

# DELHI ELECTIONS LOOM AS AAP REBOUNDS

*With Kejriwal behind bars, can Sisodia steer the party to another victory in India's capital?*

BY NIDHI RAZDAN | *Special to Gulf News*

**F**inally, the Aam Aadmi Party or the AAP has got some relief in India. With the Supreme Court releasing AAP leader and former Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia on bail in an alleged money laundering case, the AAP has suddenly been reenergised. Sisodia spent 17 months in jail and with no sign of a trial anywhere in the near future, the top court said his custody was no longer tenable.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal is also in jail in the same case but he has got bail under the tougher money laundering law. He remains behind bars only because another investigating agency, the CBI, arrested him in the same case. Bail is only a matter of time for him too.

Sisodia has hit the ground running, starting with a padyatra or a march on foot this week, to connect with voters. This actually marks a change for Sisodia who was more of an organisational man for the AAP, not really its foot soldier on the ground. But with Kejriwal out of action for now, he has taken the reins.

Delhi elections are due early next year and for the AAP, it will be a major test of its popularity in Delhi despite the alleged corruption scandals and arrests of its leaders. The recent Lok Sabha polls did not throw up any sympathy for the jailed chief minister with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning all the seats but the assembly may still be a different story. While the BJP has consistently dominated the general election seats in Delhi, the last two assembly polls have proven the dominance of AAP.

But could the AAP face some strong headwinds this time? The party, which was borne out of an anticorruption movement against the Congress-led government, today finds itself facing a series of corruption allegations.

Then there are serious governance issues that the national capital is grappling with. The collapse of civic infrastructure in particular has been a glaring failure for which the AAP cannot escape blame.

It is also true that the Delhi's complicated governing structure has essentially allowed the centre (run by the BJP) to constantly undermine the AAP government in Delhi and create hurdles in governance.

The Delhi government has no control over officials, their postings or transfers. A Supreme Court judgement which gave them those powers was nullified by an ordinance brought by the central government which gave the powers to the LG.

An appeal is still pending in court. As a result, officers don't attend meetings called by AAP ministers and a recent ruling by the Supreme Court, allowing the LG to make certain appointments to the municipal bodies without the approval of the Delhi government, has further eroded the authority of elected representatives.

It is true that the AAP has emerged as a major political thorn in the BJP's side over the last decade with emphatic wins in Delhi and Punjab. Whether the AAP can hold on to its majority despite the challenges of the last few years will now be tested at the ballot box.

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