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Delhi chief Arvind Kejriwal resignation: game changer for India elections?

Mr. Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party rode a wave of anticorruption sentiment to power in Delhi last December. Now, he's resigning to focus on the national election.



Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal addresses his supporters before announcing his resignation from his party headquarters in New Delhi Feb. 14, 2014.

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By Nida Najar, Contributor

NEW DELHI

The future of Delhi's crusading anticorruption Aam Aadmi Party is in question after its leader, Arvind Kejriwal, resigned as the chief minister of Delhi and leader of the legislative assembly last night.

The immediate reason for his resignation was the mounting controversy over the Aam Aadmi Party's signature piece of legislation, the Jan Lokpal bill, which was meant to curb corruption in the state government. But analysts say that his decision to resign was a strategic move to allow the party to focus on the upcoming national elections.

Mr. Kejriwal's party, known as AAP, surged to prominence last winter after riding a wave of popular frustration over endemic corruption to surprisingly strong electoral results. The party could shake up the dynamics of the national election, which will see India elect its first new prime minister in 10 years.

In his resignation speech last night, Kejriwal pointed to lack of support for the anticorruption bill from the powerful Congress and Bharatiya Janata (BJP) parties and presented his resignation as a matter of principle.

Deepak Bajpai, a spokesperson for AAP, said today that the party will refocus their attention on the upcoming national elections in the lower parliament, or Lok Sabha. They will start by organizing demonstrations in 300 constituencies.

The decision signifies that the AAP is "looking for a long inning in Indian politics and they have to demonstrate to voters that they're not power hungry," says Sanjay Kumar, a professor at the New Delhi-based Centre for the Study of

Developing Societies and an election specialist. “They want to make a big impact throughout the country, and you have to do it by projecting yourself as different from other parties.”

49 days in power

Kejriwal became the chief minister of Delhi after the AAP, launched in late 2012, won 27 seats in an upset state assembly election in December. Throughout his 49 days of rule the party grappled with the transition from a young party known more for rhetoric and protest to one responsible for the actual business of government.

Kejriwal’s style of governance was anomalous — he ordered a criminal complaint against the chairman of Reliance Industries, India’s second-largest company, over alleged graft. He staged a protest with the public last month against the Delhi Police. And he tried to set up a regular “janta darbar,” or public hearing where the public could interact with their chief minister and air their complaints, but had to shut it down after the first attempt for fear of a stampede from the unexpectedly large crowd.

"If they had got about 18 to 20 seats, it may had been much better," said Mr. Kumar, who said that the party might learn more about governance as a minority in the parliament. “In the opposition, you don’t have too much responsibility. You can just shout.”

Local media reported on Saturday evening that the government was in the process of authorizing president's rule in Delhi for the first time in over two decades, meaning that the central government will step in to replace the departing Mr. Kejriwal until fresh elections can be held or a new part or coalition can form a government in the assembly.

National elections

It is unclear what impact the AAP can make on the national elections, which are determined by elections for the 543-seat Lok Sabha in April and May. The BJP looks poised to capitalize on a strong anti-incumbency mood across the country and it's widely expected that their leader, Narendra Modi, will be the next prime minister. But the AAP could play a significant role as a strong opposition voice in parliament after elections. [**Editor's note:** *Due to an editing error, the original version of this story misspelled Mr. Modi's first name.*]

Mr. Kumar estimates the party can win 12 Lok Sabha seats, but said that things could change depending how well the public took to Kejriwal's resignation and subsequent campaigning.

Volunteers gathered outside of Aam Aadmi's headquarters in central Delhi after the announcement were mostly supportive of Kejriwal's decision to resign.

"It was the best decision at this moment," said Vijay Singh, a chemist who joined the party as a volunteer six months ago. "We don't want to be with the government if it is corrupt."

As for the future, he is optimistic about the party's chances.

"We will fight this election, we will speak to the people, and we will prove we're going in the right direction," he said.

Though no one is predicting dominance in the upcoming elections — there is limited time and resources, especially to gain rural voters — some said that the party would make its presence as an opposition voice felt.

"This Lok Sabha election is going to be very intense," says Rasheed Kidwai, an editor at the Kolkata-based newspaper, The Telegraph, and author of two books on the Congress Party. Whatever the governing coalition ends up looking like and however many seats the AAP captures, he said, "there will be an angry man in the crowd with Arvind Kejriwal. Everything will come under scrutiny."



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