

India: The 2014 Elections, a Secular United Front and the Aam Aadmi Party

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With the Lok Sabha elections just weeks away, the priority of all left-wing and anti-communal activists should be to ensure the defeat of Modi and the BJP. Regardless of whether or not we characterise Modi's politics as fascist and see the coming election as containing the very real threat of fascism at the Centre, it is undeniable that fundamental rights and the rule of law will be fatally undermined if he comes to power. At present he can use the Gujarat state machinery to ensure that he isn't chargesheeted in any of the Gujarat cases and to file false cases against activists like Teesta Setalvad and others. His absolute control over the state machinery and use of it even for purely personal affairs is demonstrated by the Snoopgate scam. And his determination to eliminate any authority that is independent of him is highlighted by his spending crores of public money to ensure that the Gujarat Lokayukta is under his thumb. **But** his writ does not extend beyond Gujarat. If he comes to power at the Centre, his first priority will be to shut down the cases against himself, Amit Shah and the Hindutva terrorists, crush those who are fighting them or who oppose him in any way, tighten his grip over the state machinery countrywide, and assert control over all independent authorities including the judiciary.

However, this possibility looms over us only because the various secular parties (both national and regional) are hopelessly divided among themselves and against each other. Almost every state replicates the potential tragedy of UP, where forces deeply opposed to the BJP on both social and political grounds are set to divide the non-BJP vote between them in what may well turn out to be a stunning political miscalculation. **Modi cannot be stopped without consolidating the anti-BJP vote**, and one way of achieving this is to work for an electoral United Front of all secular parties and independents including the Congress Party. Even if intense rivalry (for example between the JD(U) and RJD) rules out an electoral alliance, informal seat-sharing could be advantageous to both, with fewer seats contested but more seats won. If there had been a United Front of this sort in Chhattisgarh, it would have won the assembly elections there.

The refusal of almost the entire Left to consider a United Front that includes Congress is reminiscent of the refusal of the German Communists to take the Nazi threat seriously while concentrating their fire on the Social Democrats in the early 1930s. The equation of Congress with the BJP and insistence on a 'Third Front' is reminiscent of the suicidal 'social fascism' theory that helped Hitler to come to power by splitting the opposition to the Nazis. It is difficult but still possible to fight against neo-liberalism under a flawed democracy, but under a fascist regime all today's fighters - trade unionists, RTI activists, journalists, and so on - would be in jail or dead.

Where the secular candidates remain divided, voters themselves should organise strategic voting in each constituency for the secular anti-Modi candidate who is most likely to defeat the BJP. An all-out campaign against Modi and the BJP and formation of an electoral secular alliance against them is the most urgent need of the hour.

What is the place of the Aam Aadmi Party in this scenario? Left-wingers and anti-communal activists who join or support AAP on the grounds that it offers the only hope of defeating Modi and the BJP in the elections face a strange paradox. How can this end be achieved? One way would be by AAP

forming a government at the Centre on its own, but this is not a realistic prospect. Another way would be by being part of a coalition at the Centre that excludes the BJP, but AAP has publicly ruled out alliances of any sort. The third way is by winning a significant number of votes and seats that would otherwise go to the BJP, thereby making it impossible for the BJP to form a government. This is entirely possible; indeed, it is what happened in Delhi.

Who are the AAP voters who would otherwise vote for the BJP? By definition, they are people who wouldn't mind having a prime minister who presided over a massacre of Muslims in Gujarat (whether or not they know what role he played in it). This is where the AAP and BJP constituencies overlap. But these voters are fickle. AAP issued just one statement during its election campaign about the violence in Muzaffarnagar, and apparently that was enough to make the overwhelming majority of Jats, who constitute a strong voting bloc in outer Delhi constituencies, decide to support the BJP. In other words, ***the more AAP makes anti-communal statements or takes left-wing positions, the less it is a threat to the BJP***.

There is thus a logical fallacy in the actions of pro-democracy and anti-communal activists who join AAP in order to defeat Modi, because their intervention will only send right-wing AAP supporters scuttling to the BJP, thus helping Modi. At present, it is not at all clear whether AAP will help to defeat Modi and the BJP or help them to come to power. AAP seems to appeal to the urban middle classes who have otherwise been favouring Modi, but the Delhi election shows that they cut more deeply into Congress and BSP votes. Think of a state like UP, where they plan to contest: if BJP votes are consolidated and the secular vote split four ways – SP, BSP, Congress and AAP – ***AAP could actually help the BJP to win many seats***.

