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## Local contest, national impact: Understanding the success of India's Aam Aadmi Party in 2015 Delhi assembly election

Abstract: In this paper, I discuss how a relatively new anti-corruption political party in India – the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) was able to achieve an unprecedented electoral victory in the 2015 Delhi assembly election, comprehensively defeating the two national parties – Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Congress Party. Although Delhi is a small Indian state with limited powers, AAP's victory provides it with a platform to expand in other parts of the country. However, to do so, it will need to deliver effective governance in Delhi, enunciate a clearer ideology, and develop credible regional leaders. As things stand now, the AAP could be characterised as a party whose appeal is more likely to be in the urban, media-thick Indian cities and towns than in the rural areas. If this description of the AAP is correct, then its ability to challenge the larger national and regional parties in the near future may be limited.

## **Introduction and Background**

A relatively new political party in India – the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) led by Arvind Kejriwal, a former tax official, achieved an astonishing victory in the recently held 2015 Delhi state assembly election. The AAP which was formed in November 2012, won 67 of the 70 assembly seats, comprehensively defeating the two main national parties – the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which won just 3 seats, and the Congress Party, which could not win any. This state election turned out to be nationally significant because of the scale of AAP's victory, and the defeat of the BJP, which had won an impressive victory in the Indian national election held in April-May 2014 (including winning in all 7 parliamentary constituencies in Delhi), and subsequently achieved electoral success in four state assembly elections.

It is worth noting that India is a federal union of states comprising 29 states and 7 union territories (UTs). While states have many independent law-making and administrative powers as defined in the Indian Constitution, the UTs are administered directly by the central (federal) government.<sup>2</sup> Delhi was a UT until 1992 when it attained the status of a semi-state, but does not have all the powers of a full-fledged Indian state. Although Delhi has a legislative assembly, a council of ministers with chief minister as the head of the state government, the central government retains exclusive control over specified subjects – public order, police and land, and administers these through the lieutenant governor of Delhi.<sup>3</sup>

Delhi is home to about 1.5% of the India's population, and sends only 7 (of 543) members to *Lok Sabha*, which is the lower house of the national parliament, and the principal law making body. Thus, numerically speaking,

Delhi's political significance is rather limited. However, being the national capital city, Delhi assembly elections receive disproportionate media coverage, and their outcome have both high symbolic and political importance. The electoral competition in Delhi has historically been between the two main rival national parties - the BJP and the Congress. The BJP was in power during 1993-1998, and thereafter, the Congress enjoyed a 15 year term in office after winning consecutive elections in 1998, 2003 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> The 2013 Delhi assembly election saw the entry of a new party in Delhi's electoral politics — the AAP, which sought to challenge the historical domination of the Congress and the BJP primarily on the basis of its anti-corruption agenda.

### The formation and rise of the AAP

The AAP emerged out of an anti-corruption civil society movement – 'India Against Corruption' (IAC) which was led by social activist Anna Hazare and his associates. IAC's protests in Delhi during 2011-2012 were widely covered by the national and international media, and involved participation by a large number of ordinary Indian citizens. The movement was able to persuade Indian Parliament to accept its demand for an independent anti-corruption watchdog – the *LokPal*. However, subsequently, the movement suffered a split, and in November 2012, a section led by Arvind Kejriwal, a close aide of Hazare, decided to form a political party – AAP, while Hazare and his other supporters decided to remain outside electoral politics.<sup>5</sup>

Since its formation, AAP's strategy has been to focus on issues rather ideology or identity-based politics; it attacks corrupt politicians, large corporates and favours pro-poor policies. It also advocates the principal of self-rule (swaraj) and de-centralisation of governance through mohalla sabhas (local committees). According to Wyatt (2015:174), 'The AAP does not appeal to a homogeneous social group, and so does not gain from a structural cleavage that could be based on caste or religion. Instead, Kejriwal [as AAP's leader] attempted to develop a political or non-structural cleavage based on the issue of corruption.' Similarly, Roy (2014:46) notes that 'Like other antiestablishment parties around the world, AAP presents itself as a party that advocated for the ordinary citizen or common man who is neglected, misunderstood, and actively silenced by the political establishment.'

