

What the “Common Man Party” victory in Delhi means for politics everywhere

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***Mukulika Banerjee** reflects on the Aam Aadmi Party’s landslide victory in the Delhi Assembly Elections and argues that it challenges the perception that politics is by definition a dirty and selfish game. At the same time, she acknowledges that the AAP is on its second chance and will face an uphill struggle to meet voter expectations without falling foul of cynics and political opponents.*



Yesterday, in a small but significant election in the world’s largest democracy, a new party vanquished India’s mighty ruling party and successfully challenged all it stands for. The Aam Aadmi Party (‘Common Man Party’) won an unprecedented 67 out of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly. The BJP, led by Prime Minister Modi, won just 3 seats, and the venerable Congress Party none. On a high turnout of 67% (the highest ever for a Delhi election), AAP got 54% of the votes, an increase 30% since the elections last year.

But this victory is about far more than unusual numbers.

The Aam Aadmi Party was formed in 2012 to be a political party with a difference. It grew out of a nationwide anti-corruption movement that named and shamed corporate houses, politicians and political parties that worked in collusion and robbed the exchequer and the common man through tax evasion, nepotism and violence.

To take this fight to another level, and in recognition of the limits of agitation in influencing established power structures, AAP was formed to fight against the three Cs – corruption, criminality and cronyism – through elections and democratic processes. AAP vowed to provide clean governance, transparency and honesty instead.

So the victory of the AAP is a not just that of another political party, but of an idea, a vision, based on another three Cs – conscience, commitment and courage – all manifested in AAP’s willingness to take on the most powerful and intimidating individuals in the country. This vision challenges the view that politics is by definition a dirty selfish game and asserts that selflessness and purity of intention is still possible in politics. A radical idea that will have much international resonance.

AAP chose the humble broom as its election symbol to send out a clear message about clean government. Significantly, AAP’s broom is the simple bundle of rushes used by Indians all over the country who bend their backs low to sweep. As such, it speaks of both humility and the dignity of labour. In contrast, the broom the BJP government adopted for its recent cleanliness campaigns is a long handled tool that makes for a good photo opportunity but is more of a signifier for the aggressive slum clearances required for ‘smart cities’.

AAP has also shown that it is possible to take on a ruling party like the BJP, a slick political machine that has not lost an election in a long time, and win it without recourse to large amounts of money, expensive advertisements or by offering cash or liquor to voters. It has shown that young people can be galvanised by this alternative way of doing politics into participation and activism. In a young country like India, where half the population is below the age of 25, this has profound implications for the future.

But with victory also comes the glare of expectation, responsibility and trepidation. The AAP is already on its second chance, having left the Delhi government after [just 49 days last year](#) in a fit of frustration, deeply disappointing the many who had voted for it then, and incurring reputational damage, seen in [weak performance](#) at the national elections last spring, which it was not obvious it could ever recover from. It simply cannot afford to make the same mistake again. Its political opponents will watch every move of the new government very closely for signs of incompetence or hypocrisy. So too will the many cynics among the educated who recognise the need for change but

expect AAP to falter. Many others in the middle class fear AAP will bring uncontrolled populism and anarchy to the streets.

Can AAP avoid all this, and deliver clean government and basic amenities in Delhi and thereby live up to the expectations of the millions of ordinary people who have carried this young party on their shoulders to victory? Can AAP vindicate those voters' willingness, against all experience, to suspend disbelief that all politicians are vile and corrupt? As I have often heard people say during my years of research on Indian voters: "pessimism is a luxury for those who can afford it – if you have nothing and are vulnerable, hope is your only asset". Today the political phenomenon that is AAP – with its shoestring financing and rag tag bunch of students, activists, professionals, workers, drivers, traders, poets, intellectuals, journalists, doctors, musicians, engineers – has been entrusted with the hope of the common man, the aam aadmi.

Yesterday marked a potential turning point, a victory for a new vision of politics that might inspire not just India, but anywhere in the world where millions of people question the fairness of the status quo or the value of elections. Perhaps we can enjoy at least a few moments of optimism, before we hold our breath as AAP steps out on to the fragile and wind blown tightrope of government.

[Full disclosure: the Author's brother-in-law is a senior member of AAP, but her interest in Indian elections is longstanding and primarily as a social scientist.]

Cover image: Aam Admi poster on back of auto rickshaw. Credit: flickr/ [Joe Athialy](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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