

Delhi uni elections reveal shifts in Indian student politics

As DU Goes to Polls, Students Discuss Campus Violence and an Unlikely Alliance. Left-leaning AISA has tied up with Aam Aadmi Party's student wing, CYSS.

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New Delhi: Students at the University of Delhi - or at least a section of students, given the history of low voter turnout - will be voting for their students' union representatives on Wednesday. In the run-up to the election, the campus has seen rhapsodic slogans, pamphlets distributed across colleges and promises made - and also an unlikely alliance.

While the usual contenders include Congress-affiliated National Students Union of India (NSUI) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's student wing Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), this year sees the emergence of a new alliance - the Left-leaning All India Students' Organisation (AISA) has teamed up with the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (CYSS), the student wing of the Aam Aadmi Party. Given the [recent incidents of violence on campus](#), some are viewing this alliance as an alternative to mainstream student politics. And while there are quite a few ideological differences between the two parties, they have put them aside to come together and fight what they call 'fascist' forces.

Sumit Yadav, president of CYSS Delhi, claims that "the alliance is totally based on issues, this has got nothing to do with our ideologies". He further added that the alliance is only concentrating on problems that Delhi University students face. The agenda of the alliance focuses on opposing the commercialisation of higher education and curbing the use of muscle and money power in students politics. They are also promising a "zero tolerance policy against hooliganism in the campus". To bridge the gap between English-speaking students and those who are fluent in other languages, it also aims provide study materials in regional languages and run remedial classes.

The CYSS will be contesting the Delhi University Students' Union (DUSU) elections after a three-year gap. They had independently contested all four seats in 2015, soon after its parent party's victory in the capital, but the results were disappointing for the organisation.

While saying that the alliance is not based on ideology, neither AISA nor CYSS considered joining hands with the NSUI, a major player in the DUSU elections.

"NSUI's agendas somehow didn't match with ours," said Niraj Kumar, the Delhi state secretary of AISA. "We want to get rid of this pattern of *gundagardi* (hooliganism) on campus and the use of muscle-money tactics, and CYSS wanted to work on similar issues so after months of discussions we declared the alliance." As far as the Students' Federation of India, student wing of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), is concerned, their presence is not "strong enough for this election", Kumar said.

"We will only support those who are addressing the real campus issues," CYSS's Yadav added.

Congress-backed NSUI celebrated a comeback 2017 after winning the top two posts in the union, securing the president's position for the first time since 2012. The other two seats were won by the ABVP.

While opposition parties with differing ideologies are talking about coming together to battle the Bharatiya Janata Party in different states and at the Centre, a similar pattern is being observed on campuses as well. The 2017 students' union elections at the Hyderabad Central University witnessed an alliance between SFI, Dalit Students' Union, Ambedkar Students Association (ASA) and a few other like-minded groups that were at the forefront of protesting against right-wing groups. A few years ago, SFI and ASA had been at loggerheads over the suicide of Rohith Vemula. Similarly, in Jawaharlal Nehru University, for the past three years Left parties have been contesting elections together.

Another controversial alliance partner on many campuses is the SIO (Students Islamic Organisation, the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami). In JNU, it lent support to the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students Association in the past few elections, while in HCU, its proximity to ASA raised questions on whether SFI, which was allied with ASA, could get along with its ideological rival.

Sangh parivar offshoots have managed a considerable stronghold on campus politics across India, and such groups [have exponentially grown in number](#). Other groups have alleged that muscle power is an integral part of this right-wing hegemony. As recently as last month, AISA leader Kawalpreet Kaur was allegedly [slapped by ABVP members](#) at Kirori Mal College. Last week, members of the NSUI [allegedly attacked the SFI presidential candidate](#) while he was filing his nomination papers.

However, the ABVP haven't owned up to any of the charges. In a telephonic interview, Abhishek Yadav, a member of the ABVP, said that the other parties are also using 'money power' to boost their campaigns. ABVP's agenda for this DUSU election includes student-friendly admissions, concessions to students from rural areas, prompt exam results, preventing teachers from agitating and women's safety on campus.

The ABVP and NSUI both think that the AISA-CYSS alliance is 'opportunistic'. "Both the parties have engaged in ideological opportunism," said Ruchi Gupta, in charge of the NSUI. "The Left thought that the AAP is strong in Delhi which is why they went into an alliance. The Left wouldn't have gone in an alliance with them in, say, Goa or some other state." NSUI's promises for the upcoming elections include raising DU's academic profile, the opportunity to work with Sheila Dikshit who will be mentoring 100 women students for leadership roles, and subsidised thalis (at Rs 10) for students.

Voters, though, are hoping to find candidates who are serious about issues that they face on campus every day.

"There are a number of issues, but hostel, transportation and safety of women students are the ones which are important. Most of the colleges in DU don't even have hygienic water and toilet facilities. Ninety percent of outstation students are forced to live in PGs and private hostels. Girls of co-ed colleges face harassment and there is no proper GSCASH or ICC to complain to," said Abhigyan, a student at Deshbandhu College.

"The Left alliance of SFI and AISF is still away from the money-muscle and glamour politics. However, the CYSS is using both money and muscle to campaign and since it is an alliance partner with AISA, of course it helps AISA as well," he added.

Shivank Trivedi, a student at the Campus Law Center, told *The Wire*, "I would just like to have a DUSU that would let us lead our lives peacefully. Without interfering, and also helping and allowing

us to keep student spaces safe.”

“That is the least we could expect,” he added.

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