In December 2013, just over one year after its formation, the AAP contested its first election, for the Delhi assembly, and to everyone's surprise, it performed very well winning 28 of the 70 seats, and emerging as the second largest party after the BJP, which won 31 seats. The Congress which had been running the Delhi state government for the last 15 years was pushed down to the third place, winning only 8 seats.<sup>6</sup> After BJP's refusal to form a

minority or a coalition government, the AAP was invited to do so.<sup>7</sup> Although the AAP had campaigned strongly against corrupt practices of both the Congress and the BJP, it decided to form a minority government with Congress' support, and Kejriwal took over as Delhi's chief minister.<sup>8</sup> However, he resigned after only 49 days in office, alleging that the Congress and the BJP were not supporting the AAP in bringing the party's much promised 'Jan Lokpal' - an anti-corruption bill in Delhi. As a result, president's (central government's) rule was imposed in Delhi until fresh election could be held.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, the AAP decided to fight the national election, which was held in April-May 2014. However, this decision proved too ambitious for the party, and it won only 4 seats of the 432 it contested.

The Delhi assembly re-election was announced in January 2015. The BJP, having won a clear majority in the 2014 national election, was in power at the centre with Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister. Subsequently, it had also achieved success in the four state assembly elections held during October-December 2014, and therefore felt confident of winning the Delhi assembly reelection (Online Appendix A1 provides brief details of the results of these four state assembly elections).

Figure 1 summarises key events leading up to AAP's victory in 2015 Delhi assembly election.

Figure 1 about here

## 2015 Delhi assembly election - parties, leaders and the campaign

The election was keenly fought, with main contesting parties using various conventional and innovative campaigning methods to appeal to the voters. AAP's electoral strategy included promoting itself as the only credible alternative to the BJP, and projecting Arvind Kejriwal as the best chief minister candidate. Its team of volunteers campaigned relentlessly, singing and dancing to a song - 'paanch sal Kejriwal' (five years of Kejriwal government) which was composed by a well-known music director from the Indian film industry. The AAP made extensive use of social media including twitter and facebook, as well as traditional door-to-door campaigning to ask for voters' support. It also made an effective use of its party symbol - the 'broom' symbolising the intention 'to cleanse society', and the Gandhi 'topi' (cap), which became the headgear for the party's leaders and supporters. AAP also experimented with other techniques of campaigning such as nukkad natak (street plays), art competitions, wall art, music videos, Google+ hangouts, innovative posters and sloganeering and friendly conversations with commuters in the Delhi Metro by its volunteers (Brahamchari, 2015).

The AAP adopted 'crowd sourcing' model for its funding, whereby donations can be made through mobile telephony as well as the party's website. It also used other innovative fundraising methods such as 'Dinner with Kejriwal', and 'Selfie [photograph] with mufflerman' (Kejriwal), and highlighted that its funding sources were completely transparent, in contrast to those of mainstream political parties.

Based on a consultation with voters through its 'Delhi dialogue' project, the AAP developed a 70 point manifesto, which included many promises such as free 'life line' water, 50% cut in electricity tariff, free Wi-Fi across Delhi, installation of closed circuit cameras for women security, reduction in the rate VAT (value added tax), and full statehood for Delhi. These promises were made in the general backdrop of making Delhi corruption-free, and delegating power to the people in the form of *swaraj* (self-rule) through constituting 'mohalla sabhas' (local committees). Kejriwal presented himself as a humble aam aadmi or common man often wearing a muffler (scarf), while projecting the BJP as a party of the elite and the rich. He also publically apologised for 'deserting' Delhi's voters by resigning as chief minister in 2013, after just 49 days in office.

BJP's campaign largely focused on projecting Prime Minister Modi's popularity and leadership, and also included participation of the party's central ministers and members of parliament in election rallies. Just weeks before the election, the BJP announced Dr. Kiran Bedi, a former police officer as its chief minister candidate. Initially, it seemed like a 'master-stroke' because of her clean image, substantial administrative experience, and her being a close associate of Hazare and Kejriwal in the IAC's anti-corruption campaign. However, her selection triggered discontent among the loyal cadres of BJP's Delhi unit, who saw her as an outsider. The AAP countered Bedi by calling her 'opportunistic', highlighting that she had joined the BJP, the party she had earlier been strongly critical of, only to fulfil her political ambitions. In the end, Bedi proved to be politically inexperienced, and was not able to connect with the voters. As the polling date approached, BJP's campaign became more negative, depicting Kejriwal as an anarchist and a liar. In general, BJP's campaign proved ineffective because of a 'disgruntled ground level cadre, a disproportionate dependence on the Modi blitzkrieg and the lateral entry of Kiran Bedi' (Philipose, 2015).

