



BJP AND CONGRESS: RHETORIC AND CAMPAIGNING FOR THE GUJARAT STATE ELECTIONS

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not
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Campaigning for the upcoming state elections in Gujarat in December 2017 has been going on for some months now, as the Congress party attempts to dislodge BJP from its traditional stronghold by taking advantage of an economically turbulent time. Congress Vice President Rahul Gandhi has in fact been regularly visiting the state, attending rallies, speaking at events, and visiting temples in an attempt to win votes for his party. His campaign and rhetoric has focused on issues of economic strife, joblessness, and failure of the BJP to fulfill its promises, and he has even alleged that Gujarat is the most corrupt state in the country under the BJP.¹

Apart from such political rallying and sloganeering, which are nothing new in politics of this sort, there are other more clear reasons for optimism for the Congress. In recent weeks, this has been due to an emerging alliance between the Congress Party and the Hardik Patel-led Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), an organization of the influential and powerful Patidar caste, conventionally also called the Patels. The Congress has been reaching out to the Patidars and aiming to win their support with promises of community reservations and quotas for jobs and college admissions in the state if it comes to power, leading ultimately to Hardik Patel's declaration of PAAS's support for

¹ "Gujarat is most corrupt, alleges Rahul," *The Hindu*, November 12, 2017.
<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/gujarat-is-most-corrupt-says-rahul/article20356102.ece?homepage=true>

Congress based on an agreement of quotas for his community.²

The importance of the Patidars as a constituency in state politics cannot be denied. They make up around 12% of the population of Gujarat, and their voting is likely to heavily influence the outcome in around 60 of the total 182 assembly seats.³

The approach of the Congress towards the Patidars, including promises of quotas, has been seen by BJP leaders as a way for the Congress to deceive the Patels, since any increase in the state's quotas would be violating Supreme Court rules of an upper limit of 50% for quotas. In addition, BJP leaders have also developed a narrative in their campaigns that the Congress is "anti-development", does not understand economics, and perhaps most scathingly, that it is playing caste politics.⁴

BJP has, ironically, also been criticizing the Congress, and specially Rahul Gandhi for using a "soft Hindutva" approach in Gujarat and visiting several temples in order to attract the Hindu majority, calling his visits "a drama".⁵

Prime Minister Modi has also been actively campaigning in his home state, and has added to the acerbic tone of politics in the run-up to the elections. He has, for instance, blamed the Congress for having an "anti-Gujarat mindset" and declared that "the Congress hates Gujaratis", portraying the elections as a battle between development and dynasty.⁶ Modi has also called on the Patidars, who have been severely critical of the BJP over demands for quotas, to support the BJP by raising the issue of Congress conspiracies to dislodge Patidar Chief Ministers in the past. Furthermore, his political rhetoric in recent speeches has portrayed the Congress and its leaders as having a soft and anti-Indian stance on issues such as Lashkar-e-Taiba's Hafiz Saeed, Indian Army's surgical strikes, and the Doklam standoff with China.⁷

Overall then, BJP's strategy to counter the Congress campaign has involved its own propaganda for which media centers have been set up, and the party is said to have shown "an air of quiet

² "Gujarat elections: Hardik Patel says Congress has agreed to give Patidar community reservation," *Hindustan Times*, November 22, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/hardik-patel-says-congress-has-agreed-to-give-patidar-community-reservation/story-vicPSQMpQZLCvXo45lnRiL.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Congress deceiving Patels with quota promise, says Jaitley," *Hindustan Times*, November 20, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/gujarat-elections-congress-deceiving-patels-with-quota-promise-says-jaitley/story-7CEjJKIIPmG0j3jkOUCrI.html>

⁵ "Rahul's temple visits akin to Aurangzeb's, says BJP," *The Hindu*, November 22, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/rahuls-temple-visits-akin-to-aurangzeb-says-bjp/article20667367.ece>

⁶ Mahesh Langa, "PM Modi invokes son-of-the-soil sentiment," *The Hindu*, November 27, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/gujarat-elections-a-contest-between-trust-on-development-and-dynastic-politics-narendra-modi/article20957429.ece?homepage=true>

⁷ Ibid.

