ISSUE BRIEF

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THE RISE OF THE AAM AADMI PARTY IN INDIAN POLITICS

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)

In the past few election cycles, Indian politics has adopted a bipolar nature, with the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party being the main competitors vying for power. However, over the last few years, a new force has been emerging in Indian domestic politics. The rapid decline of the Congress has allowed numerous parties to capitalize on the misfortunes of India's oldest party. Various regional parties have been able to enhance their control in their respective states. However, the Aam Admi Party (AAP) became the first such party to expand its authority into two states. With a thumping victory in Punjab and the prospect of making serious inroads in Gujarati politics, the AAP is emerging as a force to be reckoned with.

A byproduct of the 2011 anti-corruption protests, the AAP has positioned itself on an anti-corruption populist platform. The party's leader, Arvind Kejriwal, a former employee of the Indian Revenue Service, is currently serving as the Chief Minister of Delhi. In fact, the party's performance over the last seven years has allowed it to expand its base. By prioritizing human development and tax reforms, the Delhi government has been able to drastically improve the state's public education system and created a conducive business environment. While the rise of the party may be considered to be a positive development in Indian politics, one must also look at a number of other factors such as Kejriwal's own use of Hindutva idioms and how his rise may actually play into the

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BJP's hands. In fact, in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, the AAP may cut into the vote share of the dilapidated INC and increase the likelihood of a third term for Narendra Modi.

The Politics of Developmentalism

One of the core programs of AAP in Delhi has been education reform. A revamp of public schools has allowed these institutions to outperform private schools in standardized tests. Moreover, the government has launched novel experiments such as introducing "happiness" classes in the curriculum. In 2018, Manish Sisodia, the Deputy CM of Delhi asked a group of Delhi's teachers, "We have given best-of-the-best professionals to industry. We have been successful so far. But have we been able to deliver best-of-the-best human beings to society, to the nation?"[1]

Between 2015 and 2021, the state has spent about 769 billion rupees on the 1037 schools it administers. This amount is double of what the state's governments spent in the seven years before AAP took the reins of government.[2] In fact, Delhi's reforms have been so successful that other states are mulling over adopting a similar blueprint for education and healthcare reform.[3]

Another key tenet of the AAP's governance model has been reforming tax collection. From 2014-15 to 2021-22, the revenue of the Delhi government has more than doubled, despite the fact that no new taxes have been levied for the past seven years.[4] Revenue collection has drastically increased as the government has prevented state institutions from carrying out punitive raids that harass traders and businessmen, as well as increasing VAT collection by reducing the tax rate.[5] In conjunction with public service reforms, such measures have increased the confidence of the business community in the state government, as they believe that the tax that they pay will be used in a substantive manner.

1 Vidhi Doshi, "India, Which Has Long Focused on Student Success, Now Offers 'Happiness' Classes - The Washington Post," The Washington Post, July 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-which-has-long-focused-on-student-success-now-offers-happiness-classes/2018/07/21/203f2f10-8466-11e8-9e06-4db52ac42e05_story.html.

2 Karan Deep Singh, "How India's Capital Is Fixing Its Schools - The New York Times," The New York Times, August 16, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/16/world/asia/india-delhi-schools.html.

3 "Adopt Delhi Education & Health Models in All States, Says Telangana CM K Chandrashekar Rao," *The Times of India*, May 22, 2022, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/adopt-delhi-edu-health-models-in-all-states-kcr/articleshow/91715424.cms.

4 "Revenue and Budget – Revenue | Aam Aadmi Party," February 15, 2022, https://aamaadmiparty.org/revenue-and-budget-revenue/.

5 Ibid.

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The BJP's Approach towards the AAP

Recently, the BJP has been targeting AAP officeholders by utilizing anti-corruption institutions to pull these members in for questioning.[6] Furthermore, the party has alleged that the BJP is attempting to bribe its lawmakers to defect in order to create an untenable situation for the AAP in Punjab.[7] However, the BJP has not been able to directly target the sustainability of the AAP's public service reforms. There is a clear indication that their current tactics are a byproduct of the sense of anxiety prevalent in the BJP's ranks over the rapid rise of the party. However, the AAP's rise in Gujarat may play into the BJP's hands. By turning the elections into a triangular contest, the AAP's rise makes it look increasingly likely that the BJP will continue to maintain its stranglehold over the state, as the AAP may very likely cut into the Congress' vote bank.

The BJP is also worried by the AAP's rightward turn. Kejriwal has been using the vocabulary of the RSS and Hindutva politics in order to challenge the BJP's monopoly over the Hindu vote. Measures such as sponsoring pilgrimages to Ayodhya for senior citizens are meant to increase the party's popularity in the Hindi belt.[8] Furthermore, Kejriwal is attempting to exploit differences between the RSS and the BJP. The huge personality cult of Narendra Modi has in fact weakened the patriarchal control that the *Sangh* has historically enjoyed over the BJP. It is also important to remember that the RSS played a key role in the anti-corruption movement in 2011 that had tarnished the reputation of the Indian National Congress.[9]

Taking these considerations into account, it remains to be seen what the AAP's rise means for the future of India's politics. On one hand, the AAP is emerging as an alternative to the BJP by positioning itself on a platform of adherence to constitutionalism and prioritizing development. At the same time, the populist politics of Arvind Kejriwal may prevent other parties from aligning with him in order to create a united platform to take on the BJP in 2024. In fact, by preying on the Congress' misfortunes, the AAP may aid the BJP in its quest for political domination.

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6 "'More AAP MLAs Will Be Arrested, It Seems..': Kejriwal after Amanatullah's Arrest," Hindustan Times, September 17, 2022, https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/more-aap-mlas-will-be-arrested-it-seems-kejriwal-after-amanatullah-s-arrest-101663404848384.html.

7 "40 MLAs Were Targeted by BJP with Offer of ₹20 Crore Each: AAP," *The Hindu*, August 25, 2022, sec. India, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/40-mlas-were-targeted-by-bjp-with-offer-of-rs-20-crore-each-aap/article65809613.ece.

8 Alishan Jafri and Apoorvanand, "Ayodhya and AAP: How Kejriwal Is Normalising Hindutva as a Way of Living," The Wire, December 7, 2021, https://thewire.in/politics/ayodhya-aap-arvind-kejriwal-hindutva-normalise.

9 Vivek Deshpande, "Why Arvind Kejriwal Is Borrowing the RSS Vocabulary of Supremacist Nationalism," Text, Scroll.in (https://scroll.in, September 10, 2022), https://scroll.in/article/1032484/why-arvind-kejriwals-soft-hindutva-and-supremacist-nationalism-is-music-to-rss-ears.

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