Having performed dismally in the 2013 Delhi election, and after suffering its worst-ever defeat in the 2014 national election, Congress was already a weakened force when the 2015 election was announced. It too, announced its chief minister candidate – Ajay Maken only few weeks before the polling date. Although Maken was seen to have a clean image, Congress' anti-incumbency

disadvantage proved to be a serious obstacle for him to improve the party's chances in the election. Overall, Congress' campaign lacked energy and enthusiasm, and indicated that it had conceded defeat even before votes were cast.

Until mid-January 2015, most opinion polls had predicted the BJP to emerge as the single largest party. However, AAP's prospects improved significantly as the polling day approached, with many opinion polls conducted in late January and beginning of February 2015 projecting a higher number of seats for the AAP than the BJP.

#### **Election results**

Delhi went to polls on 7 February 2015, and the results were declared on 10th February. The election saw 673 candidates from 71 parties contesting in 70 assembly constituencies. There were 13.3 million eligible voters, over 12,000 polling stations, and about 20,000 electronic voting machines (EVMs) were used to collate the results. The voter turnout was 67.1%, which was the highest ever recorded in a Delhi assembly election, and almost all exit polls predicted a majority for the AAP.

Table 1 shows the seats and the votes won by contesting parties in 2015 Delhi election, and compares it with the 2013 result. The AAP won a staggering 67 of the 70 seats (gain of 39 seats compared to 2013), which was much higher than any projections in an opinion or exit poll. <sup>12</sup> The BJP won only 3 seats (a loss of 28 seats from 2013), while the Congress failed to win any. <sup>13</sup>

#### Table 1 about here

Although BJP lost heavily in respect of seats, its vote share remained almost intact (32.2% in 2015 versus 33.1% in 2013). Congress on the other hand, suffered a substantial decline of 14.9% in its vote share compared to its performance in 2013 election. The other smaller parties' combined vote share was 3.8% but none of these parties was able to win any seat. BJP's inability to win seats despite retaining its vote share was due to a consolidation of non-BJP votes in favour of the AAP, rather than being dispersed in a multi-cornered contest. It can be seen that 15% of the Congress votes and 9% of the other parties' votes from the 2013 Delhi election consolidated in favour of the AAP in 2015. The election results also highlighted how disproportional the conversion of votes to seats under the single member plurality system (SMPS) can be.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the BJP which won 32% of the votes only managed to win 4% of the seats. The SMPS also enabled the AAP to gain from a

significant 'seat bonus', and win 96% of the seats with a much smaller – 54% share of the votes.

Figure 2 further illustrates the scale of AAP's victory, and the nature of electoral competition in Delhi election.

## Figures 2(a) to 2(d) about here

As can be seen in Figure 2(a) - 2(c), the distribution of the margin of victory, winning party vote share and the vote share of top two parties at constituency level has shifted markedly towards the right. The average victory margin in a constituency increased from 8% in 2013 to 22% in 2015 election, the average vote share of the winning candidate (almost all from AAP) increased from 39% to 55%, and the combined average vote share of the top two parties in a constituency increased from 69% to 87%. Figure 2(d) shows, through a scatter plot of the vote share of winning and runner-up candidate in a constituency, that the electoral competition in 2015 became even more bipolar. This is evident in the clustering of data points (representing 70 constituencies) in the electoral competition space towards the right side of the Nagayama triangle (see Grofman et. al, 2004 for a discussion of this graphic tool for displaying patterns of party competition). In the constituency of the party competition of the party competition.

AAP's performance in 2015 Delhi election was historic because no other party had been able to achieve such a large victory in any recent state or national elections. The fact that this feat was achieved by a small and relatively new party made this outcome even more significant. While Delhi politics has historically been dominated by the Congress and the BJP, the 2013 election outcome was a three-way split between the BJP, AAP and the Congress. However, the 2015 election saw Delhi reverting to a two-party competition but between the AAP and the BJP, with the Congress being relegated to the third place (see Table 2).

