

India: Kejriwal's winner-takes-all intolerance bodes ill for AAP

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Many who had fervently hoped that the Aam Aadmi Party would provide an alternative pole of attraction in India's otherwise dismal politics would be disappointed at the expulsion of two of its best-known faces, Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan, from its national executive. The outcome became inevitable after the two warring camps vented their spleen, leaking emails and secretly-taped conversations to the media. But few imagined that their mutual recrimination could stoop as low as it did.

Arvind Kejriwal conducted a vengeful, bouncer-supervised, purge expelling the duo (and associates Anand Kumar and Ajit Jha) in an "either-me-or-them" vote. He also sacked party Lokpal L Ramdas — a move that sits ill with AAP's demand for an impartial Lokpal for India.

Kejriwal wanted to punish Yadav and Bhushan, whom he saw as pretentious, ideologically-driven disrupters who wished to be treated as more than his subordinates. He judged them wrongly: not by their overall contribution to AAP, but by their marginal role in its stunning victory in Delhi. Last year, they went along with Kejriwal's unilateral flip-flop over dissolving the Delhi Assembly and fully legitimised his despotic conduct. But they soon became more assertive: Yadav tried to push for AAP's national expansion, and Shanti Bhushan declared support for Kiran Bedi. Prashant distanced himself from this, but that wasn't good enough for Kejriwal.

Even the slightest display of difference and ambition, which would be considered normal in any party, is unacceptable to Kejriwal. He wants a personality-focused, over-centralised organisational model — not the open, consultative, participatory one he advocates in broader politics.

Kejriwal's authoritarian, winner-takes-all approach has robbed AAP of the veneer of inner-party democracy and will put off many of its supporters who were greatly impressed by the political freshness, cohesion, dedication and unity of purpose it demonstrated until recently. Yadav and Bhushan's attempt at claiming victimhood on account of "dissidence" won't sell. Yadav was no less intolerant of dissidence in his native Haryana.

The duo is now certain to be expelled from AAP and would probably form a new party. This will draw (limited) support outside Delhi, especially if it gives up the pretence of being "post-ideological" and adopts a clear left-leaning programme while retaining features that made AAP attractive to many people: transparency, advocacy of local democracy, and commitment to fighting corruption.

As for AAP, it will continue to command goodwill in Delhi for having politically mobilised the poor in huge numbers to stop the Modi juggernaut — a result which many, including this writer, didn't predict in the first weeks after the Lok Sabha elections. But AAP's political longevity and ability to expand will depend on what it's able to deliver, as much in process as in outcome.

AAP hasn't quite got off to a flying start. It's scrapping the Bus Rapid Transit system—a true long-term, equitable solution to Delhi's horrendous transportation problem, 15-20 times cheaper than the Metro — without consulting anyone, especially bus commuters. It's offering every family 20,000

litres of water free every month. This is both excessive and unrelated to the real need, which is for reliable, regular supply. It has banned the sale of all kinds of chewing tobacco, which will only drive the business underground. It makes no sense to do this when cigarettes and bidi sales aren't banned.

Nevertheless, AAP can be expected to take some good pro-people and anti-corruption measures in Delhi. Whether that compensates it for the discredit earned from the recent purge isn't clear. But there's no long-term future for AAP unless it democratises itself and broadens its horizons beyond winning elections.

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P.S.

*<http://www.dnaindia.com/analysis/column-kejriwal-s-winner-takes-all-intolerance-bodes-ill-for-aap-2073900>