Janata theoretician told this author following the elections, it is time to completely reorient thinking.

If the BJP has been humbled and its juggernaut successfully stalled, there is little reason for rejoicing in the Congress camp. Uttar Pradesh, the heartbeat of India's Independence movement—besides being the home state of more than 140 million Indians, and the state that has provided the country seven of its nine prime ministers so far—this key state is now lost to the party for years, if not decades. This loss is added to the political decimation that Congress had earlier faced in the adjoining state of Bihar, another former stronghold of the party. The Congress victory in Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh suggests that the Bharatiya Janata Party has fallen flat on its face, and traditional politics still rules the roost in both states.

However, the ruling Congress party in New Delhi can draw solace from the outcome, because of the failure of the BJP to forge ahead. Had the BJP returned triumphantly in all four states where its governments were dismissed by the central government, there would be mounting pressure on the Narasimha Rao government to call for mid-term elections. Such a possibility does not exist as of now, particularly when the Janata Dal has been virtually sent into oblivion and the BJP leaders, besides licking their wounds, would be rethinking the party's goals and objectives. On that score, the Narasimha Rao government has received a mandate from the people to continue.

However, Delhi will do well to note the development in Uttar Pradesh and its implications for the future.