confidence” specially in its attempts to manage the Patidar Patel unrest. The success of this strategy of reaching out to them has, however, been debatable – as one prominent Patidar has commented on the BJP’s approach towards his community, “BJP tells us if we don’t vote for them, it will mean Congress raj, which is equal to Muslim raj. But this time, even Muslim raj is better than BJP raj.”⁸

BJP’s assertions regarding the promise of quotas by the Congress are well-founded, however. Currently, Gujarat has 49% reservation for different castes and communities, and if the promise of reservations for Patels takes the total proportion of quotas beyond 50%, “it will run counter to the Supreme Court ruling and risk being struck down.”⁹ Implementing the quota in fact seems difficult at best, since BJP efforts in the past have also been overruled since they violated this ruling. This has thus led to BJP leaders questioning the intent of Hardik Patel and the Congress in their emerging alliance, since any further quotas would be illegal under the present law.¹⁰ Moreover, the alliance is also said to run the risk of upsetting other caste leaders.¹¹

Hardik Patel’s announcement of support for the Congress after promise of quotas for the Patidars has offered significant encouragement to the Congress which has not won in the state in two decades. Patel has also been extremely critical of the BJP, blaming it for atrocities on his community, and his following within the Patidars has committed itself to the Congress as a result, even as the Patels have traditionally been BJP voters in the past.¹² However, this does not mean that the Patidar vote belongs to the Congress en masse, since there are divisions among the community as well.

Congress has also been struggling with its own problems, with “party rebels threatening to spoil its prospects” by contesting the polls independently.¹³ Moreover, the Congress and Patidar alliance has also not been without issues – indeed the Patidars have expressed their unhappiness at the Congress’s first list of candidates, in which the Patel community is underrepresented from their

⁸ Prashant Jha, “BJP has its plan ready to address crucial challenges on Modi’s homeground,” *Hindustan Times*, November 12, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/bjp-has-its-plan-ready-to-address-crucial-challenges-on-modi-s-homeground/story-Csl59YA1G1vRIVst72qKHM.html>

⁹ “Hardik Patel says Congress has agreed to give Patidar community reservation,” *Hindustan Times*, November 22, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/hardik-patel-says-congress-has-agreed-to-give-patidar-community-reservation/story-vicPSQMpQZLCvXo45lnRiL.html>

¹⁰ “Hardik announces support for Congress after quota promise, BJP dismisses alliance,” *Hindustan Times*, November 23, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/hardik-announces-support-for-congress-after-quota-promise-bjp-dismisses-alliance/story-pbd3THMEvMJ1GcUA3aJ8dK.html>

¹¹ Aurangzeb Naqshbandi, “Gujarat elections: Pact with Hardik is Cong’s best bet, but it’s a tricky road to fulfill quota promise,” *Hindustan Times*, November 22, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/pact-with-hardik-is-cong-s-best-bet-in-gujarat-but-it-s-a-tricky-road-to-fulfill-quota-promise/story-7J81ExvGpfiVHHl0rvmSql.html>

¹² “Hardik announces support for Congress after quota promise” *Hindustan Times*.

¹³ Aurangzeb Naqshbandi, “As Gujarat elections near, senior Congress leaders rush to douse rebel,” *Hindustan Times*, November 23, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/as-gujarat-elections-near-senior-congress-leaders-rush-to-douse-rebel-fire/story-xXEUhEHJNmZJbzPOgYMNpM.html>

perspective.¹⁴ That said, even the prospect of a Congress victory in the elections is also an achievement in its own right, since not only has the party not won in the state in two decades, its loss in 2014 was overwhelming, as the BJP won all 26 constituencies.¹⁵ The December elections, however, promise to be different and closely contested, and will likely be indicative of the near future of Indian politics between the Congress and BJP..

¹⁴ Mahesh Langa, "Congress's first list of candidates causes heartburn to Patidar group," *The Hindu*, November 20, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/gujarat-elections-congress-releases-first-list-of-77-candidates/article20559781.ece>

¹⁵ Srinivasan Ramani, "To win Gujarat, Congress must turn a sultan of swing," *The Hindu*, November 22, 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/congress-must-turn-a-sultan-of-swing/article20667348.ece>