## Table 2 about here

BJP's decision not to hold the re-election in Delhi soon after the 2014 national election enabled the AAP to recover from its poor performance in that election. It seems that the BJP delayed holding the re-election because riding high on its victory in the 2014 national election, it wanted to focus on elections in larger and politically more important states of Maharashtra, Haryana, Jharkhand and Jammu & Kashmir before shifting its attention to Delhi. The AAP on the other hand, concentrated all its efforts in Delhi, and this enabled the party to re-build its communication with voters and re-energise its

organisation and volunteers, which contributed substantially to its major victory. The AAP also gained from Kerjiwal's image of an *aam aadmi*, and focusing on basic issues such as corruption, women security, water and electricy that resonated well with the voters. Following AAP's win, Kejriwal took over as Delhi's seventh chief minister on 14 February 2015. To focus on fulfilling AAP's electoral promises, he decided not to hold any specific portfolio, but oversee the overall working of the government and other ministers.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

Although AAP's success in a small but symbolically important state of Delhi is unprecedented in India's democratic history, the question remains whether a single-issue based party, bereft of a specific political ideology can emerge as a major player at the national level. Its rise has made corruption an important electoral issue in India but also puts a higher onus on the party to stay on the path of integrity and transparency, which may be challenging, as it grows further. 18 It will be more difficult for the AAP to replace the Congress in other states than it has been in Delhi where Congress was already weak and discredited. Further, not every state is as 'media-dense' as Delhi, and therefore, building the necessary financial and organisational resources to contest elections in other, larger states could be an impediment to AAP's national ambitions. Through its volunteer-based model of party-building, the AAP has offered a large number of ordinary citizens an opportunity to actively participate in its activities (Roy, 2014:52). Although this model has the potential for replication in other urban cities and towns, its effectiveness in rural areas, which are heavily influenced by caste, regional and religious divisions, remains unclear. It could build electoral alliances with other parties to grow beyond Delhi, but this would risk diluting its unique appeal as an anticorruption and anti-establishment party.

Kejriwal has been the key factor around which the party has coalesced and grown, and he has been instrumental in shaping the culture and organisation of the party. He has been called a 'political entrepreneur' who has refused to accept existing patterns of party competition and used the issue of corruption for political mobilisation (Wyatt, 2015:168). However, Kejriwal has been accused of centralising power in himself by being both the head of Delhi government and AAP's national convener. He has also been engaged in a bitter tussle with the lieutenant governor of Delhi over the rights to appoint and transfer senior civil servants in Delhi. Wyatt (2015:172-3) notes that it is not clear to what extent Kejriwal represents party supporters outside Delhi, and mentions centralisation of decision making power with Kejriwal, and poor coordination between the AAP's central leadership and its state units as potential weaknesses related to his leadership style. Kejriwal's future success

as Delhi's chief minister will depend on whether he can work effectively with the central home ministry and the lieutenant governor of Delhi who has independent powers in specified areas to govern Delhi. To expand further, the AAP will also need to develop regional leaders, so that it does not become too dependent on Kejriwal's appeal to win elections in other parts of the country.

The AAP also made some specific promises in its manifesto for different sections of the electorate in Delhi, and this could lead other parties to also consider a 'clientelistic' approach in gaining voters' support. <sup>20</sup> However, fulfilling its electoral promises may be challenging for AAP because of budgetary constraints and the party's dependence on the BJP-led central government for financial and other resources.

After coming to power, the AAP has criticised a section of the media for their biased and negative portrayal of the party. This however, runs counter to media's contribution to the rise of AAP, as Udupa (2015:13) points out 'Whatever it lens we adopt, it is hard to dispute that this non-legacy party has relied on the symbolic resources of media more than any other contemporary political outfit.' Whether or how AAP can use the media coverage to its advantage in the future remains to be seen.

Do the Delhi results mark a point of no return for the Congress? After its worst ever performance in the 2014 national election, and now a humiliating defeat in Delhi, it faces an uphill task to win back support of the voters. However, it remains one of the two main national parties in India, and writing its obituary in Delhi politics is premature. Although the BJP can gain some satisfaction from retaining its vote share in Delhi election, its defeat has revealed the limits of the party's reliance on Modi and its central leadership to win state assembly elections.

