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Kejriwal's Image Crisis, combined with AAP's Isolationist Strategy in Delhi Election, Backfires

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ABSTRACT

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The BJP has replaced the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the recent assembly election, securing a thumping majority with 48, seats, while AAP trailed behind with 22. An analysis of ground realities and Election Commission data reveals that AAP's losses stemmed largely from its failure to align with the Congress. Although the Congress and the AAP were part of the grand I.N.D.I.A alliance formed before 2024, general elections, they contested separately in the assembly election, rendering the alliance largely symbolic. Furthermore the BJP effectively used the slogan "Sheesh Mahal" to tarnish Kejriwal's "Aam Admi" image. Their repeated question "An aam admi lives in sheeshmahal, how common is he really? was aimed at portraying Kejriwal as hypocritical and elitist. This narrative, which contradicted his common persona, resonated with the masses.

Introduction

In a surprising yet telling turn of events, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) lost its grip in the recent assembly elections, making way for a sweeping BJP victory with 48 seats. AAP, once seen as the voice of the common man, was reduced to just 22 seats. Behind the numbers lies a story of missed alliances and sharp

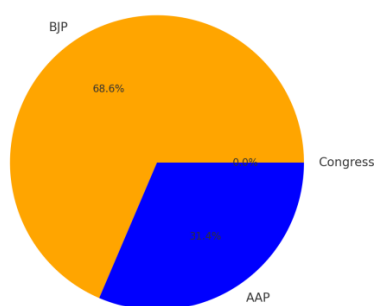
political messaging. Despite being part of the much-talked-about I.N.D.I.A. alliance with the Congress ahead of the 2024 general elections, the two parties ended up contesting separately, a move that confused voters and diluted the spirit of unity.

What perhaps hurt AAP even more was the BJP's focused campaign targeting Arvind Kejriwal's image. The repeated use of the "Sheesh Mahal" jibe questioning how a so-called 'common man' could live in such luxury struck a nerve. It painted Kejriwal as distant from the people he claimed to represent, and that narrative seemed to stick. This election, then, wasn't just about votes, it was about perception, trust, and the gap between image and reality.

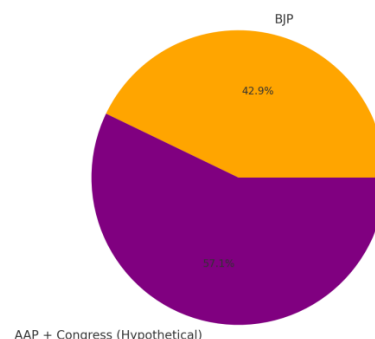
Objective of the study

- ❖ To assess the impact of image-related narratives and corruption allegations on voter perception of Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the Delhi Assembly elections, with specific reference to the "Sheesh Mahal" discourse.
- ❖ To measure the electoral effect of the absence of a pre-poll alliance between AAP and the Indian National Congress, focusing on vote fragmentation and seat outcomes in select Delhi constituencies.
- ❖ To evaluate the structural coherence and electoral viability of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance, using the Delhi Assembly election as a case study to infer implications for opposition unity in Bihar and West Bengal.

Actual 2025 Delhi Assembly Results



Hypothetical Results with AAP-Congress Alliance



BJP's Resurgence in Delhi:

After nearly 27 years, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has made a comeback in the Union Territory of Delhi by defeating the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in the recently held assembly election. AAP had come to power in 2013 as an angry anti-corruption crusader, emerging from the success of the India Against Corruption campaign. In its electoral debut, AAP won 28 out of 70 seats in the Delhi Assembly. Arvind Kejriwal was sworn in as Chief Minister, but the government lasted only 49 days.

In the 2015 assembly election, AAP secured a massive 55.3% vote share, winning 67 out of 70 seats. Again, in 2020, the party won 62 seats with a vote share of 53.57%. This time, however, the election saw a direct contest between the BJP and AAP, while the Congress remained on the fringes, failing to win a single seat, just as in the 2015 and 2020 elections.

Interestingly, the BJP had already won both the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections with overwhelming majorities, sweeping all seven parliamentary seats in Delhi. Yet, when it came to state elections, Delhiites repeatedly chose AAP to govern, with Arvind Kejriwal as their Chief Minister.ⁱ What made this election different was the perceived damage to AAP's image as "the party with a difference" and to Kejriwal's carefully crafted "Aam Aadmi" persona. The BJP strategically capitalized on this by highlighting allegations of corruption against AAP leaders, particularly relating to the now-scrapped excise policy and the lavish renovation of the Chief Minister's residence.

