

Delhi's AAP government teeters after month in office

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Barely a month after taking office, Delhi's Aam Admi Party (AAP) government is mired in a spate of political controversies and visibly teetering. With the AAP dependent on Congress Party support for its majority in the Delhi Assembly, the government's survival even to May, when national parliamentary elections are to be held, is very much in doubt.

The AAP (Common Man's Party) is a capitalist party formed little more than a year ago by leaders of Delhi's 2011-12 anti-corruption protests. It shocked India's political establishment last December by winning 28 of the 70 seats in the legislature for Delhi—India's National Capital Territory and, with a population of 22 million people, its largest urban conglomeration.

The rise of the AAP has been fuelled by growing middle class frustration and anxiety at India's descent into "stagflation." In the Delhi election elections it was also able to tap into the deep-rooted anger of the working class and urban poor with the Indian elite's principal parties—the Congress and the Hindu supremacist BJP—by making a series of populist promises.

As one of its first acts on taking office, the AAP announced that 20,000 liters of water per month would be provided free of charge to households connected to the municipal water supply through a water meter. It also cut electricity rates in half for the first 400 kwh (kilowatt hours) of consumption. However, these measures are currently slated to last only until March 31, when the 2013-14 fiscal year ends. Moreover, the reduction in water rates does nothing for the more than 50 percent of Delhi's residents who lack access to the municipal water system and therefore must rely on private water lorries for their daily water needs.

Basking in the limelight of attention heaped upon it by the corporate press, the AAP government has attempted to posture as the bane of vices ranging from corrupt politicians to prostitution and illegal drugs. With its self-

appointed role as a guardian of morality the AAP government has used aggressive and vile tactics in the name of "cleaning" Delhi of crime and corruption.

Close to midnight on January 15 the AAP Law Minister, Somnath Bharti, led a mob in a midnight raid on the residences of several African women living in South Delhi's Malviya Nagar. A notorious foul-mouth, prone to violent eruptions, Bharti took it upon himself to organize and lead the vigilante raid, claiming he had received a "tip off" about a "drug and prostitution ring."

Bharti and his mob surrounded the residences of these women, who were understandably terrified. Three of the women, who were returning from a party, were surrounded and held captive by the mob, which hurled racist insults at them.

The women later told the press that they were physically assaulted and groped by AAP party members accompanying the law minister. When the police arrived, Bharti demanded that they raid several residences, but they refused to do so since there was neither a warrant nor any legal reason to do so. An hysterical Bharti then reportedly warned the police that they would be picked off one by one and thrashed by the "people".

Four of the accused women, two from Uganda and two from Nigeria, were compelled by Bharti to undergo medical tests for illegal drugs at the AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences). The tests unsurprisingly proved that no drugs had been consumed by any of the women. A couple of women were also compelled to give urine samples in public.

One of the women expressed her outrage in an interview with the daily *Indian Express*: "I have a lot to complain and we are not going to sit quietly. When I asked the men why they were subjecting us to this torture, they punched me in the face and said 'you will know why very soon'. Despite our refusal, we were forced to undergo the painful test. How can they say that we are

involved in a drug-and-prostitution racket? Just because we are black?”

Later two of the women filed legal complaints against Bharti, with one of them clearly identifying the minister as the chief perpetrator. “Bharti was leading a mob that night. The men asked us for our passports. The police came later. The police are helping us, they saved us that night,” said one of the women.

After his shock and awe tactics came in for widespread criticism from the media and some women’s groups, Bharti sought to excuse his actions by shamelessly pleading ignorance: “I am new to this system, so I may commit mistakes. Someone should come forward and guide me.”

With various African governments vehemently protesting the AAP-led vigilante raid, India’s Congress Party-led UPA (United Progressive Alliance) government was compelled to call a hasty meeting with ambassadors from several African countries so as to assure them that India’s government will take every step to provide safety and security to their nationals.

In the wake of the January 16 incident, there were widespread calls for Delhi Chief Minister and AAP party leader Arvind Kejriwal to fire Bharti. Instead, Kejriwal vigorously defended his reactionary minister and sought to deflect criticism by denouncing the police for not doing a better job of “protecting women”—a reference to a series of brutal rapes.

Adopting the tone of an autocratic leader of a vigilante gang, Kejriwal told the media in the immediate aftermath of Bharti’s raid: “We are warning Delhi Police. People are not going to be mute spectators to what is going on.” Kejriwal accused the police of being complicit with “foreigners”, referring to the African women.

Escalating his action, Kejriwal subsequently led a march of several of his ministers and supporters to the Indian Home Ministry to demand that the Delhi police, who currently are under the authority of national government, be placed under his government’s authority. When the Indian home minister ordered the police to block Kejriwal and the demonstrators from reaching the ministry building, a furious Kejriwal decided to carry out a Dharna (a sit-in protest), accused the Congress Party Home Minister Shinde of being corrupt, and urged “honest” Delhi police to take off their uniforms and join the “common-man,” i.e., Kejriwal.

For these antics, Kejriwal was tartly rebuked by the corporate media, which saw them as not just political grandstanding, but a challenge to established authority

that raised a serious question mark over the AAP’s suitability as an alternative political instrument to the traditional governing parties of big business.

Realizing he had overplayed his hand, Kejriwal abruptly called off his protest, claiming partial victory. The “victory” was a promise from the lieutenant governor of Delhi that two of the five policemen Kejriwal had demanded be fired would be sent on temporary leave with full pay.

All of this has given the Congress Party pause. However, it has decided not to pull the plug on the AAP government for the moment, calculating that to do so would make it appear that it was frustrating the “will of the electorate” and that, in any case, the AAP is discrediting itself.

While the AAP, as exemplified by its vigilante attacks on African students and immigrants, is a petty bourgeois party hostile to the interests of the working class, its populist promises and antics have caused increasing consternation in India’s political and economic elite.

They fear the AAP’s tactics could unintentionally serve as a catalyst for unleashing popular anger against the entire social order. In a speech on the eve of India’s January 26 “Republic Day,” President Pranab Mukherjee, who as the UPA finance minister previously presided over a wave of neo-liberal “economic reforms,” warned against making any political proposals that would benefit the masses and against indulging in what he termed as “populist anarchy”.

“Government,” he declared, “is not a charity shop. Populist anarchy cannot be a substitute for governance. False promises lead to disillusionment, which gives birth to rage, and that rage has one legitimate target: those in power.”



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