

CONGRESS AND BJP STRIVE AMIDST UPCOMING ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN MADHYA PRADESH

By
Muhammad Ahmad Khan
Research Associate
India Study Centre (ISC), ISSI

Edited by
Malik Qasim Mustafa

July 26, 2023

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



Madhya Pradesh (MP) state assembly's tenure will be completed in January 2024. Before that, the state must choose the upcoming assembly members through elections that are supposed to happen in November this year. However, the exact date is still to be finalized by the government. Both Indian National Congress (INC) and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) are expecting their dominance based on socio-political and economic dynamics in MP. After securing an impressive majority in the Karnataka state elections in May, INC is more confident and has included in its slogan to repeat the same enthusiasm in Madhya Pradesh also. The BJP officials, for their part, negate any such implications of Karnataka's election results in MP. Socio-economic and political dynamics of each state vary. Therefore, it is important not to extrapolate much from a previous instance. MP election results will depend upon taking into account multiple factors ranging from economic, ethnic, and social factors to the performance of the current BJP government under Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan.

Madhya Pradesh is the second largest state of India in terms of area and contributes significantly to political aspects. The 7.27 crore population is divided into Hindus at 90.89%, Muslims at 6.57%, Jains at 0.78%, and 0.83%. MP is the Indian state with the most tribal population that also carries the most reserved seats in the state assembly compared to others. As of now, the state legislative

assembly has 230 seats, of which 35 are reserved for scheduled castes and 47 for scheduled tribes.¹ The state contributes 29 seats in the Lok Sabha elections making it one of the politically significant states in India. Although BJP and INC remain the dominant political parties in the state, there are other parties as well including the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) that somehow also play a role in determining state politics.

Historical analysis shows BJP's dominance in Madhya Pradesh in recent decades. Since 2003, BJP has remained in power except in 2019 when Congress defeated the ruling party but due to intra-party tensions, lost to BJP again. The table below shows election results since establishing Madhya Pradesh as a separate state in 1956 and the commencement of the state assembly election in 1957.

Madhya Pradesh Legislative Election Results, 1957-2018²

Party	1957	1962	1967	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2018
BJS/BJP		41	78	48	230	60	58	220	117	119	173	143	165	109
Congress	232	142	167	220	84	246	250	56	174	172	38	71	58	114
BSP								2	11	11	2	7	4	2
PSP	12	33	9											

In 2018 Congress after an arduous competition secured a majority with the help of one *Samajwadi Party* (SP) MLA, 2 BSP MLAs, and 4 independent MLAs. But due to an internal power tussle in the party, Jyotiraditya Scindia led a coup against Kamal Nath taking 22 MLAs with him to BJP. With that, BJP again established its rule and Shivraj Singh Chauhan became Chief Minister again. Scindia is an influential politician in MP and was expecting a CMship as he had mentioned in his speeches earlier. Congress, feeling betrayed at Scindia joining BJP, resolves to sweep BJP in the upcoming elections. In May INC defeated BJP single-handedly in Karnataka and expects the same enthusiasm from the electorate in MP also. Lokendra Singh, a pro-RSS political analyst in MP, acknowledged that “the congress no doubt has got a psychological edge. There had been a glow of energy and enthusiasm across the party and they will be able to work diligently. In this sense, the Congress has the upper hand.”³ A recent ABP C-voter pre-election survey said that both parties are in intense competition but Congress looks one step ahead. According to the poll findings, BJP will be able to secure 106-118

¹ As per the official data, there are 48 scheduled castes and 46 scheduled tribes in Madhya Pradesh. “List of Scheduled Castes,” Department of Social Justice and Empowerment, <https://socialjustice.gov.in/common/76750>.

² BJS stands for Bhartiya Jana Sangh, the predecessor of BJP that was established in 1951 and stopped working in 1977. BSP stands for Bahujan Samaj Party while PSP stands for Praja Socialist Party that was established in 1952 and worked till 1972. In earlier days, PSP was the only opposition party to INC in Madhya Pradesh; Prabhaskar K Dutta, “Madhya Pradesh Assembly Election: What Past Polls Indicate,” *India Today*, November 28, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/story/full-majority-how-madhya-pradesh-has-voted-in-past-assembly-elections-1397770-2018-11-28>.

³ Deepak Goswami, “Will the BJP's Karnataka Loss Have an Impact on Elections in Madhya Pradesh?” *The Wire*, June 1, 2023, <https://thewire.in/politics/will-the-bjps-karnataka-loss-have-an-impact-on-elections-in-madhya-pradesh>.

votes, while Congress may secure 108-120 votes with BSP standing at 1-4 seats in the assembly elections.⁴

As the time of the election draws closer, both BJP and Congress come up with pledges for public welfare. Congress announced *Nari Samman Yojna* to empower women, committing to give Rs 1500 to every registered woman and subsidized gas cylinders at Rs 500. The scheme was earlier initiated by Congress SM Kamalnath but due to BJP sweeping his government, later announced its initiative *Chief Minister Ladli Behna Yojna* that provided Rs 1000 to every woman between age 23 to 60.⁵ Besides these social welfare schemes, other factors will likely contribute decisively to MP elections. The most prominent among those is the role of tribal affiliations. MP assembly has 82 reserved seats for scheduled tribes and scheduled castes combined, as the former makes 21.1% while the latter forms 15.6% of the total state population.