This narrative gained traction when Prime Minister Narendra Modi mocked Kejriwal's official residence, calling it a "*Sheesh Mahal*" (Royal Palace). During BJP rallies, replicas of the renovated bungalow were even showcased as selfie points, visually reinforcing the party's message. These symbolic attacks struck at the core of AAP's brand and contributed to its electoral setback.ⁱⁱ

Freebies, Corruption, and a Fading Image: How BJP Turned the Tables on AAP

In the past, the BJP harshly criticized AAP for offering freebies, calling it "*reckless populism*" and alleging that such schemes were a burden on taxpayers. But in this election, the BJP appeared to shift its stance. It embraced the concept of welfare and assured voters that none of AAP's existing schemes would be rolled back.

In an interview with *Frontline*, BJP Vice-President Baijayant Jay Panda clearly stated that his party has no issue with welfare schemes. He said, "It's our party (BJP) that runs several welfare programmes,"

citing examples like the *Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana* the world's largest food aid programme and *Ayushman Bharat*, which he described as the world's most extensive health safety net. "The difference," he added, "is that we deliver without corruption, whereas in Delhi, the AAP government used freebies as a pretext to siphon off thousands of crores and to build a *Sheesh Mahal* (Grand Palace) for their leader."ⁱⁱⁱ

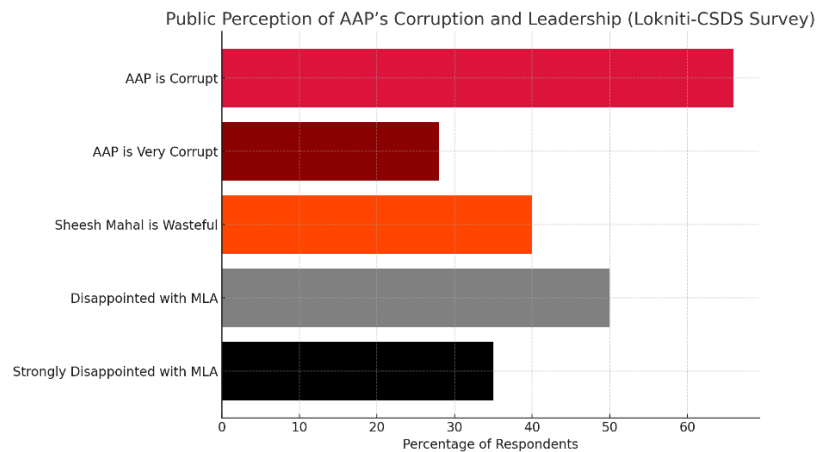
The damage wasn't just rhetorical it showed in the results. Most of AAP's senior leaders who were jailed during recent controversies ended up losing their seats. Even Arvind Kejriwal, the party's convener and face of its movement, failed to retain his seat. Former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, ex-minister Satyendra Jain, and prominent leaders like Somnath Bharti, Saurabh Bhardwaj, Rakhi Birla, and Durgesh Pathak all suffered significant and humiliating defeats. Among the few who managed to survive were Atishi, Gopal Rai, and Imran Hussain but the setback for AAP was unmistakable.

The BJP's relentless and targeted attacks on AAP, focusing on corruption charges, scandals, jail terms, and leadership hypocrisy, struck a chord with voters. The strategy worked, handing the BJP a decisive victory.

In a recent interview with Karan Thapar on *The Wire*, political analyst Yogendra Yadav, who was also a founding member of AAP, offered a candid reflection. "The reason AAP was defeated," he said, "is because the calling card of anti-corruption and moral credibility that brought them into politics has faded over the past two to three years." He added that while voters may not fully believe Kejriwal and Sisodia were guilty in the liquor scam, "the idea that AAP was entirely clean no longer held up." The contrast between *what AAP once promised* and *what it eventually did* became too obvious to ignore.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents in the Lok Niti-CSDS survey viewed the AAP government as corrupt, with a little over one in four (28%) believing it to be *very* corrupt. Four out of every ten respondents saw the *Sheesh Mahal*, the term used by the BJP to describe the Chief Minister's residence revamp under the AAP government, as a symbol of wasteful expenditure.^{iv}

The incumbent MLAs also share part of the blame, as the survey revealed that half of the respondents were disappointed with the performance of their local representatives. More critically, nearly one in every three (35%) of those who expressed disappointment said they were *strongly* dissatisfied with their MLA's work.



