

**By Sidharth Mishra**



A few weeks back, your reporter in this very column had mentioned about the possible role which the Congress could play in the upcoming polls in Uttar Pradesh. The conclusion was that even in the case of the near-dead Uttar Pradesh Congress Committee coming back to life, the possibility of it forming a government was remote. However, alive and kicking Congress in UP certainly has the potential to damage chances of the BJP, which is making an attempt to regain its foothold in Lucknow. The saffron party's rule in the state ended in 2002. Thereafter, its political fortunes in the nation's politically most significant state has been on a downswing - barring 2014 Lok Sabha polls. Under the stewardship of Narendra Modi and with his closest ally Amit Shah playing the navigator, the party managed to win 73 out of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in the state in 2014. However, managing a rerun of 2014 blitzkrieg in the winter-spring of 2017, when the state goes to polls to elect representatives to the Assembly, has just become a wee bit more difficult with the Congress entering the fray with some gusto.

The pollsters, who have already started entertaining people with their predictions, are indicating a hung Assembly.

The BJP and the ruling Samajwadi Party have been put neck and neck at 27 percent, whereas the BSP closely follows them with 25 percent votes. The Congress, for now, is projected to get six percent votes and others, 13 percent.

Despite the pollsters' mastery at failing to make right predictions as far as the number of seats go, we can still lay bets on the basis of the vote share figures, which have often turned out to be closer to the truth. Going by this trend, we can safely call the upcoming polls to be a keen contest.

The figures suggest that it's not going to be a rout for the Samajwadi Party and the clear victory for the BSP, as was said till a few weeks ago. One of the interesting aspects of these figures is the role the leaders of these combinations are going to get.

There has never been any doubt about the fortune of the BSP being closely linked to the influence its leader Mayawati wields over a section of voters. However, what is crucial is the score which incumbent Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav has managed on the personal popularity

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rating. Yadav with a near 33 percent is way ahead in the popularity race and his personal charisma show to be carrying much more weight than the influence of his party. The score of the Congress and its chief ministerial face, Sheila Dikshit, at six and five percent respectively again show that the face of the Chief Minister is going to be crucial, something on which the BJP has so far not managed to make an offer.

If BJP fails to overcome inner contradictions and doesn't offer a face for the polls, it might have walked into the Congress trap. In creating a Brahmin (Dikshit), Thakur (party's campaign committee head Sanjay Singh), Muslim (party in-charge Ghulam Nabi Azad), and non-Yadav OBC (UP Congress head Raj Babbar), leadership combination with the clarity about who would be the Chief Minister, the Congress would dent the BJP most and may well put paid to latter's chances of returning to power on the Vidhan Sabha Marg.

The Congress strategists are working on the belief that if Brahmins, who along with Muslims and Dalits had formed the traditional base of the party in its hey days, is won over, large sections of Muslims will flock back to the Congress. On the other hand, Mayawati is trying to wean the Muslim voters away from Samajwadi Party and recharge her D-M (Dalit-Muslim) formula, which has not worked for them since 2009 Lok Sabha polls. With people talking about all possible permutations and combinations, some credit is definitely due to the Congress for having added excitement to polls.

The campaign of the party through road shows has now been on for almost 45 days. It has included highly successful road rallies by party president Sonia Gandhi in Varanasi and vice-president Rahul Gandhi in Lucknow. Their programmes have been covered on the television. What was not covered was the large number of worker and small public meetings which the local teams led by Babbar and Dikshit had held in last one month and a fortnight. This would continue for another month till the beginning of the festival season in October. If the idea was to create a buzz, the party has done it successfully.

The quality of the response could also be judged from the fact that it has given the confidence to both Dikshit and Babbar to reject any initiative at an alliance with either with the Samajwadi Party or the BSP. The idea is to push the campaign deeper and make the buzz louder before entering into any political bargain. The appointment of Dikshit, a three-term Delhi Chief Minister, as the face of the polls has generated a considerable hum in the state and the challenge is to keep the momentum going.

The party's campaign committee chief Sanjay Singh had to use considerable physical strength to keep the "enthusiastic" party workers at a distance from the demure 78-year-old leader, who too is faced with the onerous battle of her long and illustrious political career. With the Congress at the centre of people's political discourse, it has helped energise the dormant Congress workers. It has also galvanised the rivals into action, with BSP chief Mayawati, too, hitting the

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campaign trail. Akhilesh Yadav, too, has scheduled his road shows. However, in the past few elections, the surging crowds have often proved to be misleading. BJP learnt it to their nemesis in Bihar in 2015, Congress in Delhi earlier in the same year. Uttar Pradesh will be interesting to watch.

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