

DELHI ASSEMBLY POLL

Welfare politics trumps nationalism



PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

It was billed as a battle between the politics of welfare and the politics of strident nationalism centred on a changed citizenship law, which critics see as divisive. In the end, the former emerged victorious. That is how the results of the Delhi legislative

assembly election turned out to be.

Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) returned to power for the third time with a resounding victory in the election. While a comfortable win for AAP was widely expected much before the election was announced, what came as a surprise was the scale and sweep of the victory that came tantalisingly close to replicating the party's remarkable feat in the previous assembly poll five years ago—bagging 67 of the total of 70 seats. That AAP fell five seats short of that figure this time did not matter much. That AAP's polling percentage fell from 54 last time to 53.91—and that its principal challenger Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) increased its tally of seats from 3 in 2015 to eight in 2020, accompanied by a rise in percentages of votes polled from 32 to 39—did not alter the final picture. But the fact that there was no change in the electoral fate of Congress in Delhi—the party failed to get a single seat in 2015 and drew a blank this time, too—has important pan-India political implications.

The campaign for Delhi has been bitter and



Supporters of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) celebrate after learning of the initial poll results outside its party headquarters in New Delhi, India, on February 11, 2020.

PHOTO: REUTERS/ANUSHREE FADNAVIS

An important message emanating from the Lok Sabha poll verdict in Delhi last year and the recent assembly election result is that Indian voters often vote differently in national and state elections.

polarised, the political discourse marked by incendiary speeches by some BJP leaders. The saffron party banked on anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) protests at Shaheen Bagh near Jamia Millia University in the Muslim-dominated assembly constituency of Okhla, straddling some posh localities of South and comparatively less affluent areas of East Delhi,

as also in other parts of India. On the other hand, AAP's main plank was its performance in health and education sectors and free electricity, water and bus ride for women. AAP's agenda revolved around an upgrade of government-run schools and introduction of mohalla (street) clinics, billed as a major step forward in university healthcare.

BJP's was a high-voltage campaign that sought to build on the momentum of its sweep of all the seven Lok Sabha seats in the capital during the national elections held in April-May last year, decimating both AAP and Congress. BJP pressed into service its top leaders Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, scores of its lawmakers, federal ministers, and state leaders including saffron-robed Yogi Adityanath—Uttar Pradesh's chief minister and a hardline Hindutva mascot—to woo Delhi voters.

Eight months is a long time in electoral politics. In the run-up to the last parliamentary elections, BJP ran a nationalistic campaign

that paid off handsomely, giving the party a greater number of seats than in 2014. The party once again took to the nationalism narrative in the Delhi assembly election campaign, but with very little return this time. It was the first poll battle in the thick of anti-CAA protests. So, what was the difference between BJP's two nationalistic narratives with two contrasting results?

The nationalism during its parliamentary election campaign united most of the Indians behind BJP and its national security plank in the wake of the deadly terror attack that killed 40 paramilitary men in Pulwama in February last year and the subsequent Indian air strike on a terror camp in Balakote in Pakistan. However, the nationalism framed by the party during the row over CAA/NRC lacked the same unifying glue, because CAA/NRC relates to people residing within India.

It is time for BJP to introspect whether an aggressive nationalistic campaign at a time of economic slowdown and livelihood crisis

has begun to be hit by the law of diminishing returns particularly when the target audience varies. It is also time for the party to ponder whether the kind of vitriol used by lower-rung leaders like Kapil Mishra, Anurag Thakur and Parvesh Singh Verma during the Delhi poll campaign helps. That Thakur and Verma were banned briefly by the Election Commission from campaigning did not seem to stand BJP in good stead. Also, a major handicap for BJP in the Delhi election was the absence of a credible leadership in its faction-ridden Delhi unit. The party did not name any chief ministerial candidate and relied mainly on the charisma of Modi and the door-to-door outreach of Amit Shah.

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In contrast to BJP, AAP's campaign frame was a judicious blend of development and

a touch of soft Hindutva. In fact, there was nothing to suggest that AAP at any point during electioneering was driven by a strident ideological posturing. If it opposed BJP's "communal" agenda and voted against the bill to amend the citizenship law in parliament in December, it also supported the Modi government's abrogation of the special constitutional status of Jammu and Kashmir in August. The Delhi assembly poll campaign saw Kejriwal and other AAP leaders visiting temples, the chief minister visiting Hanuman temple and chanting "Hanuman chalisa" (hymns of Lord Hanuman), and AAP workers regularly shouting "Bharat mata ki jai", a slogan usually associated with BJP cadres. Throughout the electioneering period, AAP avoided wading into the CAA/NRC controversy and Kejriwal never visited Shaheen Bagh, the epicentre of the anti-CAA/NRC movement. The party, thereby, chose to stay clear of the trap of being caught in a polarising debate, avoid taking a definite posture that could trigger a consolidation among the majority of community voters and help BJP.

It is this combination of welfare politics and a dose of soft Hindutva that helped AAP capture the political space created by the spectacular decline of both BJP and Congress. Kejriwal's party succeeded in tapping into the discontent among the traditional support base of its rivals.

Congress, which ruled Delhi for three consecutive terms from 1998 to 2013 under the stewardship of Sheila Dikshit and was part of Kejriwal's short-lived coalition government in 2013, ran an absolutely listless campaign to the extent of being virtually squeezed out of what had begun as a three-horse race before turning into a straight contest between AAP and BJP. The result was there for all to see: the party got less than five percent of the total votes polled, and 63 of its 66 candidates had to forfeit their deposits after failing to secure one-sixth of the total valid votes cast in a constituency. The party's vote share plunged from 9.7 percent in 2015 to less than five percent. The Delhi poll mandate once again drives home the point that Congress is increasingly losing its relevance as a pan-India alternative to BJP, leaving that space to an aggregate of key regional parties.

BJP's defeat in Delhi came after its below-par performance in Maharashtra, Haryana and the loss in Jharkhand assembly elections in the last few months. The party faces more electoral tests in the coming months—in Bihar later this year, and West Bengal next year. The BJP-ruled Uttar Pradesh also has an assembly poll due in 2022, just two years before the next national elections in 2024.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star. He writes from New Delhi, India.

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