With this victory in Delhi, the Modi-led BJP has completed a hat-trick of wins following the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. The party's emphatic victories in Maharashtra, Haryana, and now Delhi have defied the predictions of Modi-critical political analysts, who had suggested that dark clouds were gathering over his leadership after the general elections. However, Narendra Modi's powerful stage presence and magnetic persona continue to hold sway not only at the national level but also in regional contests across the country.^v

The I.N.D.I.A. Bloc: A Symbolic Alliance with Deep Cracks

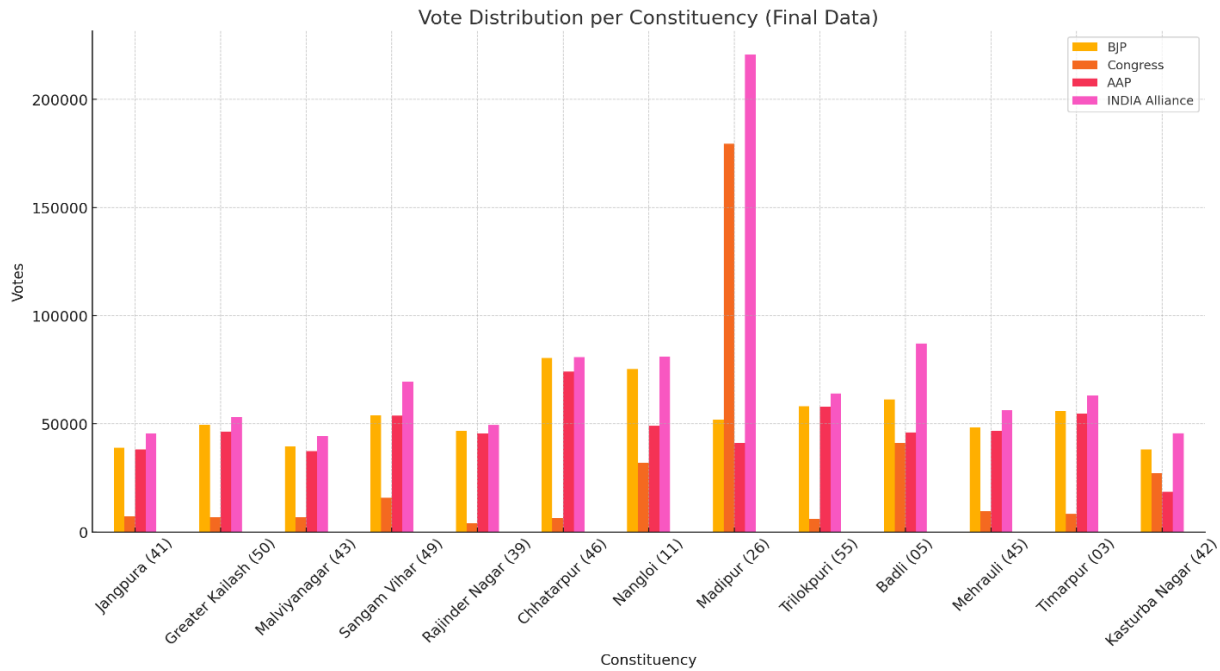
The I.N.D.I.A. bloc has increasingly come to be seen as a merely symbolic alliance. Its fissiparous tendencies and the lack of a coherent agenda have often been criticized as being united only by a shared opposition to Prime Minister Modi, which has prevented it from being held together, as evident in the Congress route in Haryana and the defeat of the MVA in Maharashtra. Rather than forming a united front, the INDIA alliance has become a token coalition lacking political cohesion.

One of the major roadblocks has been the problem of seat sharing in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. This issue has made it difficult for the bloc to evolve into a formidable force capable of countering the BJP's dominance. In states where regional parties hold considerable sway, they remain reluctant to concede seats to the Congress, which, in turn, hesitates to accommodate them. This mutual unwillingness undermines collective strategy and strength.

The rift became even more visible after AAP's poor performance in the recent assembly elections, which triggered fresh recrimination among alliance partners. The pragmatic necessity for unity only emerges when it's clear that defeating the BJP is impossible without forming alliances. Otherwise, entrenched self-interests dominate, and coalition efforts are abandoned.

