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The Modi 'Wave': Implications of Uttar Pradesh State Elections

By Sinderpal Singh

Synopsis

The sweeping victory of PM Narendra Modi's ruling party in Uttar Pradesh enhances its position in several states and the Upper House while auguring a stronger showing in the next general election. It also consolidates Modi's dominant position in the BJP.

Commentary

RESULTS OF four state elections in India announced this week gave Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party a massive victory in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 312 out of the total 403 seats in the state, a monumental win considering it garnered only 47 seats in the last state elections in 2012.

In the wide-ranging debate over the factors which led to the BJP electoral romp, many attribute it to Modi's personal charisma and his single-handed ability to swing votes for his party. They called it the Modi 'wave', like in the 2014 general election, although the BJP suffered setbacks in some other states.

Three Implications of Modi Sweep

There are three broad possible implications - short term, medium term and long term - of this BJP sweep in Uttar Pradesh.

In the short term, the scale of BJP's victory will have significant institutional and legislative implications. Most immediately, this election result confers a popular mandate for Modi's decision to demonetise 86 percent of all cash by circulation value in India. This move, represented as Modi's personal decision to uproot rampant

corruption within India, was met with much criticism and scepticism within both academic and political circles.

Some commentators also speculated that Modi's political capital would be significantly dented by the hardship experienced by large sections of India's less economically advantaged population as a result of this policy. The scale of the BJP's election victory in UP will silence much of this criticism.

Modi's reputation as a leader willing to take difficult and unpopular decisions will be further consolidated. There will thus be less resistance to future policies which Modi will undertake, especially from within his party and the wider range of parties and organisations affiliated with the BJP. In 2018, when 56 members of India's legislative upper house, the Rajya Sabha, are set to retire, the BJP's victory in UP will allow it to wrest at least about half of these seats. This is significant given that important pieces of legislation being undertaken by the BJP are currently being held up in the Rajya Sabha, where the BJP is in a minority.

Lastly, as the term of India's current president comes to end in July, the BJP, together with its allies, as a result of the victory in Uttar Pradesh, will be in a very strong position to form the majority of the electoral college which will elect the next president of India.

Implications for Next General Election

In the medium term, this stunning victory in Uttar Pradesh provides a huge momentum for the BJP's hopes of winning the next general election in India in 2019. It also cements even further Modi's position within his party and largely rules out any chance of a leadership challenge to him from within the party. This will translate into the BJP staying in power in India till 2024.

Together with a majority in India's upper house and having a president of the party's choice, the Uttar Pradesh victory will also be seen as a sign of the BJP's ability to wrest control of state governments not run by the BJP. It will also further cement the BJP's control of states it more recently has tasted victory in.

The states of Jammu and Kashmir and Assam will be two states in which the BJP will attempt to consolidate further control post-2019. In these recent state elections, the BJP increased its share of seats in the north-east state of Manipur and is on the verge of forming a government there for the first time together with the support of a few smaller regional parties.

There is, however, a need to appreciate some recent setbacks to the BJP in these state elections. In Goa, where the BJP was an incumbent, it came in second to the Congress Party, although even there it seems to be on the verge of forming the government with the support of smaller regional parties. In Punjab, the BJP and its ally, the Akali Dal, suffered a bruising defeat to the Congress Party. Post-2019, the BJP will hope to use its momentum in this election and the upcoming general election to wrest back some seats in these states.

Long Term Hegemony

In the longer term, the Uttar Pradesh victory could signal a period of sustained hegemony for the BJP in Indian politics. The disenchantment and disarray within the Congress Party and the inability of emerging parties like the Aam Aadmi Party to mount a serious all-India challenge to the BJP could possibly translate into a period of BJP dominance, very much like that of the Congress Party's for much of the three decades since India's independence.

Within the BJP and within the larger 'family' or '*parivar*' of ideologically-minded parties and organisations, there would possibly be pressures to pursue a hegemonic BJP agenda at the national level. There seems to be a contradiction between the pro-development, modernising efforts on the part of Modi and sections of the BJP and the 'Hindutva' agenda driven by identity politics on the part of several organisations like the RSS and some university student bodies allied to the BJP.

The fact that the BJP did not field a single Muslim candidate during the Uttar Pradesh elections has given rise to concerns about the party's view of the place of Muslims in India. The fact that the BJP won in 31 out of the 42 seats where Muslims were at least a third of the electorate, may however, guide the BJP's future electoral calculations and plans.

The BJP might probably evolve to push more of the pro-development modernising agenda and shed elements of the narrow identity politics strategy as it strives to cement its hegemonic position in Indian politics into the medium and long term.

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