

Opinion – The Aam Aadmi Party's Effect on Indian Politics

Written by Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/02/24/opinion-the-aam-aadmi-partys-effect-on-indian-politics/>

NADEEM AHMED MOONAKAL, FEB 24 2020

Indian politics has often shown that the world's largest democracy is filled with unprecedented surprises. The birth and journey of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) can rightly be pointed as one with the recent sweeping victory in Delhi Assembly elections held in February 2020. It is to be rightly observed that AAP didn't evolve from a vacuum and more importantly AAP thrived on people's aspiration which is the foundation of any democracy. Hence, the effect and implications of AAP on the Indian political landscape can be seen as the prospect of alternatives in a democracy that remains as inexplicably heterogenous. In 2011, a widespread public movement blew across India at the backdrop of a spree of corruption scandals and allegations during the Indian National Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) regime. The premise of the protest remained to be the demand for the enactment of the Jan Lokpal Bill of which the main aim was to establish a centre anti-corruption institution called Lokpal. The movement was largely driven against the political establishment and was steered ahead mainly by activists outside the mainstream Indian political class. The future of this movement resulted in the formation of AAP.

In 2012 the AAP was born and its birth could certainly be pointed as a milestone in Indian politics. A normal Indian middle-class man became the face of the anti-corruption movement in the world's largest democracy; rightly representing the wide scope of changes in a young nation. The AAP fought its first election in 2013 through crowdfunding and managed to even form a government with outside support. What the AAP did was capture the wave of frustration, disappointment and a strong protest largely from the middle class and the lower middle class to act against the lack of accountability from the political establishment. However, they could not pass the Jan Lokpal Bill since the party did not have a majority in the Delhi Assembly. The impediments and limitations of the Bill also were widely debated at this juncture although Kejriwal clung onto the issue and looked ahead optimistically. The AAP government resigned in February 2014 in their quest to seek a complete majority in the assembly and Arvind Kejriwal became one of the shortest-serving Chief Ministers of India. His decision received a lot of criticism from the public. However, Kejriwal sensed the wave rightly despite their performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections which Narendra Modi had by then become a face of without competition or challenge. As mentioned earlier, the AAP rose again with the same principles of wiping out corruption with the party's clarion "Paanch Saal Kejriwal" (5 years of Kejriwal).

Dressed often in sloppy trousers, an untucked shirt, casual footwear and a muffler around the head during winters, Kejriwal managed to reflect the common Indian man even with his fashion statement. The 'muffler man' of Indian politics emblazoned the 'aam aadmi' (common man) image with his attire. When the national capital went for elections again in February 2015 the AAP swept the polls with a record vote share of 54 percent winning 67 seats out of 70 in the Delhi Assembly. The newborn political party with its electoral success etched a unique place in the political landscape of India firmly questioning the status quo of electoral populism that first evolved from Indira Gandhi's left-wing socialist populism to the Modi era's right-wing Hindu nationalism.

The primary features of the AAP's narrative have been accountability, transparency and anti-corruption and in the last five years, the AAP managed to achieve a fundamental change in social welfare and education. AAP also fulfilled its promise of reducing the electricity bills by half and of waiving off bills if their electricity consumption is below 200 units. The promise of getting water from Munak Canal was also successful despite the party facing strong criticism

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for its free water scheme. The AAP banked on its work especially in reforming the education and healthcare sector. Though the AAP could not fulfill its promise of 1000 Mohalla clinics, people have condoned the efforts of the party and have largely lauded the reforms brought by the Aam Aadmi Party.

The Delhi elections took place during a vulnerable time. The nationwide protests against Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the police attack on students protesting in Delhi created a tense situation in the national capital. The AAP's response to these protests remained lukewarm although Kejriwal had urged the centre to revoke CAA and had spoken against the Act on several occasions. Many other prominent leaders from AAP had openly voiced their solidarity to the people protesting in Shaheen Bagh against CAA and NRC.

To a large extent, the AAP realized the public psyche and refrained from plunging into anything adventurous. They pulled off their entire campaign on issues relevant to the people of Delhi and the progress made by the party in fulfilling their promises. With the victory of 62 seats, the muffler man once again proved that alternate narratives in contemporary Indian politics cannot be shrugged off entirely despite a strong polarisation prevailing in the country. Soon after the election results Amit Shah, the current Home Minister of India and former BJP President, accepted that his forecast with respect to Delhi went wrong. He also rightly assessed that extremely polarizing and hate comments from several BJP leaders have impacted BJP's failure.

After the AAP swept the Delhi polls again many opined an ideological victory for the BJP pointing out Kejriwal's 'soft Hindutva'. Kejriwal's recitation of Hanuman chalisa, a proud proclamation of being a *Hanuman Bhakt* and the AAP government's 'Mukhyamantri Teerth Yatra Yojana' could be seen as soft Hindutva, though, the AAP's central premise has been development and welfare of the people throughout the campaign, unlike the BJP. It is true to an extent that Kejriwal picked on the wave of right-wing nationalism and sensed that battling against that idea in the national capital could impact the party's image. Hence, the AAP did not fight Hindutva in Delhi, rather what it did in a surprising way was to get the attention of the people in Delhi to issues that really matter like education, water, electricity, and transportation. It is to be noted that the same people in Delhi had voted against the AAP in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. People realized the lack of credible leadership and affirmed that there isn't anyone to challenge the stature of Narendra Modi from any other political party on a national level. The same people however also voted differently just months after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections showing faith in the Aam Aadmi Party and the work they have done in Delhi.

This could only mean that the people in Delhi negated superficial narratives and have voted for welfare-oriented governance that benefit them widely. While the pro-government voices are eager to emblazon the AAP's victory in Delhi as a victory of Hindutva ideology, they fail to understand the birth and journey of the AAP which is beyond any ideology. The young party grew from the support of the people and the party rightly recognizes it every time they go to the polls invigorating an alternate scope for Indian politics that transcends beyond the binaries of any rigid ideology. The welfare policies of the AAP might be ascertained as populism although the central character of the party remains to be 'flexibility' which the leftist political parties in India largely did not bother. In that context, the AAP is redefining the Indian political spectrum with a prime focus on the large middle-class population without being rigid and urging people to vote beyond any ideology. Hindutva was the turf on which BJP fought and won several elections. Kejriwal with a team of policymakers who gained the confidence of the people of Delhi played on the same turf, but with a different agenda that rightly captures the dream of a predominantly young nation.

About the author:

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