The vote division within the INDIA alliance comprising the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) significantly benefited the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in many key Delhi constituencies. An analysis of 13 such seats reveals a powerful insight: had Congress and AAP contested jointly, the INDIA bloc could have secured 12 out of the 13 constituencies.

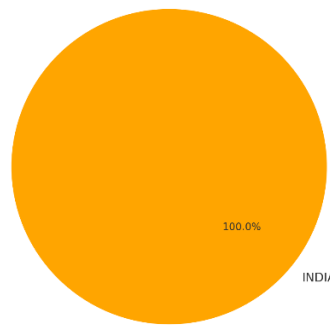
Let’s look at the scenario in detail:



After analyzing the final vote data from 13 constituencies, it is evident that a unified INDIA alliance (AAP + Congress) would have overwhelmed the BJP in nearly every seat, even in traditionally strong BJP areas.

This analysis reveals that a complete reversal could have occurred had AAP and Congress formed a pre-poll alliance. The BJP benefited from the vote-splitting phenomenon in every seat listed. In several constituencies, the INDIA alliance would not just win, but do so with substantial margins.

Potential Winning Party if INDIA Alliance Was United (Final Data)



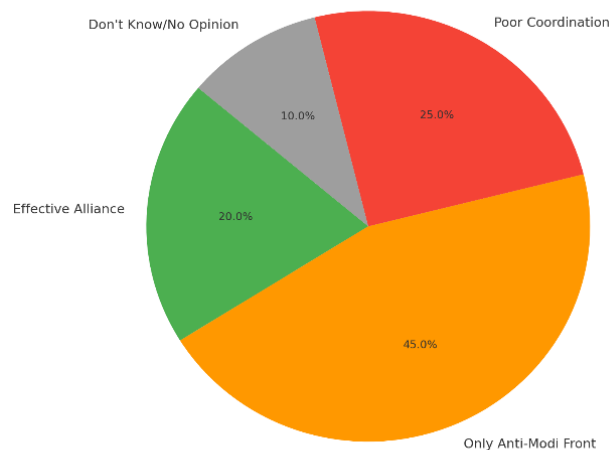
This data further reinforces the strategic importance of pre-poll alliances in multi-party contests. The BJP's dominance in these 13 seats was not due to higher support but rather due to the fragmentation of opposition votes. A united INDIA front would not just have made these seats competitive; it would have won nearly all of them.

Suppose INDIA hopes to challenge the BJP effectively in future elections, especially in Bihar and West Bengal. In that case, it must form pre-poll alliances, build trust among partners, and present a unified electoral front. The evidence is irrefutable: unity in voting equals electoral victory.

Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee, a key figure in the alliance, held a meeting with her party's MLAs in Kolkata following the Delhi setback. There, she openly criticized both Congress and AAP, blaming them for ruining the prospects of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc. "If the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Congress had contested together, the results in Delhi would have been very different," she remarked. She also noted that AAP didn't support Congress in Haryana, and Congress didn't back AAP in Delhi.

At the same time, Mamata Banerjee asserted that the Delhi election results would have no impact on the upcoming Bengal Assembly elections scheduled for next year. She firmly declared that the Trinamool Congress would contest the elections alone and sharply criticized the Congress for its lack of meaningful presence in West Bengal. This statement is a telling sign of the growing cracks within the opposition alliance and highlights the challenges of maintaining unity among its members.

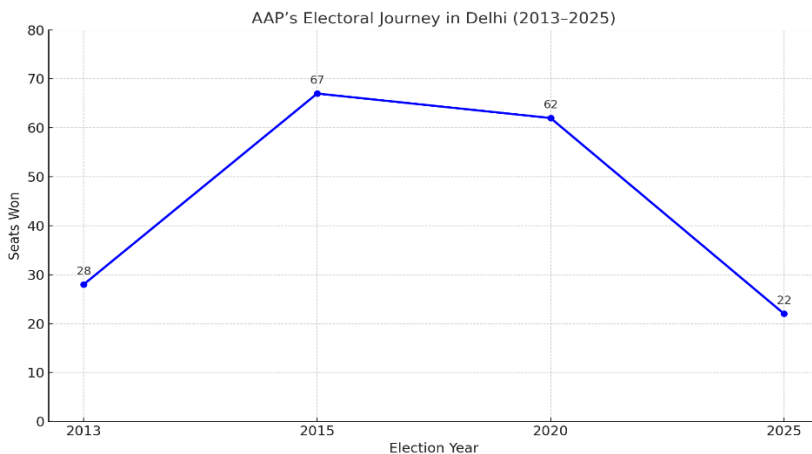
Public Opinion on I.N.D.I.A. Bloc's Effectiveness (Hypothetical Data)



