



ELECTIONS IN INDIA 2019: MANIFESTOS AND THEMES

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



India - which prides itself as the world's largest democracy is currently in the middle of its 17th Lok Sabha elections. Spanning over a period of nearly six weeks in seven phases, the elections which started on April 11, 2019 will conclude on May 19, 2019 in seven phases while the results will be announced on 23 of May, 2019.

Total number of seats in the Lok Sabha is 543, and the party succeeds in securing 273 seats would be invited to form the new government. There are currently 2,293 political parties registered with the Election Commission of India,¹ with some 900 million eligible voters.² Among the popular parties in this election include: Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Aam Aadmi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Samajwadi Party (SP), Shiv Sena and Asom Gana Parishad.

With a number of parties fielding their candidates, needless to say that it is the BJP and the INC (hereinafter Congress) that are the main contenders. While Congress has ruled India for most years after India gained its independence in 1947, the BJP on the other hand also takes pride in leaders like the former Prime Minister Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and more recently, the current Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi. It was personal charisma and reputation of a strong and decisive leader that helped Mr. Modi to win a decisive victory in 16th Lok Sabha elections that were held in

¹ India now has 2,293 political parties, 149 registered between February & March, *Economic Times*, May 17, 2019 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/india-now-has-2293-political-parties-149-registered-between-february-march/articleshow/68451605.cms>

² Poorvi Vora, Making the world's largest democracy work: How India's 900 million voters cast their ballots, *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2019 at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/05/making-the-worlds-largest-democracy-work-how-indias-900-million-voters-cast-their-ballots/>

2014. Prior to his election as Prime Minister of India, Mr. Modi had been Chief Minister of the State of Gujarat for three consecutive terms.

Manifestoes

Both Congress and BJP released their manifestos on April 2, and April 8, 2019³ respectively. A close comparison of both these manifestos is interesting. With regard to Kashmir, while the language used by Congress is more assuaging and conciliatory, the BJP manifesto is more aggressive in nature. As was the case during the last elections, BJP this time too promises to abrogate Article 370 and Article 35 A. It speaks about resettling West Pakistani refugees in Kashmir.⁴ The Congress manifesto on the other hand speaks about initiating a dialogue process with the Kashmiris without any preconditions and promises that it would ensure that the unique status of Kashmir is not compromised by any means. It also promises to review Armed Forces Special Powers Act if elected to power.⁵ On the contentious issue of National Register of Citizens (NRC), the BJP vows to complete the process of (NRC), as well as enactment of citizenship amendment bill. BJP also once again pledges construction of Ram Mandir at the site of Babri Mosque. On other issues, both manifestos put utmost importance on matters of national security and more proactive role for India on multinational forums. Both parties also pledged to continue their efforts to ensuring a permanent seat for India in the United Nations Security Council and Nuclear Suppliers Group.

Themes

There are number of themes that have been dominant during this election season. Lately, Mr. Modi had been under severe criticism due to allegations of corruption in the deal for procurement of Rafale fighter planes.⁶ Government's decision to introduce Citizenship Amendment Bill (2016) also resulted in strong reaction in the Northeast region where people believe that the bill will give legal status to illegal migrants and will result in turning the local people into a minority.⁷ Mr. Modi also came under criticism for failing to create jobs that he promised five years back. An official survey

³ India's BJP releases Manifesto ahead of elections, *Al Jazeera*, April 8, 2019 at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/india-bjp-releases-manifesto-upcoming-elections-190408072851526.html>

⁴ For full text visit <https://www.thehinducentre.com/resources/article26769375.ece/binary/BJP-Election-2019-english.pdf>

⁵ For full text visit https://www.thehinducentre.com/resources/article26719096.ece/binary/english_compressed.pdf

⁶ Enough evidence to prosecute PM Modi for corruption in Rafale deal: Rahul Gandhi, *The Economic Times*, March 6, 2019 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/enough-evidence-to-prosecute-pm-modi-for-corruption-in-rafale-deal-rahul-gandhi/articleshow/68290742.cms>