Since 2003, BJP has secured victory in these tribal majority regions. The major reason behind this tribal tilt towards BJP is the work of *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) at the grassroots level. The ideological organization RSS is working along with the affiliated organization *Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad*. In the recent shameful incident of a man affiliated with BJP urinating over a member of the Kol community which is the third largest tribal community after Bhils and Gonds in the state, BJP came in highly negative light.⁶ Congress immediately pounced to criticize the deplorable episode. The government arrested the man and condemned the action. To mitigate the damage in the wake of upcoming elections, CM Chauhan called the victim to his office and apologized to him and his wife. There, he washed the victim's feet to portray that, for BJP, "the public is God".⁷ The incident, amidst election hype, could batter BJP vote bank in tribal areas, but timely mitigation from the government seems to have calmed the situation.

Farmers, sometimes deprived of a basic welfare system for them, criticize the BJP government as happened in November last year when farmers organized a rally against Chauhan for not addressing

⁴ "ABP-CVoter Opinion Poll: Close Contest on Cards Again in Madhya Pradesh Congress Marginally Ahead of BJP," ABP Live, <https://news.abplive.com/elections/abp-cvoter-survey-madhya-pradesh-election-2023-close-contest-congress-bjp-kamal-nath-shivraj-1611922>.

⁵ "Madhya Pradesh Nari Samman Yojana," Govt Schemes India, May 11, 2023, <https://govtschemes.in/madhya-pradesh-nari-samman-yojana#gsc.tab=0>.

⁶ Milind Ghatwai, "Madhya Pradesh Assembly Polls 2023: Will Urination Episode Undo BJP's Tribal Outreach?" *India Today*, July 6, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/opinion-columns/story/opinion-madhya-pradesh-assembly-polls-2023-will-urination-episode-undo-bjps-tribal-outreach-2402659-2023-07-06>.

⁷ "MP CM Chivraj Singh Chouhan Washes Feet of Urination Incident Victim, apologises to him," *Time of India*, July 6, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bhopal/mp-cm-shivraj-singh-chouhan-washes-feet-of-urination-incident-victim-apologises-to-him/articleshow/101535780.cms>.

their issues.⁸ However, with elections approaching nearer, BJP is showering cash for the farmers. In June, at *Mukhyamantari Kisan Samman Nidhi*, Chouhan increased the amount given to farmers' welfare from Rs 4,000 to Rs 6,000. Side by side, farmers are also getting benefits of *PM Kissan Samman Nidhi* which also ensures them Rs 6000 per year.⁹

Hitherto, it was observed that an anti-incumbency campaign against Chouhan will negatively impact BJP's vote bank in MP, but a C-Voter survey concluded that around 65% of the people are highly or moderately satisfied with Chouhan's government, while 67% are in favor of Kamal Nath.¹⁰ So both leaders are in a stiff competition. In MP, the 'Hindutva' ideology is not much supported as showed the survey. The state has a huge tribal population, while the ultra-nationalist 'Hindutva' ideology completely disengages these scheduled tribes and castes. So, people in the state disfavor such hyper-nationalism and BJP is avoiding any blunder to make in its name.

To conclude, it is pertinent to recognize the local dynamics ranging from scheduled tribes and castes' roles to the farmers and Chouhan's policies in Madhya Pradesh. Both parties, BJP and Congress, are on somehow equal footing. Both parties will try to take bigger initiative at this moment to secure more public support. Some supporters who had left Congress following the Scindia coup, have returned.¹¹ How much this will influence INC's vote bank is still to be gauged.

⁸ Iram Siddique, "Madhya Pradesh Farmers Criticises Shivraj Singh Chouhan Government for non-redressal of their Issues," *The Indian Express*, November 23, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bhopal/madhya-pradesh-farmers-criticise-shivraj-singh-chouhan-govt-for-non-redressal-of-their-issues-8283959/>.

⁹ Sravani Sarkar, "BJP Government Rains Cash Incentive in Poll-bound Madhya Pradesh," *The Week*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2023/06/13/bjp-government-rains-cash-incentives-in-poll-bound-madhya-pradesh.html>.

¹⁰ Aditya Menon, "Who's Winnig in Madhya Pradesh: BJP or Congress?" *The Quint*, 29 June 2023, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/madhya-pradesh-election-survey-cvoter-shivraj-chouhan-kamal-nath-bjp-congress#read-more>.

¹¹ Sayantani Biswas, "New Twists to MP Poll Battle? Scindia Supporters Returns to Congress in 400 car Convoy Ahead of Assembly Elections," *Mint*, June 15, 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/madhya-pradesh-polls-2023-scindia-supporter-returns-to-congress-in-a-year-of-joining-bjp-this-time-in-400-car-convoy-11686818522186.html>.