Local Legislative Assembly Elections Held in Delhi

The results of the Delhi Legislative Assembly elections held on February 8, 2020 in the National Capital Territory of Delhi (an area with a population of over 20 million people) are important in terms of political trends both within India itself and across the greater subcontinent, and it was nothing short of a landmark event.

After all, we are talking about a country with a population of over 1.3 billion people and a rapidly developing economy in terms of its total size (although of course, not yet in terms of quality), which was already on course to level with (or even surpass) the economy of the former capital city last year. Additional factors worth considering are the strength of the Indian Armed Forces, totaling 1.2 million troops and their possession of nuclear weapons.

Considering the latest regional flare-up in the territorial conflict referred to as “the Kashmir problem”, which is also threatening to destabilize the global situation, the slightest hint that there could be dramatic changes in domestic politics within India, a leading regional power, is bound to be of interest to “third-party” observers.

While this has been going on, these kinds of (very clear) “hints” were dropped at the elections in Delhi. To be more precise, the announcement of the election results on February 11 confirmed several important trends in domestic politics, some of which were already taking shape in the 1990s.

So, here are the results: in Delhi’s 70-seat Legislative Assembly, according to the February 8, 2020 election results, 62 seats were won by the “the Common Man’s Party”, usually referred to by its transliteration as the Aam Aadmi Party, AAP, and the remaining 8 seats were won by the nationalist “Indian People’s Party”, usually referred to by its transliteration Bharatiya Janata Party, BDP (in government for the second consecutive term). Compared to the last elections in 2015, the AAP lost 5 seats, which have gone to the BJP.

India’s oldest party, the Indian National Congress (INC), which ruled the country almost uninterrupted since India gained independence in 1947 up to 2014, did not win a single seat. Like the last elections in 2015, this reflects the INC’s loss of popularity, which brings us to the first of the trends that have been observed. From this author’s perspective, that trend has already proven itself to be fairly catastrophic, and their loss of popularity is virtually irreversible.

When assessing the current domestic political situation, it is extremely important to highlight that up until recently, the INC had actually been considered the voice and guarantor of the Republic of India’s “secular” state structure.

It seemed that with the relatively young politician Rahul Gandhi of the “Nehru-Gandhi clan” taking over as president of the INC at the end of 2017, the party would get its “second wind” after suffering a crushing defeat in the spring 2014 general elections and a series of state-level elections that followed.

It looked as if these kinds of expectations had been fulfilled in the 2018 local elections across a number of states. However, the subsequent defeat they suffered last spring in the 2019 Indian general election, which was an even more humiliating defeat than in 2014, dashed these hopes.

The INC continued to lose political face as the leading “secular” nationalist party by agreeing to play “second choice” with local parties in subsequent elections in several states. In October 2019, local Legislative Assembly elections were held in the state of Maharashtra, which is India’s second-largest state in terms of its population (over 112 million people), and in the fight to prevent the BDP from forming a government, the leadership of the NCP (split from Indian National Congress) even agreed to a proposed coalition with the far-right Shiv Sena Party against their
The AAP's landslide victory in the Delhi election is a reflection of another long-established trend that has seen almost all local parties grow stronger, which mainly operate within the boundaries of their own states. This trend should in fact be of concern to the "central" political elite, as it exposes the patchwork of modern India, its several hundred principalities, most of which were "glued" together by the British Raj (which also had varying degrees of independence before being colonized).

However, some commentators are already predicting that the AAP will go national, and take "the fallen banner of secularism" into their own hands. This is despite the fact that the party's founder Arvind Kejriwal is just beginning his political career (he has been in politics for about 30 years) and has links to a certain "neo-Hinduism" tendency.

The AAP phenomenon is closely linked to Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his own personality, who only created the party in 2012 and took office following the 2015 election. The authoritative voice of the Times of India is already referring to him as India's potential "national leader".

Arvind Kejriwal is 51 years old now, which means that like Rahul Gandhi, he may be considered part of a new generation of progressive politicians in India. It is important to note that before making a full transition to politics and life in the public eye, Kejriwal managed to build a career in one of the companies belonging to Tata Group, a leading Indian (multinational) conglomerate, and also worked in the Delhi's Income Tax Department (for about 10 years). All of this experience, in addition to the last five years Kejriwal has spent performing his duties as Delhi's Chief Minister, gives him a good basis to enter the race to determine the country's future.

The AAP's main political "brand" (developed during the formation of the party) became their slogan and the promise made to the electorate during the last elections, to fight corruption among government officials: "Wield the broom, get rid of cheats". This was supplemented with promises that a government led by the AAP would build schools (for children from poor families), and provide citizens with free medical treatment, cheap electricity and urban transport. Kejriwal's party came on the scene five years ago with the same slogans and promises to run for Delhi's local government, and it would seem a national government led by Kejriwal would receive solid results if the party receives anywhere near as much support as it did in 2015.

However, we should not forget that just 8 months earlier in the Indian general election, the AAP completely lost the fight for the seven seats from Delhi, which went to the ruling BJP. After their triumphant victory in 2015, this was a major defeat for Kejriwal's party. As it happens, this was around the same time (in spring 2019) when the current Prime Minister and leader of the BJP Narendra Modi confirmed that he will not just be running for reelection as a candidate and "potential" leader, but that he is the undisputed leader of the country (in office since 2014).

A crucial event unfolded over a relatively short period of time, as while the political landscape in Delhi at the beginning of 2020 was restored to that of 2015, the recent triumph of the BJP party looked more like a failure (although the party won five additional seats in Delhi's Legislative Assembly). Of course, it does not compare to that of the INC.

And in general, judging by the results of last year's local elections (including in Delhi), the BJP has held onto its position and its electoral core, who are calling for Hinduism to be given a greater role to play in the socio-political and personal lives of Indian citizens.

As for the certain "neo-Hinduism" tendency that has been mentioned, it is fairly simple to work out what this is referring to. Since August last year, the Indian government (i.e. the BJP) has introduced several new pieces of legislature, which have severely complicated the situation both within India and outside the country. The unrest did not stop at the mass protests, where not only Muslim activists took part. They were also joined by representatives of "secular" Indian society, who have perceived the new legislature as a threat to modern India's basic founding principles. The political landscape began to look like quite a mangled mess when local governments in almost a third of Indian states announced they would not be implementing the new acts, and let's be clear, we are talking about legislation that was adopted by the central government.

As we have noted on more than one occasion, this legislation has inadvertently contributed to "the Kashmir problem" being brought to the attention of the international community, which the Indian government has always sought to avoid. Another way that this trend has manifested itself was when the Indian government agreed to let foreign envoys from 25 embassies in India go on two-day visit to Jammu and Kashmir, to make a firsthand assessment of the situation.
In order to strengthen its shaky position within India, the BJP government will undoubtedly take advantage of the US president’s visit to India, which is scheduled for February 24. Donald Trump has already tweeted that Narendra Modi has promised him a massive welcome in an unprecedented spectacle, with 5-7 million Indians there to greet him when he touches down in Ahmedabad, the Gujarat state capital, which would give the local government and the current Indian Prime Minister’s political career a huge boost.

However, it is still too early to say whether the BDP might have finally found its match and a worthy competitor on the national scale in Arvind Kejriwal’s party. India’s next parliamentary elections will not be held until 2024. In the meantime, a lot of things could change both outside and within India itself.

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