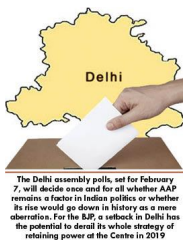


Complex poll, needs clear mandate

Written by Administrator

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By SIDHARTH MISHRA

Last week's notebook had focussed on how the campaign for upcoming assembly polls in the city was gearing up. In between Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a scathing attack on Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) at a poll rally in the Ramlila Grounds last Saturday and AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal issued an apt rejoinder. With poll dates announced, the campaign has moved to a higher gear.

Having followed both leaders consistently for the past four years, after they burst on the national political scene, the indirect debate between the two was in keeping with the general make-up of their campaign styles. While Modi blamed Kejriwal of frittering away the opportunity to govern the city and being inspired by the idols of Naxalism, the social sector activist-turned-politician decided to counter it with a more sombre vestige, saying that he would prefer restrain as far as personal attacks are concerned.

It goes without saying that the both the BJP and AAP are lodged in a grim battle. Considering the 'grimness' of their respective agendas, it would only be appropriate to examine them. After the rout in the Lok Sabha polls, AAP reconciled to the fact that at best it has so far grown as a regional party of Delhi and it would take some time for the party to establish a pan-India avatar. Having reconciled itself to this position, it decided against contesting the assembly elections in Haryana, Jharkhand, Jammu and Kashmir and Maharashtra.

Of these, in at least two states, Haryana and Maharashtra, it did have the wherewithal to contest but desisted to conserve energy for the Delhi polls. Hence, the polls on February 7 for the Delhi assembly will once for all decide whether AAP remains a factor in Indian politics or whether its rise would go down in history as a mere aberration. Therefore the bottom line for AAP is that it's a 'do or die' battle.

For the BJP too, the fight is equally grim. In its mission to have most state governments under its belt by 2017, a setback in Delhi has the potential to derail the whole strategy of retaining power at the Centre in 2019. Secondly having an AAP government in Delhi could mean an actual pain in the neck for the BJP government at the Centre, with Kejriwal and his bouts of activism capable of bringing political tussle to the level of a street struggle. Therefore, for the

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saffronites too, the stakes are very high and they cannot afford to lose.

For the Congress, which was in power in the city for 15 years at a stretch, these polls have arrived with minimal stakes. With their vote percentage having come down to 15 in the last Lok Sabha polls, their fortunes have hit rock-bottom. From such a poor position, their rise is only natural. Having lost the Vidhan Sabha polls in December last year and Lok Sabha polls in May on account of anti-incumbency and charges of corruption, the Congress should enter the upcoming battle with a relatively clean slate.

Poll analysts have been quick to dismiss the results of the Delhi Cantonment Board polls as non-issue, where the AAP was routed. However, in times when the state is poll-bound and the cantonment seat is under its belt, Kejriwal and his team should be concerned. Delhi Congress president Arvinder Singh Lovely claim that the board results have boosted their cadres' morale has merit. The Congress not only managed to win in two wards but also came second to BJP in most seats. Comparatively, AAP won in one ward, came second in three and third in the other four.

Since the general perception is that the Congress and AAP would be vying for same electoral base in the upcoming polls, the board results could warm the cockles of BJP leadership's heart. However, that would be too simplistic an analysis, as AAP has shown a shifting electoral base in the past two elections.

In the last assembly poll, AAP's performance was much better in the middle-class urban seats, when compared to the BJP. This completely matched the perception that in Arvind Kejriwal, the middle class saw the symbol with whom they could associate 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. However, Kejriwal's party has managed to spread its tentacles among voters belonging to the lower economic strata and minorities.

Both the known liberal and conservative faces of Muslim leadership in the city have joined ranks with the Congress. Without a minority face, Arvind Kejriwal and his party would need a yeoman's effort to convince the 15 per cent Muslims to back his candidates once again. In May 2014 there was no 'communal' agenda before the Muslims. This time around, Muslims would use its vote to ward of the threat of "Ghar Wapsi".

Additionally with Ajay Maken at head of the Congress campaign, the party would also enter the fray with a credible face. Kejriwal or for that matter the BJP would find it difficult to corner him on their pet issue of corruption. Rather Maken, with his track record of being an efficient minister at both the state and the Centre, would be able to launch an effective counter-attack on his rivals. With him Congress has also put forth its best possible candidate for the polls.

So Delhi, let's hope for an end to the chilly winters. Let spring usher in a government that would be best for the city. But this would demand a clear mandate from voters in a poll that never before has been so complex.

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