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Labour Wins London

Sadiq Khan and the Future of British Politics

Rohit K Dasgupta

The election of London's first ethnic minority mayor, Sadiq Khan, has tilted the political compass of the city in favour of the Labour Party. Does his election to office herald a progressive future for British politics?

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In a pamphlet published by Sadiq Khan in 2008 for the Fabian Society (Khan, Jameson and Katwala 2008) he says, "I did not come into Parliament to be a Muslim MP... I am Labour first and foremost. I am also a Fabian, a father, a husband, a Londoner..." He repeated the same statement in 2016 when he first declared that he was standing for London mayor with a campaign slogan "A

Mayor for All Londoners."

Khan's ascendancy to British politics and his subsequent election in a voting system, which gives him a personal mandate

unmatched even by the Prime Minister of Great Britain (David Cameron got 35,201 votes from his Witney constituency in 2015 general election), is a political fairytale surpassing the legendary tale of Dick Whittington and his cat.

For those unknown to the London mayoral voting system, London uses a supplementary vote system in which voters express a first and second preference for their candidates. This means that the winning candidate has the support of a majority of voters. In Khan's case this was a staggering 15,36,806 votes (representing 56.9% of the first and second votes) making him the only politician in the United Kingdom who has been elected to a public office on such a large public mandate.

Political Lessons in London

Khan's story is one of "climbing from below." Born to a Pakistani couple (his

dad was a bus driver whilst his mother

was a seamstress), he was one of eight

children living on a South London council estate. His own unprivileged upbringing and being exposed to the inequalities of a harsh London life has had a profound effect on his election manifesto in which he strongly insisted on tackling inequality and representing all Londoners.

Khan entered politics at 15, first joining the Labour Party followed by a 12-year stint as the Labour councillor for Tooting in South London (from 1992) and finally representing the constituency as a Member of Parliament (MP) since 2005. Under Gordon Brown's leadership when he became Prime Minister, Khan was first made a whip followed by cabinet post in 2009 and thus became the first Muslim in the cabinet. Khan's nomination to be mayor was also an uneasy ride that saw him pitted against a much more senior Baroness Tessa Jowell but he surprised everyone by coming out as Labour's top choice.

In the 2015 general elections, Khan was one of the labour MPs who was credited for swinging the London votes towards Labour and gaining a majority in the city even though it ultimately did not translate into other seats across the country. But with the capital moving towards Labour, the chances of a Labour mayor in 2015 seemed not too distant for a struggling Labour Party which had endured a crushing defeat across the nation.

London—A Labour City?

Perhaps, one of the most radical departures in British politics has been the reimagining of London as a Labour city. This has been a startling success for the party.

For several years London has swung between the left and right with a tendency to be on the right of centre. In fact Margaret Thatcher's landslide victory in 1987 also saw London and most of southern England swing to the conservatives. A large part of their decline was attributed to Ken Livingstone (the former mayor of London and leader of the Greater London Council (GLC)) and the Labour Party's pro-diversity policies (also see Davies 2001).

Thatcher ultimately abolished the GLC in 1986. But over the last few years the racial diversity of the city has increased and issues such as pro-immigration and pro-LGBT

(lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) rights, which at one time seemed too radical for the city, has been embraced full on. Perhaps this can be attributed to the changing demographic of the city. Jeremy Corbyn, the new leader of the Labour Party whose socialist and left of centre policies catapulted him to a major leadership victory, is part of the London left wing milieu.

It is no surprise that Corbyn and most notably several Labour politicians' commitment to black, minority and ethnic (BME) people in Britain through fighting against apartheid in the 1980s to closing down pay gaps, racial equality strategies within the government and strengthening of BME representation in public life has been rewarded by an overwhelming number of non-whites voting for the Labour Party. The labour BME support in London is 54% compared to the Conservative's 34%.

However as *British Future* (2015) polls show, the Conservatives have a stronger ground within certain religious groups such as the Hindus and Sikhs (Labour has 41% support compared to Conservative's 49%) which make the BME support particularly complicated. This was exploited quite well by Zac Goldsmith in his campaign targeting the Hindus and Sikhs to vote against the Muslim, Sadiq Khan.

Support of the 'Precariat'

The growth of a precarious, educated middle class is also another reason why Labour's support has grown in London. By precarity I mean the tension and casualisation of labour brought about through the fragmentation of paid work and increased inequalities. Standing (2011) has written about the emergence of the precariat—a category that includes significant sectors of middle class salaried individuals whose labour has become insecure and unstable through casualisation, informalisation and through growth of part-time labour.

London is home to several universities and graduates who are entering an unstable job market, a shrinking public sector and growth of unpaid internships. The relatively high cost of living brought about through skyrocketing rents, inflated transport expenditure and lack of support for jobseekers have naturally turned many young graduates and youth towards the Labour Party. The precarious Londoner

could be seen as a member of a "class in the making" (Standing 2011).

Whilst Labour's support in London has also grown with the emergence of the new young precariat class with a liberal attitude, it has also seen a collapse in their vote in other parts of England, especially southern and middle England. Ford and Goodwin (2014) explain that a large number of working class old Labour voters lost faith in the party during the Blairite years and attached themselves to the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which they argue is "a radical right revolt...anchored in a clear social base."

Thus whilst a younger populace of London voters are embracing immigration, ethnic and social minorities, many of the older Labour voters are anxious about these changes. They embraced other parties spurred by ethnic and racial nationalism. Ford has further argued that the spread of liberal London Labour ideas in other parts of the country risks the feeling of an imposition of values (Beckett 2016).

