

The Yogi gamble

Adityanath's elevation as UP CM is a move of radical novelty — and political risk



Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. (Express photo by Vishal Srivastav)

A recent visit to India made it clear that the Uttar Pradesh elections stunned not only the observer and the reporter, but also the political class. Waves are normally noisy: UP 2017 introduces a new term in our political lexicon — silent wave. It rolled by without anyone noticing it.

The results raise two larger questions: Can the Muslim vote be rendered electorally irrelevant in India's democracy? And, under what conditions would [Narendra Modi](#), or the BJP, pick a non-RSS man to head a BJP government? The first question is connected to the idea of Hindu

consolidation. The second is significant because Yogi Adityanath, UP's new chief minister, has never been in the RSS, the mother organisation of Hindu nationalism. BJP leaders with an RSS background have been the party's default choice for heading governments.

The BJP's UP strategy acquires tremendous clarity in retrospect — it calculated that if it ignored Muslims, Yadav OBCs and Jatav Dalits, it would still be left with roughly 60 per cent of UP's electorate, consisting of upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits. In a three-cornered contest, roughly 70 per cent of this 60 per cent — yielding 40-42 per cent of the total vote — was all that the BJP needed to win. Votes from other communities, if any, would be a bonus. That is why it did not pick a single Muslim candidate to contest the elections.

Since the BJP's UP vote was roughly similar in the 2014 parliamentary elections, we need to ask whether the pattern will be repeated in the 2019 general election. Can the BJP's vote stabilise around 40 per cent in UP?

Unless a Bihar-style grand alliance of the SP, BSP and Congress can come about, turning the UP contest bi-polar and requiring nearly 50 per cent of the state's vote for victory, the BJP's vote stabilising at 40 per cent may well inaugurate a Gujarat 2.0, meaning a repeat of what happened in Gujarat, though on a vastly bigger scale. UP is more than three times larger than Gujarat. The BJP has been in power in Gujarat for nearly two decades. Should that happen in UP, it could transform Indian politics.

Comprising only 10 per cent of Gujarat's population, Muslims can, with relative ease, be made electorally irrelevant there. But Muslims are 20 per cent of UP's population; if they became politically inconsequential, it would be an unprecedented electoral development — it has never happened before. Several BJP state units would start thinking about how to make Muslim votes

entirely peripheral via Hindu consolidation.

Of course, a Gujarat 2.0 may not happen in UP. Gujarat 1.0 (Gujarat after 2002) was not only about Hindu nationalism, but also high economic growth. An economic backwater, UP's massive growth elevation cannot be assumed. It is the Hindu domination of Gujarat that might be replicated in UP, not economic growth.

That is exactly why Yogi Adityanath's appointment acquires enormous significance. Like Modi, Hindu nationalism is his ideological pivot, but unlike Modi, the Yogi was never in the RSS, which has produced virtually all the BJP chief ministers of recent years. He is a Hindu cleric, a monk, a sadhu, with a private vigilante group. He heads a religious order in Gorakhpur. Many of India's politicians, including [Mahatma Gandhi](#), have been religious, but no Indian state in modern times has been ruled by the leader of a religious order or institution. The radical novelty of the move has not been adequately noted.

What do we know about sadhus in politics? In his MIT PhD thesis, now a book, *When the Saints Go Marching In*, Rajesh Pradhan has produced the most systematic research on sadhus in recent years. During 1993-96, Pradhan followed 30 sadhus, probing why they got involved in the Ayodhya movement. He returned to 10 in 2008. His interviewees included Mahant Avidyanath, Adityanath's mentor in Gorakhpur. He met the Yogi, but he was not a major figure at the time.

Two of Pradhan's conclusions are noteworthy: First, sadhus believe in spiritual, not political, discipline. They get involved in politics to serve a larger religious objective, not to serve a political party. Second, they are used to followers; they do not follow political leaders. Sticking to political parties goes against their spiritual mission.

Adityanath may have won his parliamentary seat on a BJP ticket five times,

but he is not a Modi follower. Nor has he held organisational positions within the BJP. Indeed, he has often accused the BJP of diluting ideological purity. His causes are of the extreme cultural right; reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism; attacking what he calls “love jihad” (romances between Muslim men and Hindu women); the elimination of beef-eating and slaughter houses. Instead of opposing the lynching of a Muslim man by a mob on the suspicion of storing beef in Dadri, he argued that the Muslim family be severely punished. Finally, like much of the cultural right, he has never outlined a coherent economic vision.

So, why has Modi picked him as UP’s head of government? He was not a CM candidate in the campaign. Modi does not subject himself to questioning by the press, so all we can do is speculate. Here are three political hypotheses worth considering.

First, for a second term, Modi needs to win 70 seats again in UP in the 2019 parliamentary elections, especially because, compared to 2014, the BJP’s tally in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Chhattisgarh might go down. The Yogi may not be as popular as Modi, but he is popular enough to hurt him in 15-20 seats in eastern UP, if not more. That will be electorally costly.

Second, Modi needs to rein in the party’s extreme wing. Elevating the Yogi can appease this wing, with the attendant hope that being in power will induce responsible conduct. The assumption is that appeasement incorporates; it does not embolden further. Third, Modi is so politically confident by now that he thinks he can tame a monk and his followers, should they defy him.

Whatever the intention, this gamble can go seriously wrong. Will the Yogi moderate? Will his vigilante force? Will Adityanath follow political, not spiritual, discipline? Will UP’s economy be reformed? The answers are wholly

unclear.

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