

Reading the fine print of Gujarat, Himachal, MCD

With each victory for the BJP, Congress and AAP comes key lessons for all parties, which may well determine the scope and outcome of 2024 polls

The results of the assembly elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh, along with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), held something for each party to rejoice, but also to introspect.

First, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This is its seventh consecutive victory in Gujarat, and the party has not only surpassed its previous best of 127, but also breached Madhavsinh Solanki's record of 149 seats. Gujarat now displays all the characteristics of a dominant party-state for the BJP — much like West Bengal during the Left Front's 34-year-long rule — in which it has developed an unmatched organisation machine that is presided over by a charismatic leader.

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's connection with his home state remains phenomenal, largely because he campaigns as if he is on the ticket. The party will take pride in its ability to channel momentum from one election victory to another, and use PM Modi's appeal to paper over both dissidence and cracks in local governance. It now has a stable vote base in large swathes of the country, burnished by Modi's connect, even in regions where it is not in power (such

as Delhi).

But there are several factors that must be a potential worry for a party intent on winning every electoral contest — big and small. The Himachal Pradesh elections underlined this weakness in many ways for the BJP. The party won 49% vote share in the 2017 assembly and 62% in the 2019 general elections, and from this position, the BJP would have expected to return in Himachal Pradesh, notwithstanding the state's tradition of switching incumbents (much like after winning neighbouring Uttarakhand last year). But it did not, showing that, in elections with strong localised campaigns, PM Modi's charisma alone cannot catapult the party to victory. Preliminary indications from survey data also confirm a trend visible in states where the BJP has won (such as Uttar Pradesh and even in Gujarat) — younger voters between 18 and 34 are less likely to vote for the BJP, in comparison to the past. Economic concerns, primarily unemployment and price rise, appear to be key factors driving this group. Thus, while the BJP may remain nationally buoyant, states are a competitive battlefield. Barring stronghold states, the BJP cannot afford to become complacent.

Second, the Congress. Himachal Pradesh is the only silver lining for a party whose central leadership appeared to have given up on this round of elections, with little energy, finance or muscle in the campaign. It shows that there is still a pool of sup-

port for the party, should it choose to appear competitive in an election, and speak to the concerns of the electorate.

But the party must heed serious lessons from its defeat in MCD and Gujarat. The Congress had a considerable base in Gujarat despite being out of power for 27 years. But since the last assembly election, its national leadership appears to have abandoned its state unit. Defections and frequent changes in state-level leadership led to voters and workers being left disappointed and disillusioned, and the party being reduced to its lowest vote share and seat tally in the state. In the scope of national politics,

it was a clear abdication on the part of the Congress to let go of a big state such as Gujarat without even putting up a fight. Rahul Gandhi's *Bharat Jodo Yatra* may have gained traction, but the party would do well to realise that it is not enough to ensure a serious revival plan — especially electorally. It needs an

urgent action plan for the upcoming 2023 election season, where eight states go to the polls. For instance, the party has a fair chance to make a comeback in Karnataka and return to power in Chhattisgarh; it remains a formidable player in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. However, it has to keep its house in order in all these states. In many of these states, the Congress will be in a direct contest with the BJP. Putting up a good show will be crucial for the party's ability to not allow new entrants, such as the



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Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), to erode its base, ensure it remains a central pillar of any Oppositional formation, and mount a challenge to the BJP in 2024. Ceding any more ground will not only spell trouble for 2024, but also for the existence of the party itself.

And third, the AAP. It positioned itself to become the new national alternative. By winning a majority in MCD, it has solidified its base in the city-state. And though it did far worse than its expectations in Gujarat, it will celebrate establishing a toehold in another state after Delhi and Punjab. The good news for the AAP from Gujarat is that the party is now no longer just an urban middle-class party. It now has recall value among rural, poor, and lower-caste voters, giving it a stable launching pad to expand its base through on-the-ground presence and social media. The success of the AAP in Gujarat will depend on how the party conducts itself organisationally, how much autonomy it allows to its state units, and how quickly it develops an ideological platform that separates it from the two national players.

But it will have to carefully evaluate

whether its strategy of ideological flexibility has pan-India appeal. It has worked in states where it has organisational roots, popular leaders and an electorate tired of traditional political duopolies, but as Gujarat (and Himachal, where the party receded after an initial flourish) showed that the AAP may struggle to establish its brand in states where voters have a credible choice in front of them. Another crucial thing to ponder would be its centralised leadership, which works well as an electoral machine, but may start causing issues as the party expands and looks to foster powerful local leaders. The party's assumption that taking a position on important social issues will polarise the electorate needs serious introspection. After all, without an ideological vision and strong roots in social cleavages, any party that is not in power will fade.

All parties will rejoice in their successes. But which party will heed the warning signs will shape Indian politics in the run-up to 2024 and beyond.

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The views expressed are personal