

India: Aam Aadmi's self-inflicted wounds

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It may appear to be an unfortunate coincidence to many that serious dissension should break out in India's political wunderkind, the Aam Aadmi Party, within a few weeks of its spectacular victory in the Delhi Assembly elections, which stopped the Narendra Modi juggernaut.

Unfortunate it certainly is—especially for those who relished AAP's triumph under Arvind Kejriwal's leadership as well as the Bharatiya Janata Party's debacle, and who still hope that AAP would soon emerge a formidable challenger to the BJP at the national level. But coincidence it definitely isn't—although it's a setback for the cause of a clean, decent, broadly secular and inclusive politics based on participation and local democracy.

In fact, the immediate reasons for the discord in the young party, which led to the unceremonious sacking of veterans Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan from its political affairs committee (PAC), are intimately connected to the Delhi elections in at least three different ways: through an altering of AAP's internal equations, its leaders' differences over election strategy and tactics, and the recent consolidation of a centralised, personality-based organisational model in AAP.

First, AAP's 67-out-of-70-seats Delhi triumph shook up the political balances inside the party overwhelmingly in favour of the team of activists who worked day and night in its Delhi campaign. They claimed exclusive ownership of the party, not least because some of them had given up well-paying jobs to work for AAP, and formed a praetorian guard around Mr Kejriwal.

These activists resented the prominence and prestige enjoyed by Mr Yadav and Mr Bhushan, who were by no means central to the campaign, and on the contrary, were seen by them to have played a negative role in it.

Earlier, Mr Yadav was keen that the Aam Aadmi Party contest the Haryana and Maharashtra Assembly elections, which preceded the Delhi elections by five months. Mr Kejriwal took the view that Delhi was winnable, but Haryana—where AAP did poorly in the Lok Sabha elections despite Mr Yadav's exertions—wasn't; nor would AAP have a remotely respectable showing in Maharashtra.

It wouldn't do for AAP to divert its energies away from Delhi, felt Mr Kejriwal. He prevailed. Meanwhile, however, he flirted with the idea of joining hands with the Congress in the Assembly (before it was dissolved) to prevent the BJP from poaching MLAs and forming a government.

This is where the second factor, differences over strategy and tactics, comes in. Mr Kejriwal was convinced that if AAP didn't win the Delhi Assembly elections decisively, it would be finished nationally, probably forever. That's why he unilaterally decided last May to ask the Lieutenant-Governor not to dissolve the Assembly—a highly controversial move.

This opened him up to the charge, later levelled by Mr Bhushan, that he was acting against the AAP mandate and policy to fight both the Congress and the BJP—and doing so highhandedly.

However, Mr Bhushan was himself soon accused of trying to sabotage AAP's chances in Delhi by objecting to the selection process in respect of 12 party candidates. Matters were further fouled up by his father Shanti's statement last August that Mr Kejriwal "is a great campaigner, but in my

opinion, he lacks organisational ability. He does not have that kind of competence which can spread the message of the party all over India...”

The elder Mr Bhushan later backed Kiran Bedi who was announced as the BJP’s Chief Ministerial candidate. Although his son distanced himself from this, his statements to this effect weren’t all seen as a strong enough refutation of the stand. Rumours also started circulating within AAP of a secretly taped phone conversation in which Mr Bhushan allegedly said he’d be happy to see AAP only win 20-25 seats in Delhi. The climate got progressively vitiated.

Eventually, Mr Kejriwal was vindicated on February 10 when the Delhi results came in. He inducted his closest loyalists like Manish Sisodia into the cabinet, didn’t include a single woman, and took no portfolio himself—as if to indicate that he is not just first among equals, but in a class apart.

When AAP was launched as a party, Mr Kejriwal was its pre-eminent leader. When he was sworn in as Chief Minister in 2013, he became a popular hero. But after the latest victory, he has become a national star, way, way higher in stature than any other AAP leader. He wants the party structure to reflect this—although that’s not healthy in the long run.