The Crucial Role of I.N.D.I.A. Alliance in Bihar and West Bengal Elections

As Bihar and West Bengal gear up for the crucial upcoming elections, the importance of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance has never been more significant. In Bihar, where coalition politics has always played a decisive role, a united opposition front is essential to challenge the BJP juggernaut. Similarly, in West Bengal, where the BJP is trying to make deeper inroads, cooperation between the Trinamool Congress and other alliance partners could prevent a split in anti-BJP votes.

For the alliance to succeed, mutual respect and strategic seat-sharing are imperative. Regional parties must be given space to lead in their strongholds, while Congress must focus on consolidating its presence where it remains relevant. Avoiding public criticism of alliance partners, agreeing on a common minimum programme, and presenting a united leadership front will be a key to counter the BJP's dominance in both states. Without such understanding, there is risk of weakening alliance from within.



Conclusion

The outcome of the recent Delhi Assembly elections is more than just a routine shift in power; it marks a significant turning point in the political landscape of both the capital and the country. The BJP's sweeping victory and AAP's stunning collapse reflect not only the growing dissatisfaction among the electorate but also the weakening grip of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance, which has increasingly appeared fragmented and ideologically disjointed.

Once celebrated as the voice of the common man, the Aam Aadmi Party now finds itself on the back foot, accused of hypocrisy, corruption, and abandoning its original ideals. The "Sheesh Mahal" narrative, combined with the jailing of senior leaders and unfulfilled promises on core issues like electricity, water, and governance, effectively dismantled AAP's credibility. Meanwhile, the BJP managed to project a strong, coherent message blending welfare rhetoric with a crackdown on corruption and a disciplined political machinery. It adapted its strategy cleverly, even embracing the "freebies" it once condemned, thereby leaving little ideological space for AAP to claim as its own.

Equally telling is the state of the I.N.D.I.A. Bloc. Conceived as a grand coalition to counter the BJP's dominance, it has struggled to move beyond optics. The failure of Congress and AAP to collaborate in Delhi, mirrored by similar breakdowns in Haryana and Maharashtra, showcases the alliance's chronic inability to build consensus and share power. Leaders like Mamata Banerjee have publicly distanced themselves, asserting regional supremacy and criticizing Congress for lacking relevance in key states. Her declaration to go solo in Bengal, despite being part of the alliance, underlines the fragile, transactional nature of the coalition.

Looking ahead, the importance of the I.N.D.I.A. alliance in the upcoming elections in Bihar and West Bengal cannot be overstated. These are politically sensitive states where a divided opposition could once again give the BJP a clear path to victory. In Bihar, the RJD-Congress and other local parties' alliance will need to overcome internal rifts and present a united front. In Bengal, unless the Congress and Left make peace with TMC's regional dominance, the anti-BJP vote may splinter to the party's advantage. A realistic and respectful seat-sharing arrangement, a shared vision, and a commitment to stay united despite differences are essential if the alliance is to remain relevant.

At the heart of this political flux are the people Delhi voters have sent a clear message. They are no longer swayed by slogans or past glories. They want delivery, integrity, and responsiveness from those in power. While the BJP has gained the people's trust for now, its continued success will depend on how effectively it addresses the city's real challenges without leaning too heavily on propaganda or polarization.

In the end, Indian democracy remains vibrant and unpredictable. Alliances will come and go, but the voters' expectations for clean, efficient, and inclusive governance are here to stay. For any party or coalition aiming for long-term success, it is this silent demand from the ground that must guide their path forward

Endnote

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2. *ibid.*,
3. “Kejriwal is a spent Force” Interview with BJP national Vice-President, Baijayant Jay Panda, Frontline February 17, 2025
4. Shastri S,et, (2025, February 10) ‘Why Arvind Kejriwal lost: Pollution, lack of drinking water behind voter anger, two-thirds saw AAP as corrupt’, Indian Express, pp.4-5
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