

## Promises to keep: why AAP must form govt in Delhi

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AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal shows victory sign with party members Manish Sishodia, Prashant Bhushan, Yogendra Yadav and Kumar Vishwas in Delhi. (PTI)

The good first: anyone who cares about India should be rejoicing that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) managed to do what it did. I am a fan of Sheila Dikshit — she is surely one of the best Congress chief ministers in modern memory — and I wish it did not have to happen at her expense, but the sheer improbability of what the AAP achieved has to be celebrated.

Omar Abdullah, in a recent piece, gives the example of NT Rama Rao and the remarkable ride of the Telugu Desam Party — but it is very different to be the entrant in what was essentially a one-party state than when there is two-party competition.

To see this consider the choice of an AAP sympathiser in Delhi: whether it makes sense for him to turn that sympathy into a vote turns on what he thinks everyone else will do.

If all the BJP supporters continue to vote for the BJP but some Congress supporters like him waver and vote for the AAP, all that would happen is that BJP would end up winning, which, for him, is the worst possible outcome.

For it to make sense for him to give up on his old loyalties and switch to the AAP he needs have faith that enough BJP supporters are doing the same, unless the switch from the Congress is massive enough to give victory to the AAP on its own.

In a state where there is one dominant party like Andhra Pradesh (AP) in the early 1980s, by contrast, the choice is simple: I can vote for the dominant party (the Congress) or I could gamble on a new party. If it all works out and the new party wins, great; if not the Congress wins as usual. What do I have to lose by switching my vote?

The AAP was not the first group of well-meaning outsiders in politics. There have been several, and some, like the Loksatta in AP, under its remarkable leader, JP, are widely known and respected. But as far as I know, the Loksatta has never won more than one seat and my sense is that they never really believed that they could.

The AAP from the beginning made it clear that they were about changing policy and not being a symbol of purity in a corrupt world.

Equally importantly, they believed they could do it and they made sure their supporters knew that: this is what the endless street rallies and the many (deliberately intemperate?) public declarations and media moments were all about — staying in the spotlight, staying on message, staying with the boys. Arvind Kejriwal was schooled by Mamata Banerjee and not by JP.



This is why their supporters stuck with them, through the divorce with Anna, the many attempts by the two main parties to suggest that they were irrelevant (the one thing they agreed on), the occasional scandal (maybe that actually helped—it humanised them). This is why they could overcome the curse of the fresh entrant in a two-party system.

The bad next: It is impossible not be frightened by the thought that the Congress is really imploding. In Rajasthan they got less seats than they got 1977, in the aftermath of the Emergency.

In part this is punishment for being the incumbent in a year of high inflation and low growth, and in part a sense that the government at the Centre is both venal and inept, though my sense is that a NDA-led government would not have been very different.

But there is something else: the Congress looks lost and tired and just not very keen to win. Dikshit complained about how the party leadership did not support her, but my sense is that it was less a conspiracy and more just that they have forgotten how.

This is what Rahul Gandhi has been saying for the last year, when he talks about the need for renewal and how being out of power may not be such a bad thing. He may be right. But I worry that he may be over-optimistic about the loyalty of his partymen.

Unlike him, they are in politics because they want to be in power; they will stick with the Congress if they see a way for the Congress to come back to power soon enough. If not they will vanish into the night. This is what happened to the Congress in West Bengal. I fear that it could happen everywhere; perhaps I lack imagination but I cannot think of an Indian polity without the Grand Old Party to love or hate or just frame the conversation.

Finally, there is the stuff that makes my head hurt; am I for the AAP coming to power, or against? I will confess that I found their platform disturbingly populist.

Cheap electricity and abundant free water are exactly the things that government after government have promised and failed to deliver; why would a party that promises a new style of governance start with those? They may know something that I don't know, but I strongly suspect that they will not find it easy.

The pundits in the Press think that this is why the BJP wants them in power — to stick them with failed promises and normalise them. That would argue for staying out, so that the movement for good governance can have another day.

But there is another side of me that thinks that they should take it on — if they can do it, we will have a new set of heroes (and God knows we need them). If they fail, they can still openly acknowledge their failure and try to explain why.

Poor voters in India are very forgiving — what they cannot stand is the posturing and the lying. Good governance is a lot about setting realistic targets and for that we need to talk honestly about what is possible; perhaps this is the way to get there.

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(The views expressed by the author are personal)

- See more at: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/comment/analysis/promises-to-keep-why-aap-must-form-govt-in-delhi/article1-1164476.aspx#sthash.QN7WyPD1.dpuf>