The AAP, which grew out of a civil society anti-corruption movement has achieved an early electoral success in Delhi, and aspires to become a major political party in India. However, it first needs to first prove itself by delivering its electoral promises, and providing an effective government in the state. It also needs to balance its agitational style of politics with a clearer enunciation of its stand on key policy and political debates. AAP's success illustrates that given the political space vacated by another party (in this case Congress), a small party with a credible leader, backed up by an innovative campaign and a clear offering for voters can overcome the significant barriers to entry in Indian politics. AAP's rise also suggests that the politics of governance will continue to be an issue in Indian politics, and that the middle class appetite for clean politics might be an increasingly important electoral factor over time.

The entry of AAP into the Indian political scene, and its success in 2015 Delhi election is a significant development, especially since it has brought the issue dimension of corruption and clean governance to the forefront of electoral politics. However, as Wilkinson (2007:135) argues that parties and politicians in India 'have to balance the demands of a reform-oriented constituency with more pragmatic concerns about delivering patronage to key constituencies in order to stay in power'. Wilkinson (2007:132) also points out that 'Several economic and social developments over the past decade have...created a growing constituency for economic reform that will in time restrict the growth of clientelistic politics and lead to more programmatic appeals in Indian politics.' It will therefore be interesting to see how the AAP evolves its electoral strategy, especially if it aspires to expand outside Delhi.

As things stand now, the AAP could be characterised as a party whose appeal is more likely to be in the urban, media-thick Indian cities and towns than in the rural areas. If this description of the AAP is correct, then its ability to challenge the larger national and regional parties in the near future may be limited. Finally, whether or not AAP's victory in Delhi transforms the nature of party politics in India, it implies that corruption is likely to be an important electoral issue dimension in the future.

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Figure 1 Key events leading up to AAP's win in 2015 Delhi assembly election

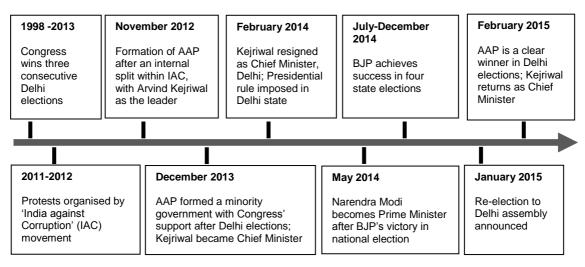
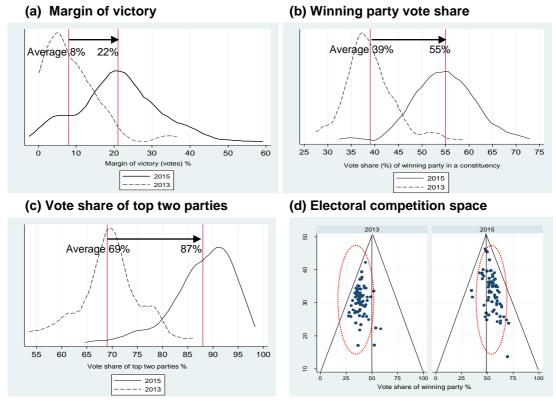


Table 1 Results of 2015 Delhi assembly election and change versus 2013

	Number of seats			Vote share %		
	2015	2013	Change	2015	2013	Change
Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)	67	28	+39	54.3	29.5	+24.8
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	3	31	-28	32.2	33.1	-0.9
Congress Party	-	8	-8	9.7	24.6	-14.9
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	-	-	-	1.3	5.4	-4.1
Indian National Lok Dal (INLD)	-	-	-	0.6	0.6	-
Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD)	-	1	-1	0.5	0.9	-0.4
Other parties	-	1	-1	0.5	2.4	-1.9
Independents	-	1	-1	0.5	2.9	-2.4
None of the above (NOTA)	-	-	-	0.4	0.6	-0.2
Total	70	70	-	100.0	100.0	-
Turnout	67.1%					
Number of valid votes	8.9m					
Number of electors	13.3m					
Number of candidates	673					
Number of constituencies	70					

Source: Election Commission of India – Full Statistical Reports.

