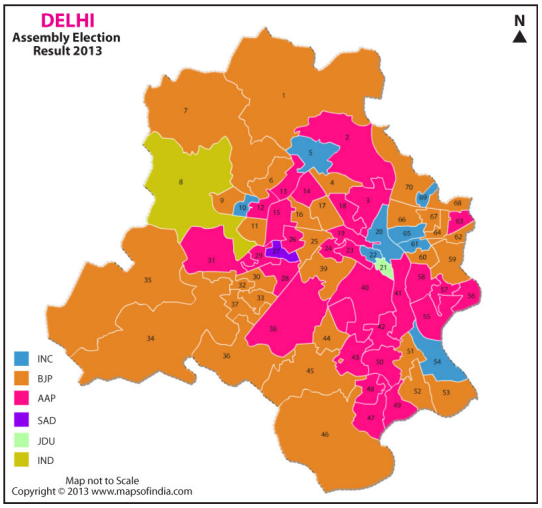

By Sidharth Mishra

Delhi has been bracing for assembly polls for the past few months. Soon after a change of guard at the Centre, and with the BJP having won all the seven Lok Sabha seats in the national capital, it was thought that snap polls would be held. However, that did not happen. The Lieutenant Governor took his time to dissolve the 5th Vidhan Sabha, which had a fractured mandate, making formation of a popular government impossible.

Though various parties have got into the election season in different degrees, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has been the most aggressive, having announced its candidates for all 70 seats. The BJP's status can best described as 'making attempts to consolidate' its position. The process of consolidation, which started with a huge subsidy to power distribution companies, has concluded with the passing of a cabinet resolution that legalised unauthorised colonies in the national capital.

The Congress, which ruled the city state for 15 years between 1998 and 2013, is spending time on regaining turf lost to the Aam Aadmi Party. It has decided to field all its sitting MLAs and also candidates, who finished second in the last state assembly elections. This does not include the New Delhi seat, where former chief minister Sheila Dikshit was runner-up to Arvind Kejriwal. It's not yet clear whether the Congress wants to bet on her 'charisma' all over again.

Looking back, the vote of 2013 was against corruption. The Congress party had come to be identified with corruption, given the spree of scams that engulfed the Manmohan Singh government. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerged as a force, since many people, who had wanted to raise their voice against corruption, could not associate with the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) in Delhi, since it suffered from a leadership vacuum.

Dr Harshvardhan was pitch-forked as party's chief ministerial candidate. However, the decision was made too late in the day, as AAP's campaign had moved far ahead. The force of voters, who cast the ballot without any financial allurement, in the 2013 Vidhan Sabha poll, propelled Arvind Kejriwal's campaign. However, six-months later the same voters had propelled Narendra Modi's charge towards the PMO.

A year later, the grammar of the campaign has somewhat changed. The perceived main rivals in the upcoming elections – the Aam Aadmi Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party –are now both practising the politics of indirect allurement. Arvind Kejriwal has promised free water, subsidy on power and no tax raids on traders. The BJP has gone a step ahead and got the Central government to pass a cabinet resolution legalising 1643 unauthorised colonies. Voters from unauthorised colonies dominate 29 out of 70 assembly seats in Delhi.

Till the December 2013 polls, unuauthorsied colonies were considered to be Congress strongholds. However, having failed to procure the right to sell properties, residents of these colonies, despite their so-called regularisation, went against the Congress on all but two of the 29 seats in the last elections. Incidentally, the seats dominated by these unauthorised colonies did not make its way to the Aam Aadmi Party. The BJP managed to bag a huge cache of 19 out of 29 constituencies, whereas the AAP managed six and the remaining went to independents.

One of the major factors that had determined the fortunes of candidates in these colonies was their regional lineage. AAP reaped its harvest, as it fielded many candidates from the Poorvanchal migrant community. BJP's candidate from Poorvanchal in Kirari managed to win by over 70,000 votes. This time around too, AAP has fielded seven candidates from the community, since its banking on the migrant community vote.

Results from the last assembly polls also showed that AAP's performance was much better in middle-class urban seats, when compared to the BJP. This completely matched the perception that in Arvind Kejriwal, the middle class saw a symbol that they could associate with to overcome the curse of corruption. The city's middle-class too has large presence of migrant voters. However, six-months later, AAP saw its core vote bank travel to the BJP during the Lok Sabha polls.

Now, a few months further down the lane, with voter having tested the ability of the AAP and the BJP to govern, the Congress sees a chance for itself to re-enter the arena. Though the party leadership does not see itself as a major contender for the treasury benches, it certainly has a desire to re-establish itself as a serious player in city politics.

This time around, the Congress is banking on the ability of its local leadership to revive the party. With this strategy, it has announced a list of 24 candidates, which includes those who had won last time or came second. These are 'capable' leaders and veterans of many electoral battles. If they manage to build a competent campaign in their respective constituencies, they would add to the complex arithmetic of the forthcoming elections.

A good performance by the Congress could help the BJP, since the grand old party could eat into the common vote bank it shares with the Aam Aadmi Party. However, there is also a possibility that the middle-class may not vote as aggressively for the BJP, as it did during the Lok Sabha polls for a variety of reasons including a precedence of the Hinduvta agenda over Narendra Modi's development plank and little relief on the their pockets. The bottom-line is that the upcoming polls would not be a lamp-post election.

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