

In U.P., a missing tango and the BJP's waltz

If an SP-Congress tie-up fails to materialise, both parties might come to rue the price to pay next year and in 2024



ASIM ALI

In many ways, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Indian National Congress in Uttar Pradesh make for natural alliance partners. Their social bases complement each other, they do not have too dissimilar an ideological outlook, and have displayed a large degree of consonance in terms of campaign issues. Yet, both parties are presently in the midst of a bruising feud, each accusing the other of colluding with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The SP has termed the Congress as the flip side of the BJP, part of the saffron strategy to confuse the voters, while the Congress has charged the SP with being too afraid of the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate to take on the BJP.

Incentives for a link

So there is the one fundamental question to ask: why are these two parties so hesitant to commit to a potentially mutually beneficial alliance? The answer to this question might help illuminate the state of Opposition politics in both the State and the country, shaped in fundamental ways by the BJP-dominant system. First, let us evaluate the case for the alliance from the point of view of both the parties.

The incentives for the Congress are relatively straightforward. If the last two elections in U.P. are anything to go by, the Congress has been reduced to a 6% vote-share party, with barely any pockets of stronghold. The evidence from the Assembly bypolls and the panchayat elections since then have only reinforced this impression, not to mention the steady stream of Congress leaders exiting the party for greener pastures. A

failure to get into an alliance with a larger party could well mean electoral decimation, in the manner of Delhi and West Bengal. Being the face of the U.P. campaign, it might also irrevocably damage the image of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra – the last remaining ‘trump card’ of the party. It might be instructive here to remember that the first time Rahul Gandhi became seared with the image of a political novice was after leading the disastrous 2012 campaign in Uttar Pradesh.

The draw for the Samajwadi party is no less compelling. The thrust of the Samajwadi campaign so far has been to make the fight for U.P. a bipolar contest. The trouble is that a direct duel with a party possessing a much larger social base is a losing proposition, minus a wave of massive anti-incumbency which has not surfaced so far. The BJP in Uttar Pradesh is a political behemoth, with a social catchment area ranging from upper castes, non-Yadav Other Backward Classes and non-Jatav Dalits. In a sense, the social base of the party in U.P. is roughly equivalent to a combination of the BJP and the Janata Dal (United) in neighbouring Bihar. The SP, meanwhile, is hamstrung by its traditionally narrow social base, anchored by Yadavs and Muslims.

The SP knows this, and its leader Akhilesh Yadav has spent much of his political career pushing his party to embrace a new umbrella avatar. Even so, the party has not done the hard yards of long-term social engineering: building up community leaders, cultivating caste alliances at the ground level, or immersing itself in new socio-political movements. It has now gone for the quickest available route: stitching up alliances with an array of smaller parties. This would, the party hopes, not only boost its electoral arithmetic, but also aid the social acceptability of the SP among the specific caste and community constituents of the smaller parties. Hence, it makes intuitive sense for the SP to clasp the Congress's hand which



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does represent, in a sense, the biggest of the smaller parties of U.P.

What, then, explains the jitters at the prospect of coming together? There are three reasons, all of which reveal one aspect of the electoral and ideological dominance of the BJP.

The Congress's decline

First, the decline of the Congress, accelerated as it has in the Narendra Modi era, has reached such a state where, in many States, it is not even a reliable junior partner. The Congress's recent record in grand alliances hardly commends it to any potential suitor. In last year's elections in Bihar, while the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the three Left parties won more than half the seats they contested, the Congress proved to be the fatal weak link. This was not an aberration as the Congress has been the laggard alliance partner in several State elections, from Tamil Nadu in 2016 to Maharashtra in 2019. Of course, Akhilesh Yadav has had personal experience of this phenomenon in the last elections, where the Congress fared considerably worse than the SP.

Meanwhile, the Congress, as a party slowly approaching a condition of existential crisis, fears it can no longer remain trapped in a state of low equilibrium. The mood in the party harks back to the Pachmarhi resolution of 1998, which declared that only those coalitions will be considered which are “absolutely necessary” and that “will not weaken the party”. A long running thread in Congress thinking holds that the only way for the party to revive its so-

cial base and rejuvenate its organisation is through a period of expansive struggle directed against both the regional parties as well as the BJP.

The BJP's dominance

Second, the BJP's ideological dominance on the issues of religion and nationalism has ensured that success for Opposition parties in State elections depends on the extent to which they can neutralise the salience of ‘national’ issues and make the election about ‘local’ issues. The presence of a national party such as the Congress in an Opposition alliance, particularly one which has been the most forthright ideological opponent of the BJP under Rahul Gandhi, hampers such a strategy.

The Gandhi siblings display none of the caution of regional leaders such as Akhilesh Yadav in terms of challenging Mr. Modi and making him into an electoral factor. After all, the Congress leadership likely views the U.P. elections, in part, as a springboard to building itself up as the national alternative to the BJP in the next general election.

Third, the BJP's dominance has converted Muslims into a uniquely radioactive political community. The SP party understands that any alliance with the Congress would be painted by the BJP as an ‘unholy alliance’ cynically aimed at consolidating the ‘Muslim votebank’. Even as the Congress has long claimed to have retained a base among Brahmins and non-Jatav Dalits in U.P., it has all but evaporated now. In the 2019 elections, only 6% of Brahmins and 7% of non-Jatav Dalits in Uttar Pradesh backed the party, almost exactly in line with its 6% aggregate vote-share in the State. The only really sizeable support base of the Congress remains among Muslims, with 14% overall choosing the party in 2019, and especially so in seats where the Congress stood a chance.

This is perhaps the most important reason why Akhilesh Yadav

has privileged allying with smaller parties such as the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party (S BSP), Janwadi Party and Mahan Dal over the larger Congress. Since the social base of these parties extends to one or more Hindu caste groups, the SP can cobble them together and portray itself to be the larger ‘Hindu alliance’. This alliance strategy is also in harmony with the SP's recent political outreach, where it has aggressively courted non-Yadav OBC castes, the Scheduled Castes, and the Brahmins, but has extended only the most rare and indirect gestures towards Muslims. The political logic behind this approach is that once the party has proven itself to have a support base among Hindus rivaling the BJP, Muslims would automatically flock to it over a third alternative, as shown by the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

Of course, there is a possibility that the present tiff between the two parties might represent nothing more than adroit jockeying for a larger share in an eventual alliance. In this interlude of brinkmanship, the Congress might be establishing itself as a major player and the SP might be demonstrating itself as the only alternative pole.

However, if this marriage actually fails to materialise, both parties might come to rue the price to pay. A recalcitrant approach from the Congress could prove fatal not just in these elections but also for its hopes of stitching up a joint opposition against the BJP in 2024. The SP, meanwhile, could consider the range of middle-ground options between a no deal with the Congress and the bad deal it had struck last time. For a party that has never broken its 30% vote-share ceiling, facing the BJP in a seemingly bipolar contest, it scarcely has the luxury of spurning partners.

Asim Ali is a political researcher and columnist based in Delhi