

Akhilesh says Firozabad loss is 'more than a setback'

Calling the rout of his wife in the Lok Sabha battle in Firozabad as 'more than a setback' for himself, Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Akhilesh Yadav accused the Congress of using money power to achieve its sensational victory.

'The Firozabad outcome was more than a setback for me, but I am prepared to prove myself,' the son of SP chief Mulayam Singh Yadav said, speaking to IANS in the Parliament House complex.

Yadav admitted that he was perplexed how his wife, Dimple Yadav, lost to actor-turned-politician Raj Babbar by more than 80,000 votes though he had attracted huge crowds during the election campaign. His disappointment still palpable, the young Yadav hit out at the Congress, accusing it of using money to buy voter support in an election that was a prestige battle for the SP for more than one reason.

Yadav said he had gone deep into the reasons for the defeat, which was the 'worst fight' of his political career.

'The Congress won on the power of money. If needed, I am prepared to speak more on this,' the 36-year-old politician said.

After winning two seats in Uttar Pradesh in the Lok Sabha elections in May, Yadav decided to retain the Kannauj seat and vacated Firozabad, which his wife decided to contest. The SP was determined to defeat Raj Babbar, a former SP MP who had quit the party after revolting against the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav as well as Amar Singh.

Yadav said a large number of votes from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the ruling Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) 'switched' to the Congress in Firozabad. He wondered how this happened.

'What happened in five months that the Congress vote count went up from a few thousand to 300,000?' he asked, referring to the paltry votes the Congress gathered in the same seat only in May.

'Why did the Congress lose most of the other (assembly) by-elections in the state, including Padrauna and Jhansi, where Congress ministers had vacated the seats?'

Yadav said he had started restructuring the party's Uttar Pradesh unit --the party's biggest -- with the aim of winning the 2012 assembly elections.

Determined to prove a point in Uttar Pradesh, a former bastion where the Congress had been reduced to an also ran for two decades, the party's scion Rahul Gandhi campaigned intensively in Firozabad. In the process, he broke the convention of top Congress leaders not campaigning in a by-election.

The Congress reacted to charges of using money power with contempt.

Party spokesman Shakeel Ahmed said: 'We won in Firozabad because of the momentum created by our victory in the Lok Sabha elections, the performance of our UPA (United Progressive Alliance)

government, Rahul Gandhi's campaign and the popularity of Raj Babbar,' Ahmed told IANS.

Ahmed claimed that the traditional voter base of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, which it lost to the BJP, the SP and the BSP, was coming back to the party.

Yadav admitted that some Muslim votes had moved away from the SP in Firozabad, but he denied the community was abandoning it.

'They are ready for a reconnect. We do not have to give proof of our secular credentials.'

He said the SP had distanced itself from Kalyan Singh, who was Uttar Pradesh's BJP chief minister when the Babri mosque was razed in 1992. 'He is away now,' Yadav said tersely.

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