

Disrupting traditional politics: The AAP's partnerships with civil society activists

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KumKum Dasgupta analyses the Aam Aadmi Party's decision to forge alliances with development professionals and activists during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

[Shefali Misra](#), an alumna of the London School of Economics, is a development professional with 14 years of experience. Misra, who specialises in women's issues, exclusion and poverty reduction, gave up her "lucrative job" at the United Nations last year to join politics. She applied for an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) ticket and was nominated to be the party's candidate from Uttar Pradesh's Sitapur constituency. Sitapur is one of India's poorest districts and the second worst-performing district in the state, ranking low on most socioeconomic indicators — gender, health, education and per capita income.



AAP candidate Soni Sori in Bastar, Chhattisgarh.

There are three reasons why Misra, who has been running an NGO in Sitapur since 2004, joined politics: first, India's entry into the [middle-income](#) category means a diminishing role for organisations like the UN in the future; second, politics would give her the opportunity to work on a wider set of issues and for a larger constituency than she has been able to do until now; and third, she believes that the increasing public demand for transparency in public affairs, an issue that has been espoused by AAP in its fight against graft and crony capitalism, would be the biggest game-changer in the Indian political scene.

The emergence of the [AAP](#) in October 2012 and its decision to contest 434 seats in the parliamentary elections provided a political platform for development professionals like Misra and activists like Medha Patkar (Narmada Bachao Andolan), [Rachna Dhingra](#) (Bhopal Group for Information), [Dr SP Udayakumar](#) (People's Movement Against Nuclear Energy), and tribal rights activist [Soni Sori](#), who was hounded by the Chhattisgarh government for

being a Maoist conduit. The AAP's [website](#) (which unfortunately has not been updated after the declaration of the names of the first 70 candidates) shows that 47 per cent of the party's tickets went to social workers and activists.

It made immense sense for the AAP to forge such alliance because the party could tap into popular social movements and take advantage of the popularity of the activists in the areas where they work. In fact, the party's leadership had been in touch with social activists since 2011. Activists and NGOs, meanwhile, responded to the AAP because the fledgling party's agenda of changing the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics matched their own, especially since many felt that the UPA government (despite the NAC) had "disregarded" the "genuine" causes they were fighting for and, in many cases, the government had "discredited" the activists, going to the extent of calling many of them "CIA agents".

But if exit polls are to be believed, the AAP does not seem to have gained very much from their decision to tie up with social sector organisations.

Civil society and political participation

Civil society participation is not new to India: social groups have been entering the political sphere since the 1960s. The first off the block, so to speak, were organisations representing scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, feminists and the green groups. The [Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan](#) (a non-party people's movement) based in Rajasthan backed candidates for [local body elections](#) in the state, but did not go beyond that political experiment.

The last decade and a half saw a further spurt in activism in the country because of serious governance failures and corruption. Several parts of the country, especially the resource-rich tribal areas, saw movements against state-backed corporate groups. In several other parts, there were movements against SEZs, mining companies and corporate takeover of land without proper compensation. Most of these struggles were backed by NGOs and according to one estimate today in India there is [one NGO for every 600 people](#).

The phenomenal rise of civil society groups meant that the state too would have to devise new rules for engaging with them. In some cases, the state itself became instrumental in supporting civil society groups, as seen in the [Bhagirdari system](#) (Delhi government) and the UPA's [National Advisory Council](#). In other cases, NGOs were brought in to augment the state's capacity to implement public policy in a decentralised manner and also serve as watchdogs. In fact, much of India's progressive legislation passed in recent years – the Right to Information Act, Right to Education Act, Right to Food Act and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act – was the product of strident civil society movements.

"Micro-powers"

Moises Naim of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's calls such NGOs and lobbyists "micro-powers" and writes that world over they are [disrupting traditional politics](#) and making life difficult for democratic and autocratic leaders. In India too we are seeing the beginning of "disruptions".

There is a school of thought that believes activism should be separate from party politics and that it is a suicidal move for civil society to give up its space for opposition to the state. This view is supported by some of AAP's candidates who believe that unless the party wins a sizeable number of seats (which looks unlikely in this election), it would be impossible to bring civil society issues to Parliament, given how the House has [functioned](#) in the last few sessions.

Despite the Election Commission's strictures and strict control of the elections, the truth is money and muscle power have played a role in polling. So have caste and religion. In such a scenario, activists know that winning will not be easy. Senior AAP member Yogendra Yadav admitted as much on 11 May when he said that [alternative politics](#) matters as much as seats for the AAP.

Whatever the outcome, the AAP did the right thing by engaging with civil society and giving them a political platform,

thereby disrupting the traditional political framework. Politics is a long-term game and the party's challenge now will be to keep the engagement intact (even if the results are not encouraging) and ensure, as Misra says, that politics is infused with a development orientation, which is sorely missing now.

About the Author

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