In UP, the Opposition seems unwilling to take the BJP on over macro issues

Two months before polls, the election campaign in Uttar Pradesh (UP) is in a transitional phase. The Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) have been making overtures towards marginal formations, and engineering defections, to set their local caste and political alliances in place. The Congress is maintaining its women-centric campaign, promising, if elected, to set up skilling schools for girls and distribute electric scooters to women graduates.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is preparing a series of six yatras to showcase the achievements of the central and state governments. The state government has multiplied its policy announcements. For instance, it has decreed the doubling of rations, in addition to a previous decision of the Centre to extend the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (distribution of free grain to ration card holders) to March 2022, a date that coincides with the expected end of polling. This timing, and the fact that the previous announcement was made on the same day the farm laws were effectively repealed, illustrate once again that the policy calendar tends to be dictated by the electoral schedule. Similarly, the recent inauguration of the Purvanchal Expressway and the foundation stone ceremony for the Noida International Airport had strong campaign overtones. The Yogi government is now planning to distribute smartphones and tablets.

All of this is business-as-usual for a campaign, where Opposition parties talk to their base and the incumbent uses public resources and the State machinery to do the campaigning on its behalf.

The repeal of the farm laws has not given either the Opposition parties or the BJP the impetus they had hoped for. Farmers in west UP are holding on to their demand to expand the minimum support price (MSP) regime. Predictably, dropping the farm laws has done little to reduce the mistrust of the government. Farmers have, instead, been incentivised to press their advantage.

By largely ignoring its main adversary and focusing on its ground campaign, the SP, too, is steering clear of confronting the BJP on major issues. Making small alliances and engineering defections are useful tools to illustrate a party’s desirability, but these can also be a distraction from the larger poll issues such as law and order, employment and overall economic precarity.

Besides, these small arrangements are unlikely to generate much support on their own. Defectors usually lose their election, and since 2002, the cumulative vote share of major parties in UP has increased from 77.5% to 92%. If one excludes votes going to independent candidates, that leaves less than 7% of vote share distributed across dozens of micro parties. Most voters are determined not to waste their votes on marginal players, and local caste alliances may not necessarily have much ripple effect beyond the handful of seats where these small parties may be relevant.

The success of Akhilesh Yadav’s ongoing yatra may indicate that segments of voters aspire to a more competitive election, but Opposition fragmentation continues to be a hindrance to a sufficiently bipolar fight between the SP and the BJP. The localism of the SP campaign also has the effect of leaving the BJP as the lone party to speak about major issues. The fact that the Opposition hardly challenges the BJP on its claims on unemployment, the end of Covid, or its success in restoring law and order reinforces the perception that these proclamations might be valid.

The main pressure on the BJP actually comes from within. As Neelanjan Sircar has pointed out in this newspaper, the BJP’s majority is based on its ability to sweep the Hindi belt and other states where it is directly opposed by the Congress. In 2017, the BJP won 77% of the seats in the UP election and that victory contributed to sealing an image of invincibility for the BJP. Should the BJP retain its majority but with a significant loss of seats in UP, the whole edifice could appear to be shaky. This explains why the BJP is now describing the 2022 UP election as a prelude to the 2024 general election and as a call to support the prime minister.

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The views expressed are personal.