

Indian state election losses intensify tensions in ruling coalition

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The Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), the major partner in India's ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has suffered heavy defeats in recent state assembly elections. The party lost control of all four states, including Uttar Pradesh, which has been regarded as one of its strongholds. The losses are certain to provoke bitter recriminations within the BJP and to further exacerbate tensions with its 23 allies in the ruling NDA coalition.

The elections were held from February 14 to 21 in Punjab, Manipur and Uttaranchal as well as Uttar Pradesh. In the case of Uttaranchal, a newly established state created in 2000 through the division of Uttar Pradesh, it was the first state poll. The BJP held power in the transitional administration by virtue of its previous political dominance in the undivided state.

The most significant defeat was in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state with 166 million people. UP, as it is known, is one of the northern Hindi-speaking states that the BJP has sought to make its political base. It was the first state won by the BJP—in 1991 as the party began its climb by inciting Hindu chauvinism. The following year the BJP were prominent in whipping up the extremist mob that destroyed the Babri Masjid mosque in the UP city of Ayodhya, setting off communal rioting across the Indian subcontinent.

In the latest elections, however, the BJP and its allies won only 108 of the state's 403 seats—down from 174 in 1996. Overall the vote for the alliance fell by 7.5 percent but the BJP itself lost 12.5 percent and its seats almost halved from 160 to just 89. At least one of the BJP state ministers lost his seat. As for the BJP's allies, all but the Rashtriya Lok Dal, which won 14 seats, were soundly beaten.

Significantly, Congress (I), the party that dominated Indian politics following independence in 1947, was unable to capitalise on the hostility to the BJP and lost rather than gained seats. Having lost control of the state in the late 1970s, it has been reduced to a parliamentary rump in the country's largest state—down from 33 seats in 1996 to a mere 26. Congress (I) even lost the seat of Amethi, which overlaps with the national constituency held by party

president Sonia Gandhi.

The major winners in the UP election were two parties that draw their support from lower castes—the Samajawadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The SP and BSP were both able to exploit growing concerns and fears over the impact of the free market policies implemented by the NDA government in New Delhi that have exacerbated the social crisis facing millions. The SP increased the number of its seats from 110 to 146. The BSP won 99 seats, nearly double its previous figure.

The outcome for the BJP in the Punjab, another populous state, was just as disastrous. The party was able to win only three seats—down from 18 in 1997. Its main ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), also lost heavily, securing only 41 seats compared to its previous 75 in the 117-seat state assembly. Five state Ministers lost their seats along with senior BJP leader Laxmi Kanta Chawla and SAD leader Charanjit Singh. Congress (I) emerged as the largest party with 62 seats.

In Uttaranchal, the BJP won only 19 seats in the 70-seat assembly, even though the state was established in 2000 with a view to it becoming a BJP-stronghold. The transitional chief minister, the BJP's Nityanand Swami, and Sports Minister Narayan Singh Rana lost their seats. Congress (I) hold an outright majority in the assembly with 36 seats while several regional parties are also represented.

The results in Manipur are yet to be finalized but the BJP has so far only won four of the 60 seats. Presidential rule was imposed in the state in July 2001, after clashes erupted between the BJP and its NDA partner, the Samatha Party led by Defence Minister George Fernandes. The Samatha Party contested the Manipur election separately and won only two seats. Congress (I) secured 13 seats; the Communist Party of India five and the remaining seats went to regional parties.

Coming on top of its losses in last year's election for five states, the latest results represent a disaster for the BJP. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's party now controls only four of India's 29 states. The outcome has definite electoral implications at the national level—taken together the

four contested states account for one fifth of the seats in India's lower house of parliament or Lok Sabha.

BJP general secretary Sunil Shastri described the result as "a shock" for the party that "really created concern". Last week BJP leaders flocked to New Delhi to conduct a gloomy post-mortem. One of the BJP's immediate fears is that its allies in the NDA will begin to look elsewhere or will drive a harder bargain as the price for their continuing support.