Figure 2 Constituency level comparison of 2015 and 2013 Delhi assembly elections



**Source:** Author's calculations based on Election Commission of India – Full Statistical Reports.

Table 2 Evolution of vote share (%) in Delhi elections 1993-2015

					Elections after AAP's entry		
	1993	1998	2003	2008	2013	2015	
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Congress Party Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) Other parties	42.8 34.5 na 22.7	34.0 47.8 na 18.2	35.2 48.1 na 16.7	36.3 40.3 na 23.4	33.1 24.6 29.5 12.8	32.2 9.7 54.3 3.8	
Top two parties' vote share	77.3	81.8	83.3	76.6	62.6	86.5	
Government formed by	BJP	Congress	Congress	Congress	AAP	AAP	

Source: Election Commission of India – Full Statistical Reports
Note: Top two parties' vote shares are highlighted

<sup>1</sup> 'Aam Aadmi' is a commonly used Hindi language phrase which translates to 'Common Man' in English.

<sup>2</sup> Supplementary Online Appendix provides further details about the Indian state, and the Constitutional provisions regarding distribution of powers between the central and the state governments.

- <sup>3</sup> The decision not to make Delhi a full-fledged state appears to have taken into account city's status as India's national capital where key institutions such as the national parliament, the Supreme Court, the offices and residences of the president and the prime minister, and the various ministries and embassies are located.
- <sup>4</sup> The Congress also ran the national government for two terms during 2004-2014, but lost the 2014 national election to the BJP, which is currently in power at the centre.
- <sup>5</sup> Indian Parliament passed the *LokPal* Bill in December 2013. Anna Hazare and his supporters celebrated the passing of the Bill. However, Arvind Kejriwal criticised the Bill saying that it was not strong enough to fight the problem of corruption in India.
- <sup>6</sup> The Congress's significant anti-incumbent disadvantage was exacerbated by a series of corruption scandals that hit the Congress governments both in Delhi state and at the Centre.
- <sup>7</sup> BJP's refusal of not trying to form the government with the support of other parties seems to have been driven by a likely negative effect of this manoeuvring on the 2014 general election.
- <sup>8</sup> From AAP's perspective, forming a government gave it an opportunity to prove itself as a party of governance, and meet the expectations of a large section of the electorate, which had voted for it on the promises of reducing the price of essential utilities such as water and electricity.
- <sup>9</sup> The Indian Constitution provides for imposition of president's (central government's) rule in a state when the state government is not able to function as per the Constitution.
- <sup>10</sup> The promise of lifeline water meant provision of 20,000 litres to every household per month through a metered water connection.
- <sup>11</sup> Kejriwal's wearing of a muffler scarf or neck wrap, and his simple dressing style reinforced his down to earth appeal and demeanour as a common man.
- <sup>12</sup> According to the most optimistic projection in an exit poll (done by *Today's Chanakya*), the AAP was projected to get 54 seats.
- <sup>13</sup> BJP's chief minister candidate Kiran Bedi also lost her seat.
- <sup>14</sup> SMPS is used in India to elect members of its principle law making institutions both in the national parliament (*Lok Sabha*) and the state assemblies (*Vidhan Sabha*).
- <sup>15</sup> The distribution of the data is depicted through Kernel density curve, which represents a smoothed histogram, calculating the density at each point as it moves along the x-axis.
- <sup>16</sup> The Nagayama triangular display plots the percentage of the vote received by the winning candidate against the percentage received by the runner-up. The left corner area of the triangle corresponds to the presence of multiple contestants (since the combined vote-share of the top two parties is less than 100 percent), while the right corner represents single- or two-party dominance.
- <sup>17</sup> In the past, victory of similar margins was witnessed in the small Indian state of Sikkim in 1989 when *Sikkim Sangram Parishad* won 100% of the seats, and in 2004 and 2009 when the Sikkim Democratic Front won 97% and 100% of the assembly seats respectively. However, for an assembly size of 50+, the scale of AAP's victory in the 2015 Delhi assembly election result was unprecedented.
- <sup>18</sup> At the time of writing of this article, one of the AAP's ministers had been arrested because of allegations of obtaining fake science and law degrees. Another allegation of domestic violence has been made by the wife of an AAP legislator.
- <sup>19</sup> In April 2015, two of AAP's prominent members Yogendra Yadav and Prashant Bhushan were expelled from the party following allegation of anti-party activities. However, according to Yadav and Bhushan, they were punished for raising concerns about the party's internal democracy and decision-making processes.
- <sup>20</sup> AAP's manifesto for Delhi 2015 Assembly election. Available at http://www.aamaadmiparty.org/AAP-Manifesto-2015.pdf.