Soon after Mr Kejriwal was sworn in as Chief Minister a second time, Mr Yadav stepped up his demand that the CM, with all his onerous responsibilities, shouldn’t also remain AAP’s national convenor; that post should go to someone else. This is by no means an unreasonable demand, but Kejriwal loyalists disingenuously countered it by saying he held no portfolio and therefore could function normally as the national convenor too.

Messrs Bhushan and Yadav, and some of their friends, suggested the post should go to Mr Yadav, given his national profile and interests. This mild expression of ambition—which would be considered normal and unobjectionable in any other party—was seen as a threat by the Kejriwal camp. So was the demand raised by Messrs Yadav and Bhushan to look into issues like selection of candidates, sourcing of funds and details of election expenses.

It didn’t help matters that many in AAP considered Mr Yadav’s personal style excessively pious and syrupy-sweet. A sting operation was launched to show that he wasn’t loyal to AAP and had briefed journalists in Chandigarh in a misleading way. Confidential letters and emails were leaked to the media by all concerned; and nasty accusations were tweeted. AAP’s organisational crisis worsened. To discuss it, a meeting of the national executive (NE) had to be convened on March 4.

Both before and during the meeting, Mr Kejriwal would have had a chance to act as a moderator and reach some kind of reconciliation to maintain AAP’s unity. But he absented himself from the meeting and got his super-loyalist deputy Manish Sisodia to play the proxy to move the proposal for sacking Mr Yadav and Bhushan from the PAC—apparently after some last-minute manipulation and number-rigging. He prevailed because of the numerical strength of his loyalists. The only surprise is that the Yadav-Bhushan duo lost narrowly, by an 8-to-11 vote.

This is as a clear indication as any that Mr Kejriwal wants a strongly personality-focused, over-centralised organisational model—not the open, consultative, participatory one it advocates in its own political campaigning. This is a regression from its earlier status as an unformed party with an uncrystallised organisational apparatus and an undefined internal democratic structure, which is fuzzier than that, say, of the Communist or other Left-leaning parties.

The new model will give fixers and loyalists the upper hand within AAP, and inhibit debate and discussion on strategies and ideas. It will also put off a number of AAP supporters and sympathisers who were greatly impressed by the cohesion and unity of purpose it has shown until now.

More important, AAP is now likely to evolve in a more centrist “non-ideological” direction, with greater emphasis on “pragmatic” “problem-solving” approaches—rather than policies and programmes based on a broad social vision, leave alone a grand long-term goal.

Messrs Yadav and Bhushan might not be flaming radicals—although Mr Yadav has a Socialist background—but both repudiate neoliberalism and have a deeper and broader understanding of various phases of and trends in Indian politics than most AAP leaders.

If AAP really intends to challenge both the BJP and the Congress, as it says it does, it can only do so from the Left. This means targeting both parties for their largely shared neoliberal economic policy orientation and countering the BJP’s Hindu-sectarian politics of communal polarisation through a strong, uncompromisingly secular agenda. AAP doesn’t have to tom-tom its “ideological” commitment, but it must take clear policy positions if it wants to become a credible national player.

Yet, despite the handsome support it got from the poor in Delhi in the Assembly elections and in some other cities in last year’s Lok Sabha elections, AAP doesn’t consider itself, and is not, a Left party. Whether it evolves in that direction or drifts Rightwards into confused pragmatism will determine if it has a long-term future in national politics.

AAP finds itself at this crossroads just when Mr Narendra Modi’s political honeymoon has ended and the BJP’s general downslide has begun—reflected in its extremely disappointing first full-year budget, its appalling performance in Parliament, and its super-opportunistic alliance with the People’s Democratic Party in Jammu and Kashmir which is likely to bring it embarrassment.

The BJP can be further weakened. That’s why it would be tragic if the Aam Aadmi Party doesn’t quickly overcome its turmoil and confusion and take a big stride forward.

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P.S.

*<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2015/03/10/Aam-Aadmi%E2%80%99s-Self-Inflicted-Wounds%3A-Kejriwal-must-show-vision>