Throughout the campaign Vajpayee and his ministers sought to whip up communal sentiment by playing on the terrorist attack on the Indian parliament in December and appealing for its aggressive military stance towards Pakistan. BJP leaders accused the opposition of being "soft on terrorism" and called to voters to support the party to protect the country. In Uttar Pradesh, the outgoing BJP chief minister, Rajnath Singh, told his audiences: "Pakistan would be the happiest to see the BJP out of UP."

Towards the end of the campaign, as defeat appeared imminent, Vajpayee openly appealed to Hindu extremist sentiment. He told a meeting in UP that the BJP would win the elections even without the votes of Muslims—an obvious jab at the Samajawadi Party which has considerable support among Muslims who constitute 17 percent of the state's population.

But the appeal to Hindu chauvinism has fallen flat. Underlying the election result is a growing anger over the impact of the economic restructuring program begun under Congress (I) in 1991 and continued by successive governments including those led by the BJP. The so-called reforms have dealt a severe blow to the living standards of tens of millions of workers, small businessmen and farmers, the urban and rural poor. Having come to power promising to end corruption and improve social conditions, Vajpayee has deepened the divide between rich and poor. In the run-up to the elections, the Indian cabinet approved changes to the labour laws that will inevitably lead to a new round of dismissals and higher unemployment levels.

As well as being its most populous, Uttar Pradesh is one of India's poorest states. A recent article in the British-based *Economist* magazine summed up the situation: "The state's massive fiscal deficit, partly a result of the corruption and patronage that grease the political system, has throttled spending on education, health and other basics. Among big states UP has the highest infant mortality rate, the third-lowest literacy rate for women and the second lowest percentage of childbirth assisted by a health professional. The state's high court observed that 'no rule of law is prevalent' in UP and that criminals with money or political clout can evade justice."

Hostility to the political establishment is often refracted through caste concerns. A municipal worker, Mahaveer

Singh, told the *New York Times* that the low castes in UP used to vote for Congress (I) but have concluded that the party only served the upper castes. The BJP tended to the upper castes as well, he said. Singh is one of the Dalit or "untouchable" castes that make up about a fifth of the state's voters.

Others expressed their frustrations to the media about the appalling lack of services. "There's been no electricity since last evening, the roads are a mess—here people are bothered about local issues," one trader said. A wheat farmer commented: "They [the BJP] talk about terrorism. This is not our immediate concern. Our concerns are roads, schools, water and electricity."

Incapable of meeting the basic needs of the masses, the BJP has few alternatives to combat its electoral decline other than shifting in a more stridently communalist direction. Already a debate has opened up in Hindu extremist circles over the failure of the Vajpayee government to accede to the provocative plan of the World Hindu Congress or Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) to build a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the razed mosque in Ayodhya. Bal Thackeray, leader of the chauvinist Shiv Sena, has blamed the election losses on the BJP's ambivalent stand on the temple, insisting it now agree to the VHP demand.

In a bid to recover support among working people, Shiva Sena has also threatened to launch a populist campaign against the recent changes to the labour laws. Vajpayee and the BJP leadership are, however, caught in a dilemma. If they in any way accede to demands by their supporters for a slowing or reversal of economic restructuring, the government will quickly lose the backing of big business. D.K. Srivastava, an economist at the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, voiced the concerns of corporate chiefs when he warned that the election results were "bound to affect the central government," which "may go slow on taking harsher economic measures."

All of these issues are bound to heighten conflicts inside the BJP and with its allies, whose support for the NDA was on the understanding that Vajpayee softpedal on Ayodhya and other communal issues. The current communal pogrom in Gujarat, where nearly 500 people, mainly Muslims, have been killed over the last week, is a sharp indication of the direction being pursued by at least a section of the BJP leadership. Gujarat is one of the four states where the BJP is still in power.



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