Even so, joining AAP might have made sense if it could be shaped into a left-of-centre mass party, but that seems unlikely, at least in the short term. Prashant Bhushan's statement on Kashmir was extremely mild – he was not saying there should be a referendum on whether it should be part of India, only on whether the army should be deployed there for internal security – yet Arvind Kejriwal immediately contradicted him by invoking 'national security'. When founder-member Madhu Bhaduri tried to move a resolution in a National Council meeting chaired by Yogendra Yadav, apologising to the African women targeted when Law Minister Somnath Bharti took part in a violent racist mob and distancing the party from racist comments, she was shouted down and the microphone snatched from her. If senior leaders like Bhushan and Bhaduri are unable to shape AAP's positions, how can newcomers hope to do so? Far from apologising to the women, Kejriwal went on a dharna demanding the suspension of the cops who the women said were protecting them! His argument that 'prostitution and drug rackets' are the cause of rape recalls AAP's election poster claiming that corruption is the cause of rape and will stop when Sheila Dikshit is replaced by Kejriwal: a disturbing instrumentalisation of sexual violence and obfuscation of its causes for electoral gain.

Another AAP leader, Kumar Vishwas, has been in the news for making racist and sexist comments about Kerala nurses; indeed, his message that 'black is ugly, fair is beautiful' not only demeans all women by defining them as sex-objects for men, but also reveals deeply-held upper-caste prejudice. Vishwas has also made communal, jingoistic, homophobic and transphobic jokes, tweeted that 'every Indian' wants a Ram Mandir at the Babri Masjid site, and expressed adulation of Modi. Insincere apologies for some of these remarks do not indicate any change of attitude. Yet he remains prominent in the UP campaign, and is frequently seen beside Kejriwal. AAP's advertisement of its achievements in its first 20 days of office included the boast that it had made a shortlist of Bangladeshi infiltrators in Delhi: a favourite target of the BJP. (Up to 26 January, this page was available in their official e-zine [\[1\]](#) It was taken down after objections to it were raised, suggesting that it was not official policy, but evidently some members thought it should be!)

In its short period in power, AAP has demonstrated that its notion of 'participatory democracy' is

devoid of any link to human rights or the rule of law, and more akin to majoritarian mob rule. And it has shown it is capable of the worst kind of corruption, namely the use of prejudice and violence against the vulnerable in order to garner votes and popularity. Its politics appeals to the right-wing middle classes, and that is precisely why it poses a threat to the BJP. Its carefully-articulated policies are aimed at this constituency: refusing to take a stand against communalism or in favour of labour (for example, refusing to support the Maruti Suzuki Manesar workers because 'tum logo ne to manager ko zinda jala diya', i.e. naively swallowing management's story wholesale, or expressing discomfort that NREGA raises agricultural wages and thereby causes problems to farmers who employ them); and implicitly endorsing popular sexist attitudes (for example endorsing khap panchayats, ignoring the fact that they are patriarchal to the core).

The conclusion seems to be that left-wing and anti-communal activists who are serious about defeating Modi in the coming elections should stay out of AAP and refrain from campaigning for it (because their support for AAP will help the BJP by further fragmenting the anti-BJP vote and driving right-wing AAP supporters to vote for the BJP), and vote for an AAP candidate if and only if this candidate is secular and has the best chance of defeating the BJP/NDA in that particular constituency. After the elections, there will be time enough for those who have already joined AAP to try and push it to the Left, gender-sensitise it, or whatever – but not now. At present, campaigning against Modi and the BJP, working for a broad secular electoral United Front, and organising strategic voting against the BJP are the priorities.

Anil Bhatia (independent journalist), Anjum Rajabali (scriptwriter and teacher), Aruna Burte (feminist activist), Hasina Khan (Muslim Women's Rights Network), Irfan Engineer (All India Secular Forum), Javed Malick (university lecturer), Kamayani Bali Mahabal (feminist and human rights activist), Kannan Srinivasan (free-lance journalist and researcher), Manohar Elavarthi (Praja Rajakiya Vedike), Pradeep Esteves (independent researcher and consultant), Ramdas Rao (PUCL-Bangalore), Ram Puniyani (All India Secular Forum), Rebecca Kurian (anti-communal activist), Rohini Hensman (independent researcher and writer), Shaik Ubaid (human rights activist), S. Janakarajan (Madras Institute of Development Studies), Subhash Gatade (New Socialist Initiative), Sumi Krishna (independent feminist scholar and writer), Uday Chandra (political scientist), Uma V. Chandru (PUCL-Bangalore and WSS National Campaign), Zaheer Ahmed Sayeed (neurologist)

P.S.

* <http://www.sacw.net/article7554.html>

Footnotes

[1] <http://communalism.blogspot.in/2014/01/india-aam-admi-partys-delhi-govt-has.html>