

By Sidharth Mishra



The nine-day-long drama which Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal unfolded in the ante-room of Lieutenant Governor's office opened discussions on several political repercussions which it believed to have caused. While a quadruple of Chief Ministers, belonging to Opposition parties and in the town for a NitiAayog meeting, did not miss the opportunity for a photo frame. On the other hand, the Congress leadership was on the receiving end of brickbats hurled at them for not joining the opposition party.

All through the nine-days that Arvind Kejriwal and his aides had the television crews holed up at Raj Niwas Marg, they did not bother to address the 'official opposition' that is the Delhi BJP. Despite having won the last round of polls in the city – the municipal elections in 2017 and having seven Lok Sabha MPs from the city, Delhi BJP failed to make an effective presence in the political drama. It was left to the Lieutenant Governor and the bureaucrats to fend for the centre's cause.

The concern of the AAP leadership all through the nine days was more about steadfast refusal of Delhi Congress president Ajay Maken to "fall in line" even in the name of opposition unity, and not the BJP raising a shindig. Congress rather utilised the opportunity to consolidate its "no truck with AAP" strategy.

Even former chief minister Sheila Dikshit, who in the past had not ruled out an alliance, came out firing all cylinders against the CM sitting on dharna albeit in the luxury of the plush ante-room beating the summer heat in the air-conditioned environment. The local unit of the BJP, meanwhile, looked clueless on how to handle the unprecedented situation.

The 'counter-dharna' outside the Chief Minister's office by BJP MLAs was orchestrated by AAP's rebel MLA and former Minister Kapil Mishra. It took Delhi BJP president Manoj Tiwari full

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two days to get into the act and visit his agitating MLAs at the secretariat. Party's seven Lok Sabha members remained noticeable by their absence except for the fleeting presence of Dr Harshvardhan that too after AAP had withdrawn the dharna.

Does this sudden 'slump' in BJP fortunes and 'rise in demand' for the Congress indicate towards any new political development? The last few months have been more or less a contest between the AAP and Congress to control the turf which the latter lost to the former in 2013. This largely consists of the non-middle class, non-urban votes spread across city's periphery, whereas the BJP has remained persistent in control of its vote banks in the middle-class colonies consisting of the Bania and Punjabi voters.

In the past 25 years, ever since the elections started in the city under the National Capital Territory (NCT) Act, the Bharatiya Janata Party's voteshare has revolved around one-third of the polled votes, especially during the assembly elections. The only time they won the Vidhan Sabha polls in the city was in 1993.

The 1993 elections were held in the aftermath of the Babri Masjid demolition and a large number of minority voters then had voted for the Janata Dal, which had emerged as the third force. But thereafter, under Sheila Dikshit's stewardship, Congress managed to romp home in 1998, 2003 and 2008.

Even in 2013, with the 'clean face' of Dr Harshvardhan as chief ministerial candidate and Herculean efforts made party's then prime ministerial face Narendra Modi, the BJP failed to cross the halfway mark as the division of votes between the Congress and the newbie AAP went in latter's favour more than anybody had expected.

During the last Vidhan Sabha polls in 2015, with Sheila Dikshit out of the scene and the party's central leadership in shambles following the rout in 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the Congress campaign just refused to take off, putting all the non-BJP votes in AAP's kitty and results were for everyone to see — the AAP winning 67 of the 70 seats.

However, the AAP has been on a downslide since then especially after below-expectation performance in Punjab assembly polls, and getting swept out in the civic polls which followed in the state. The AAP has increasingly come to be restricted within the National Capital Territory,

with no hope whatsoever left of being a national alternative after complete non-performance in Gujarat and Karnataka assembly polls.

With the Dalits and minorities backing the Congress in Gujarat and Maharashtra, the AAP is worried about its vote bank in the national Capital going back to the Congress. Moreover the AAP leadership is facing fratricidal feud, the Arvind Kejriwal government has charges of non-performance against it and its cadre frustrated with somewhat repressive management.

AAP's voteshare in the 2015 assembly polls was 54 percent, which in two years' time slid to 26 per cent during the municipal polls. The Congress's vote share from nine per cent in 2015 rose to 21 percent in 2017, thereafter Gujarat and Karnataka has followed.

On the BJP front, the local unit of the party has so far failed to grow, as mentioned earlier, beyond a Bania-Punjabi outfit despite foisting a 'Purvanchali' Manoj Tiwari as state president. Tiwari is not only an outsider to city's politics but also to BJP culture having shifted to the ruling party only ahead of the last Lok Sabha polls. He has failed to deliver an effective counter to AAP's alleged mal-governance.

In such situation, the BJP's only hope is that the AAP remains somewhat relevant and division in the anti-BJP votes once again takes place as it happened during the last municipal polls. However, with the likelihood of the consolidation of Dalits and minorities behind the Congress, as witnessed in Gujarat and Karnataka assembly polls, the city BJP would have to find a better strategy to fend off Congress's challenge in the city during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

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