Perhaps then, as Beckett (2016) points out, the growth of recent immigrants from left wing European countries such as Spain and Greece might have also shifted the balance of the city in favour of Labour and the election of London's first ethnic minority mayor.

One of the worst features of this year's mayoral campaign was the conservative Zac Goldsmith's racist and Islamophobic ire directed at Sadiq Khan. From calling him an "extremist" to trying to exploit anti-Muslim prejudices in an effort to secure a victory, Goldsmith's act has been condemned by several commentators including people from his own party like the former Chair Baroness Sayeeda Warsi and Mohammed Amin, the chair of the Conservative Muslim forum. The fact that the Prime Minister David Cameron himself joined in Goldsmith's attempts to link Khan to alleged Islamist extremists made this a particularly insidious campaign.

Concerns regarding Goldsmith's campaign first arose when he targeted Hindu and Sikh voters suggesting that Khan would put a tax on jewellery and family heirlooms. The leaflet further suggested that Khan would pose a risk to London having disrespected the Indian community by not attending the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's welcome rally at the

Wembley Stadium. The diaspora's mixed reactions to Modi's visit and especially being snubbed by the Labour leadership were also used as a campaign tactic to discredit Khan.

Banerjee (2014), writing about elections, uses the word "carnival" to describe it—a way of bringing communities together but also dividing them. The London mayoral election was probably one of the recent examples of this carnivalesque.

Since the infamous homophobic campaign directed against Labour's Peter Tatchell by Simon Hughes in the Bermondsey by-election in 1983 and Peter Griffith's racist campaigning in Smethwick in 1964, this was the most divided racist campaigns mounted on any Labour candidate. Goldsmiths' repellent campaign had resonances of the British colonial government's divide and rule policy in the subcontinent, which led to one of the most violent episodes in Indian history—the partition. Similarly Goldsmith's attempt to turn Hindu and Sikh voters against Khan, just because of his religion, exposed that the Conservative Party is yet to shake off its "nasty" label and his loss is one not just to be celebrated but as Owen Jones (2016) has rightly said not to be forgotten or forgiven.

#LondonHasFallen

Khan's victory can be seen as a particularly powerful message for the precariat non-white class—a revival of aspiration and proof that race, religion and class can often be surpassed with a convincing and honest message. Though Khan is sincere to Labour values he is far from being an "extremist Muslim hardliner"—as some of his opponents project him.

His manifesto whilst including issues around housing, environment, transport, crime and business was particularly praised for his plans to tackle the housing crisis by promising to clamp down rogue landlords, keep a check on rents and build more affordable houses. Similarly he also promised to freeze transport costs in London (Goldsmith had said that costs would increase by 17% by the end of his tenure) and introduce new transport fares for the low earners and flexible part-time workers.

Khan is also seen as a pro-business leader, something that his party leader Corbyn has been criticised for. Khan has

promised to forge a partnership with several businesses in the capital and also build a better infrastructure for new business to come into the capital. But as expected of a Labour leader he has also promised to support small businesses and protect business space to enable communities to keep the character of their high streets.

Khan's victory also saw the usual backlash from the right wing with Britain's First leader Paul Golding turning his back to him during his victory speech and the trending of the hashtag LondonHasFallen inspired by a film of the same name which was used for abusive messages criticising the mayor for his race and religious beliefs. But it was not long before the hashtag was hijacked by supporters of Khan and his party to post messages of support and satirise the abuse that was directed at Khan.

Khan's victory must be seen as progressive on all levels. As Khaleeli (2016) notes, this might not end Islamophobia but it does offer hope. Khan has stood up for human rights both in his earlier role as a lawyer to being a progressive MP who has spoken up against anti-Semitism, voted against the reduction of welfare benefits and voted for gay marriage (which even led to death threats and a fatwa). Khan might not be the ideal leftist candidate many Labour voters especially the Corbynites hoped for, however his loyalty to the party (having never rebelled against the whip) and centre-left politics might offer the strongest pushback against conservative austerity policies.

Revival of the Left?

Who won London for Labour? Is it a victory for Jeremy Corbyn or for Sadiq Khan and what does it mean for British politics? Anyone following British politics over the last few months will know Corbyn's huge win in securing the Labour Party leadership has seen the party shift to the left, a far cry from the Blairite New Labour days. Khan, unlike Corbyn, is much more centrist and despite nominating Corbyn for leadership (he ended up voting for Andy Burnham) was quick to distance himself from the leader saying that the party needs a "big tent" if it is to score further electoral victories.

For many Corbynites this has been a betrayal. Khan is definitely no Blairite or

Brownite and for people to condemn him for his centrist views is a little too premature. For many of us who have celebrated Corbyn's victory as a return of Labour socialism, we cannot afford to fight amongst ourselves and must use Khan's victory to fight back against the Conservatives.

Labour has also silenced its many critics by winning key mayoral elections and councils in several cities despite its losses in Scotland. Khan's victory might just be the spark for the party to come and rally together. Capitalism is not easy to be eroded away and London will not allow that to happen. What Labour members should be focusing on is economic and social reform of the city under a supportive city hall.

If the choice is between a reformed capitalism and a conservative neo-liberalism, the choice is simple. Khan represents a progressive future for British politics and his job will be difficult. He has to navigate between teaming up with his leader in condemning the Conservative government and also work with the government in securing vital funds that the city will need. But for all those of us who voted for him we look forward to his promise to be "a mayor for all Londoners."

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