⁷ Majority in North East against citizenship to minorities from Bangladesh, Pakistan, *The Economic Times*, 24 May, 2018 at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/majority-in-north-east-against-citizenship-to-minorities-from-bangladesh-pakistan/articleshow/64310123.cms>

conducted by National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) revealed unemployment rate at 6.1 per cent - highest since 1972/73.⁸ Projects like 'Make in India', 'Skill India' or 'digital India' have all failed to bear any fruit.⁹ Modi's decision of demonetization in 2016 which had caused mega disruption also failed to produce desired results. In states like Uttar Pradesh, the "Gathbandhan" or the alliance of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP) and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) is expected to cast a serious blow to the ruling BJP. It is worth mentioning here that Uttar Pradesh is the most important state in India, as it has the largest number of seats in the Lok Sabha. Under Modi's rule, incidents against minorities, particularly Muslims, also saw a sharp increase. The silence and the prevailing distrust of Muslim voters that may go against BJP is also being highlighted by Indian analysts.¹⁰

On the other hand, Mr. Modi has certain points to his credit also. In Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), India has received \$239 billion FDI in last five years.¹¹ Economic growth which was at 4-5 per cent five years under Congress rule, is now more than 7 per cent per annum. India has also been continuously improving its ranking on the ease of doing business, it jumped 23 places to the 77th position in the latest World Bank 'Doing Business' 2019 Report. In 2014, India was ranked at 142nd position.¹² On the international front, the United Nation's designation of Masood Azhar as a global terrorist is also expected to help Modi in winning a second term in office.¹³ In the aftermath of Pulwama incident,¹⁴ Modi was also able to stoke sentiment of nationalism among the masses, though the aftermath of Pulwama incident did elicit considerable domestic criticism of BJP narrative.

Mr. Modi, while taking full advantage of the situation, projected himself as a strong leader of the country who was able to take bold decisions on issues of national security. Consequently,

⁸ Indian jobless rate at multi-decade high report says, in blow to Modi, *Reuters*, January 31, 2019 at <https://in.reuters.com/article/us-india-economy-jobs/indian-jobless-rate-at-multi-decade-high-report-says-in-blow-to-modi-idINKCN1PP0FX>

⁹ How has India's economy fared under PM Narendra Modi? *DW*, April 8, 2019 at

<https://www.dw.com/en/how-has-indias-economy-fared-under-pm-narendra-modi/a-48251747>

¹⁰ Rasheed Kidwai, "The Muslim factor in general elections", *Observer Research Foundation*, April 20, 2019 at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-key-uttar-pradesh-when-publishing-50081/>

¹¹ India attracted massive FDI worth USD 239 bn in last 5 years: FM Piyush Goyal in budget 2019, *The Economic Times*, February 1, 2019 at

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/finance/india-attracted-massive-fdi-worth-usd-239-bn-in-last-5-years-fm-piyush-goyal-in-budget-2019/articleshow/67787519.cms>

¹² India moves up 23 spots in 'ease of doing business' ranking, *Business Line*, October 31, 2018 at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/india-moves-up-23-spots-in-world-banks-ease-of-business-ranking/article25381317.ece>

¹³ Masood Azhar case: BJP hails Modi's 'strong leadership', *Deccan Herald*, May 1, 2019 at <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/national-politics/masood-azhar-case-bjp-hails-modis-strong-leadership-731688.html>

¹⁴ On February 14, 2019, a suicide bomber killed around 40 Central Reserved Police Force (CRPF) personnel in Indian occupied Kashmir's Pulwama district. Following days saw growing tensions between India and Pakistan as India carried out aerial attack inside Pakistan on February 26, 2019 and claimed to have killed 300 terrorist. This claim was not only rubbished by Pakistan, but also by international media.

nationalism has become the biggest theme in Indian elections. In order to further prove their point, all BJP leaders added word "chawkidar" (watchman) before their name on social media platform. In this scenario, anyone who questioned or expressed doubts on government's claims on Balakot air strike was dubbed as "anti-national".

With a number of surveys and different predictions, it is generally believed that BJP-led NDA might still hold on to power for one more term, but it would be difficult for it to win a convincing victory as was the case in 2014. While it remains to be seen who finally will ascend to power, it is only hoped that the new government in India would not take long to start the dialogue process with Pakistan with the intention of resolving the disputes that bedevil the relations between the two countries. Additionally, it is also hoped that 19th SAARC Summit which was to be held in Islamabad in 2016 will finally take place for the sake of peace and development in the region.