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"A New Dispensation?" by S L Rao

It will take time for the political parties to understand act upon lessons from the Delhi state elections for our political system. They must be seen in the context of demographic changes (rapid urbanization and the dominance of people below age 35), the viral spread of social media (internet and mobile phones), the consequent ease of communication, mobilizing large crowds of the like-minded, and fund raising from many in small amounts from each, along with the dense corruption, inflation, and slow growth of the economy. Delhi unlike most other states had only the two national parties. It was ready for a third political grouping.

A a new political party shot into prominence in Delhi. It is not based on inherited power, wealth, community, caste or language, but on the principle of integrity. It has rapidly learnt to use social media. It follows the first Obama campaign in collecting small donations from the many, little from the rich. These donors are in and outside India. It has mobilized thousands of volunteers to canvass voters, by telephone and in person. Technically proficient young people have collected enormous quantities of data about compositions of constituencies and details of voters. They are unpaid volunteers who have given of their time because of conviction.

Earlier political campaigning in India did it differently. It would identify constituencies and voters by caste, community and language, and select candidates and issues that would appeal to each large group. This method still persists with established national and regional

political parties. In the increasingly urbanized India of today, these appeals to these impulses join with appeals based on development initiatives, better infrastructure, combating inflation, and social schemes to ensure livelihoods, health care, etc. In rural constituencies, the old appeals by themselves are felt to be still valid, but increasingly combined with the new.

The AAm Aadmi Party (AAP) entered the Delhi elections on the platform of integrity and service. Its selected candidates were young, new to politics and political issues, unknown and were like any other educated middle-class Delhi resident. That so many won, was incredible to the Congress and the BJP. AAP candidates, who lost, did so with small numbers of votes. In the final analysis, a new political party whose candidates had no knowledge or experience in handling the issues in governance has emerged. Will it bring political transformation? Doubtless, the AAP itself is unsure how to proceed from here on. Its refusal to take power and form a minority government in Delhi reflects this uncertainty.

Regional parties with their local appeals (like Samajwadi, BSP, JDU, DMK, ADMK), will not die as a result. Their issues remain. Over time they might see declining numbers of seats in legislatures, if the AAP is able to organize itself as well in other states, or as is more likely, the national parties take some leaves out of the AAP book.

National parties will need to downplay dynastic relationships in selection of candidates. It will require training candidates on issues, governance and campaigning skills, before they are selected as candidates. It will demand a dramatic and very public change in political attitudes as traditional parties try to support 'honest' candidates, and oppose policies and actions that are socially or economically suspect. It will require strict attention to law and order. For instance, the police must be released from most ceremonial and VIP duties. Government servants must have individual accountability

and tenures in their jobs so that they are there long enough to perform and are seen to do so. It will disqualify politicians from elections if they have been in jail for unlawful (not political) actions, speed up all investigations and make punishments for all white collar crimes more severe. Many other ideas to improve transparency and integrity in government are already in the public domain and must be introduced. Elected representatives must know what needs to be done to improve peoples' lives. If this sounds like a pipe dream, at least some of these might become part of the agenda of established political parties. These will be AAP effects.

Led by the Congress, established political parties have introduced expensive welfare schemes, poorly implemented and leading to huge losses from diversion of government funds. The AAP has made similar unrealistic promises in Delhi. Sharp reductions in electricity tariffs at a time when all costs are rising and particularly of coal and gas, are unachievable promises. Guaranteeing free daily supply of 700 liters of water to each individual is another unreal promise. If the AAP had said that it would go all out to curb thefts of electricity, or improve efficiencies, or get workers to work better, or clean the Yamuna River, enforce rain water harvesting, and stop unrestricted use of bore wells, that would have been a realistic programme for governance. By making such promises. AAP lives in an economic cloud cuckoo land.

The focus of government expenditures must be on investment, implemented effectively, not on massive freebies for all. Handouts like farmers' loan write-offs or massive employment guarantee schemes must be replaced by asset construction to help agricultural and rural development. State-owned enterprises owned by central and state governments are inefficient and require government support in most cases. They serve to give jobs to bureaucrats and perquisites to politicians. Air India, FCI and Coal India at the Centre are examples of drains on government revenues because of inefficiencies. They also drain the economy. State governments own enterprises that are even

worse off but give legislators who do not become Ministers a free car, driver, entertainment account, etc, at the cost of the enterprise, and give top jobs in the enterprises to bureaucrats. The AAP has adopted the freebie and state control mindsets of the Congress party. Even if it could form a government, it will fail because its promises are not implementable.

Over 90% of electricity investments and perhaps 70% of oil and gas (exploration, production, refining and distribution) are owned by central and state governments. There is huge inefficiency, theft, corruption, and low productivity. Essential for growth and household comfort, it is an obvious target for populist sops by everyone (including AAP). Free electricity to farmers, subsidized diesel, kerosene and gas, tolerance of large-scale theft of electricity, undisciplined employees, colluding with thieves, are features of every government owned electricity enterprise or schemes for cheap kerosene or diesel. Coal India, uses backward technology, is inefficient, tolerates massive thefts, and cannot meet contractual commitments. In oil and gas, government officials collude to give huge favours to private licensees. These losses and subsidies drain government budgets.

But support to the very poor to improve nutrition, health and education is vital. It must be carefully planned, implemented and monitored to prevent waste.

“AAP” is not talking of changing from a culture of state control. It will not favour private owners but has no plan to prevent inefficiencies of government ownership. It is unlikely, given its promises and the background of its founders, to change the work culture in governments and make government servants more accountable and transparent. In its starting months it might reduce public tolerance of corruption and inefficiency that national and regional political parties have nurtured.

But the starting euphoria will go as inefficiencies and shortages will continue.

Our hope must be that the shock of the AAP performance in Delhi will bring changes in existing national parties. If that happens, the brief life of AAP would have served a purpose.

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