

A Cong-BJP battle royal in Rajasthan



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Rajasthan, the largest Indian state in terms of area, is set for the Assembly election on November 25, 2023. One of the states where both Congress and BJP lock horns directly, Rajasthan has not witnessed any ruling party retain power after the 1998 elections. Now Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot is hell-bent on reversing this trend.

On the other hand, the BJP is very keen to establish its rule again in Rajasthan, the primary state in the Hindi belt, where it wields an immense influence. As this election outcome will have an impact on the 2024 parliamentary elections, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is projected as the most powerful face of the BJP campaign in the state. He has addressed five public meetings and taken part in two big rallies. So, the Rajasthan Assembly election is viewed as a direct battle between Gehlot and Modi.

Gehlot's popularity

It takes winning of 101 seats out of 200 to form government in Rajasthan. Back in 2018, the Congress bagged 100 seats, winning the election by the skin of its teeth. But the voting percentage difference between the Congress and the BJP is just less than one per cent. It was Gehlot's long political experience and strategic manoeuvres which played a great role in the electoral victory which the Congress achieved, though by a whisker, and enabled it to capture power. He had shown his political acumen and tactfulness when he throttled Sachin Pilot's attempt to overthrow his government by forming a dissident group of 35 MLAs. Even now the ground reality is that anti-incumbency against the Gehlot government is not so markedly manifest. Particularly, his personal popularity among the voters has increased, with the people flocking in droves to his campaign meeting venues, bearing a testimony to his rising popularity. Even the Hindu voters, who agree with the BJP's criticism of the Congress as an anti-Hindu party, assess Gehlot's rule favourably.

BJP's strategy

Vasundhara Raje, who had been Rajasthan CM twice, is also a personality with high personal influence. But this time the BJP's national high command has considerably whittled away at her importance. Going by the current electoral strategies the BJP is adopting, it seems that the party believes that Modi and the union government's schemes will guarantee the party success in the Assembly election. The main factor behind the BJP's current electoral strategy is the fact that though the party had lost power to the Congress in the 2018 Assembly elections, it won 24 out of 25 seats in the 2019 parliamentary elections.

It is the BJP high command's dominance that has manifested itself in the selection of party candidates for the Rajasthan Assembly election. Current and former MPs - Rajyavardhan Singh Rathore, Diya Kumari, Balaknath and Kirodi Lal Meena – have been fielded in the electoral fray. So, several current MLAs have been denied chance to contest the polls again. As a result, many dissidents have quit the party and are trying their luck as independents.

Religious divisions

The BJP has been levelling charges of corruption against the Congress government. The Enforcement Directorate's raids at the residences of Vaibhav Gehlot, Chief Minister's son, and Govind Singh Dotasra, Rajasthan Pradesh Congress Committee, have strengthened the corruption charges against the Congress government. Besides, during his campaign, Prime Minister Modi has accused the Congress government of supporting terrorists. The campaign has been portraying the Congress as anti-Hindu and pro-Muslim. Modi has also critically remarked that no important Hindu festival celebrations in Rajasthan pass off without violent incidents such as stone pelting.

In Muslim MLAs' constituencies, though there is no overall discontent against the Congress government, the Hindu voters believe that the local MLAs give priority to Muslims' welfare. As the BJP may try to exploit this trend of religious colours, religious division is expected to impact, at least, some constituencies. It is noteworthy that no Muslim has figured in the BJP's list of candidates.

Prominent promises

In this election, the promises of people's welfare schemes stand front and centre. The Congress has promised to provide cooking gas cylinders each at Rs.500 every month to one crore people and to create 10 lakh job opportunities. Whereas the BJP has assured to provide 2.5 lakh government jobs, cooking gas cylinder at Rs.450 under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and increase monetary aid to farmers under the PM Kisan Scheme. The BJP believes that the PM's promise to extend by five years the free foodgrain scheme announced in the time of corona will pay off.

Promises for women

Women constitute nearly half the electorate in Rajasthan. So, no wonder, both leading parties keep hurling promise after promise targeting the women voters. On the one hand, the Congress has, among other things, promised to distribute an annual honorarium of Rs.10,000 to women heads of family, free bus pass for women and leave for menstruation period. On the other, the BJP has assured to provide two-wheelers to women who have passed the class 12 examination, saving bonds worth Rs.two lakh for poor girl children, exclusive 'pink' buses for women, 33 per cent reservation for women in police recruitment and increase the quota to 50 per cent for women in teacher recruitment. Both parties have promised many schemes to upgrade security for women.

Other parties in fray

The political parties are vying with one another to woo the Scheduled Caste voters who account for 21.9 per cent of the total

population of Rajasthan. The Bahujan Samaj Party, which opened its account of electoral victory 25 years ago, won six seats in the last Assembly election. But the six MLAs had subsequently defected to the Congress, eroding people's faith in the BSP.

The Azad Samaj Party, set up by Chandra Shekar Azad, who has emerged as a young Dalit leader and floated Bhim Army, is also in the fray, tying up with the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party. He enjoys an immense popularity among the Dalit youth.

The constituents of the I.N.D.I.A front are also contesting the elections, but independently. The CPM contests 17 constituencies, CPI 9 and Samajwadi Party five. The Aam Aadmi Party too has fielded its candidates in 86 constituencies. So, this situation has added vigour to questions and doubts about the stability and unity of the I.N.D.I.A front opposed to the BJP.

Who will win?

There are advantages as well as adversities for both Congress and BJP, which are taking on each other with an equal might. Both may be affected by their own dissident MLAs.

Beyond all these things, the Rajasthan Assembly election outcome will answer the question very clearly whether it is the local issues or the national issues which will influence and impact the Assembly elections in the states.

Translated by V. Mariappan.