

IDEALS WITHOUT IDEAS

- Do political parties need ideology?" by S L Rao

___ In an earlier article I argued that the Aam Aadmi Party was one among the many attempts since independence to found a new political party. All of them to varying degrees changed our politics-whether for less government control over the economy, favouring other backward castes, against specific issues of corrupt politician. But they had economic ideologies. The Swatantra party wanted more freedom to enterprise. Jaya Prakash Narain was a socialist and in power, his ideology would be for more state control and social welfare schemes. The Janata party was a hotchpotch and tried to pander to its different components. V P Singh was a believer in fiscal balance but was not in power long enough to do much.

The Aam Aadmi party was an outcome of the Anna Hazare led India against corruption. It became a political party as Kejriwal realized the extent of urban youth support. He was for grassroots democracy and wanted decisions affecting localities to be taken by the locals. He had nothing to say about decisions affecting national security or international relations. Nor had he enunciated any economic ideology. His single point agenda was to make life easier for the common man by reducing his outgoes. He was implacably against corruption. He wanted political power exercised for the people and not for personal glorification. Despite all these lacunae, Aap will leave more of a mark on other political parties than did its predecessors.

There are two reasons for saying this. The context is different. Television has unbridled influence. It can choose to give saturation coverage as it did to Kejriwal's meetings and Modi's public rallies. The response was huge and many millions over India saw both in person and on television screens. Social media especially in the regional languages have huge penetration-mobile phones, SMSs, internet, Facebook, Twitter, etc. They are almost instant in their impact and bring many into the streets as participants, volunteers and donors. Aap (like the BJP under Modi), has exploited this new context. These media might enable Aap to survive as a party. But can it grow to become a

realistic party in Opposition of in government?

Unlike earlier failed attempts, Aap was founded by Kejriwal, a middle-level civil servant who served as a civil servant for hardly a decade. He had no political background or affiliations, no wealthy business connections, no visible large scale funding. But his public service had made him internationally recognized for his effectiveness in enabling the most significant change to Indian democracy since independence. This is the Right to Information. His early followers were a disparate bunch of low level lawyers, middling media persons, social activists, teachers, many do-gooders and others. Hardly any had experience in political parties or in public life as policy-makers or commentators. He is now attracting writers, top executives, media persons, iconic figures like Rajmohan Gandhi and Medha Patkar. They are distinguished historians, or social activists, and easily recognized. None has had a successful career in politics.

The Aam Aadmi Pary, uniquely, has no economic ideology. It is not socialist or communist or capitalist. It is pro-poor, apparently for efficiency, lower prices, improving service delivery to all, and open to listening and acting upon ideas and grievances from the many. Every predecessor party was for some group: business men, SCs, STs, OBCs, Muslims, etc. Some were there for increased state direction and control over resources; others for a lot less of it.

You could call Aap a “lazy” political party with no ideology. On the other hand, it could also be called a practical and learning party, one that wants to help the masses but with no hang-ups on whether government or the private sector should take the necessary actions. There is much for the party to learn, both to function as an effective Opposition and as a ruling party.

Take as instance its “common man” approach to popular issues of water availability, power tariffs and transportation. The common man would like them dealt with by reducing tariffs and making them freely available. Before the elections, this was announced. After the elections these promises had to be moderated in the light of rules of governemnt. Water would be given as promised only to those who had meters; power subsidies would be given from government budgets for three months. A CAG audit is believed by Kerjriwal to disclosed vast padding and leakage of funds by the private

distribution companies. Kejriwal expects these funds to lead to reductions in tariffs. We will know soon from the CAG whether there is any reality to this expectation. But this is one instance among many more to come, where the reality of governance will moderate political promises.

Over the last few months that Modi has campaigned to be Prime Minister of India, he has moved increasingly to the communal centre. His economics was always pro-industry, but he is now making it part of a coordinated set of policies. For instance he has dealt with demographic change, by promoting urbanization, urban housing and infrastructure, more educational institutions and improved quality, scholarships for higher education, and massive skills development programmes. In contrast the Aap and Kejriwal have not even touched on the subject.

Agricultural policies are another major area that need coordinated attention. Kejriwal has nothing to say except perhaps in praise of rural living. Pricing and marketing policies, agricultural infrastructure development, need radical changes. Kejriwal and Aap have no ideas on these. Similar is the need for foreign direct investment. Kejriwal talks of reducing black money and money laundering, no doubt a laudable concern. But at the top of the country's economic priorities for development must be attracting FDI. As we make it difficult for foreign investment in more areas, we may lose out altogether.

A huge need in India is for responsible implementation of all programmes by governments, and in that perspective the need for accountability of the individual civil servant. We urgently need to reform our administration. Kejriwal despite being a former civil servant, has no views.

These are only a few examples of the issues about which any responsible political party must have clear positions. If it expects to get into power, clarity on these issues becomes more essential. Kejriwal is a long way away. His committees for drafting manifestos and programmes have hardly started to function. As the Leader, Kejriwal had not expressed his ideas on any of these issues.

One can hope that Aap will develop into a political party. However it remains a well-meaning set of individuals. They have to join to develop their ideas.

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