

Indian politics has a new moral force

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In a massive blow to India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, a radical anti-corruption, anti-establishment party has swept to power in the country's capital.

The Aam Aadmi party (AAP) has accomplished an amazing political feat. Not only has it won more than half the total vote and 95% of all seats in Delhi's state assembly - but also by unabashedly championing the cause of the poor, and the interests of underprivileged social and religious groups, it has signalled the arrival of a new moral force in India's national politics.

It's the kind of force the Indian Left once was, but recently ceased to be: irreverent towards authority; militant in opposing hierarchy and privilege based on birth; passionately egalitarian; and ready to bring the tall claims of "the world's largest democracy" down to earth through greater public accountability for rulers.

The sheer magnitude of the AAP's victory cannot fully be explained by its mass outreach, its celebration of working people, and its commitment to providing better public services and fighting corruption - or even by the charisma of its leader, Arvind Kejriwal. The AAP won because the electorate wanted to hand a stunning defeat to Modi's Bharatiya Janata party, which has strutted about since it won the national election eight months ago as if it were invincible.

Under Modi and Amit Shah, the party president implicated in several criminal cases, the BJP seemed to have found a perfect winning strategy: polarise voters on caste, class and religious lines (where necessary, by inciting anti-Muslim violence); make crude appeals to Hindu supremacism, sectarian identities and jingoism; exploit upper-caste/upper-class elite aspirations; and run a dazzling multibillion-dollar election campaign funded by corporate cronies.

The recipe succeeded in converting the BJP's 31% national vote into a clear parliamentary majority last May, but the Delhi state election - where these methods were again deployed - suggests things may be turning. Modi has failed to live up to his promise of "less government, more governance", higher growth and more jobs - of which India needs to create more than a million every month just to absorb an expanding labour force. Each of Modi's grandiose schemes - including large-scale urban sanitation, cleaning up the Ganges, interlinking rivers or creating "smart cities" - smacks of gimmickry and empty sloganeering.

Yet more pertinently, Modi has cut funding for the National Rural Employment Guarantee programme, said to be the world's largest job-provision scheme, by 45%, and is about to severely restrict the public provision of affordable food grains. He's bringing in shamefully pro-corporate land acquisition rules, which will displace millions of farmers without public hearings or environmental impact assessment. These changes are widely opposed.

The government, with the BJP's hardline-Hindutva allies, is rewriting textbooks to reflect India's glorified "Hindu past" and "national pride". Growing religious intolerance, including attacks on churches and forced conversions to Hinduism, recently drew critical comments from Barack Obama. As secularism is attacked, and Mahatma Gandhi's Hindu-fanatic assassin is lionised by BJP

supporters, the religious minorities - over a fifth of the population - feel increasingly insecure. Modi hasn't yet been legally held culpable for the anti-Muslim pogrom on his watch in Gujarat in 2002, but his Hindu-hardliner image inspires little confidence.

The Delhi result has halted the BJP juggernaut and created the hope that a new people-centred, participatory, secular politics could resonate among the majority, who are mostly poor. It's not clear if the AAP leadership will draw this lesson and try to define a broad framework for its politics, which it has so far failed to do. But the result has energised India's political opposition in ways that had seemed inconceivable. Whether it leads to a broad-ranging national political realignment against the BJP remains an open question, but it has at least been squarely posed.

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P.S.

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