

DECIPHERING DYNAMICS OF BJP AND INC BEFORE INDIAN LOK SABHA ELECTIONS 2024

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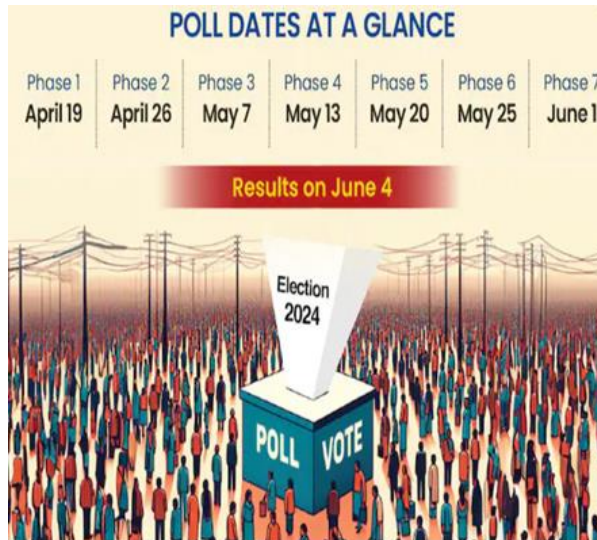
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On March 15, 2024, the Election Commission of India announced the schedule for the next (18th) *Lok Sabha* elections. The general elections will start on April 19 and the process will be completed in seven phases in 44 days till 1 June 2024. The results will be out on June 4, 2024. Figure 1 and Table 1 show the timeline of the elections.¹ Both the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) have intensified their electoral campaigns and are propagating their narratives to garner popular support. While both parties are waging their campaigns across the country, certain controversial measures taken by the ruling BJP are creating obstacles for the opposition in having a level-playing field.

¹ Ajmal Abbas, "Lok Sabha Polls in seven phases from April 19," *India Today*, March 16, 2024, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/lok-sabha-election-announcement-date-parliament-election-commission-2515514-2024-03-16>.



Date	Phase	No of Seats	No of States
19 April	Phase 1	102	21
26 April	Phase 2	89	13
7 May	Phase 3	94	12
13 May	Phase 4	96	10
20 May	Phase 5	49	09
25 May	Phase 6	57	07
1 June	Phase 7	57	08

Election Campaigns

As soon as the dates of the upcoming *Lok Sabha* elections were announced, key figures of the incumbent government as well as the opposition geared up their outreach to the masses. Rahul Gandhi of INC, believing in the success of the '*Bharat Jodo Yatra*' starting from Kanyakumari to Srinagar in 2022, had commenced another '*Bhaat Jodo Nyay Yatra*' in 2023. This time Rahul Gandhi's Yatra started from the East (Gujarat) in October 2023 and ended in the Western part of the country (Arunachal Pradesh) in March 2024. During this Yatra, Rahul Gandhi, alongside criticizing the government, outlined his policies in support of the youth, women, farmers, and laborers, and emphasised justice with equity, if he comes to power.² The opposition alliance focused its narrative on the anti-secularist and anti-democratic policies of the BJP bent to overwhelming the opposition and is crystallising its message with the slogan, '*Loktantra Bachao*' (save democracy).³ On the other side, the ruling BJP is expansive and loud in its messaging, chanting the slogans, '*abki bar 400 par*,' '*teesri baar Modi Sarkar*'; and '*main hoon Modi Parivaar*'.⁴ These slogan have been crafted with the aim of portraying Mr. Modi as a trustworthy figure due to his previously popular policies of 'hyper-development' while strengthening indigenization. They also present a tilt towards asserting Hindu identity, while persecuting minorities. Moreover, in previous elections, BJP's electoral campaign was primarily based on anti-Pakistan rhetoric. This time, Mr. Modi has so far focused more on the Ram Temple, women empowerment, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and also the developmental

² "Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra," <https://bharatjodonyayyatra.com/>.

³ Gulam Jeelani, "INDIA bloc's Loktantra Bachao Maharally and Arvind Kejriwal's Tryst with Ramlila Maidan," *Mint*, March 31, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/india-blocs-loktantra-bachao-maharally-and-arvind-kejriwals-tryst-with-ramlila-maidan-in-5-points-11711866805692.html>.

⁴ "BJP coins new slogans for 2024 Lok Sabha polls," *Mint*, January 2, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/bjp-coins-new-slogan-for-2024-lok-sabha-polls-ab-ki-baar-400-paar-11704211730336.html>.

aspect. The BJP ministers, however, have not shied from making provocative, anti-Pakistan statements here and there.

Anticipating Political Standings

According to electoral pundits, the BJP is in a stronger position vis-a-vis the opposition that lacks a cohesive and strong narrative to counter BJP's electoral prowess, expansive agenda, and forceful narrative. News18 Opinion poll survey has predicted that the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will win around 411 seats, with BJP securing 300 seats. In comparison, the survey claims, the INC-led Indian National Development Inclusive Alliances (INDIA) is expected to secure 105 seats, with INC securing 49 seats. The survey also predicted BJP's major gains in Maharashtra, West Bengal, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat. It may, however, be noted that such poll surveys have been off the mark in the past.

As it aims to grab more than 400 seats for the NDA, the BJP's own target is to secure 370 seats for itself. This figure is symbolic. Mr. Modi said in a *Lok Sabha* speech that the numeric '370' is of fundamental importance for the BJP. To pay tribute to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the ideologue who campaigned for the abrogation of Article 370, the BJP has to secure 370 seats in the *Lok Sabha*. Setting such a high target, the Modi regime has resorted to all kinds of means – from intense political campaign to engaging the RSS workforce to targeting the opposition leadership. The BJP is striving hard to expand its influence beyond the Hindi belt region, especially in the North Eastern states and South India. For this purpose, the BJP has sought to enter into political alliances with smaller political parties as well. For instance, in Punjab, it has rejoined hands with Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). While INC can secure a majority in Punjab, the BJP-SAD alliance could damage its seats tally. Likewise, in Tamil Nadu, the BJP has established alliances with All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), and the Amma Makkal Munnettra Kazhagam (AMMK). In Andhra Pradesh, too, the BJP has aligned itself with local parties including Jana Sena.

While it is busy manoeuvring to pave its way towards securing 370 seats, the BJP is also being accused of pursuing controversial policies. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) under the guise of an anti-corruption movement, has arrested leading opposition figure, Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, just weeks before the *Lok Sabha* elections. In February 2024, ED had arrested Hemant Soren, Chief Minister of Jharkhand, in a land scam case. Opposition parties have protested against these arrests and criticized the Modi regime for using state apparatus for his political ambitions.⁵

⁵ Amit Bhelari, "ED arrests Hemant Soren after he resigns as Jharkhand Chief Minister," *The Hindu*, January 21, 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/ed-arrests-hemant-soren-after-he-resigns-as-jharkhand-chief-minister-champai-soren-named-new-leader/article67797634.ece>.

Recently, the BJP also appointed two election commissioners, Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu. Questions are being raised about whether these officials would be able to ensure a level-playing field for all political parties or will fall prey to Mr. Modi's politicization of state machinery in the upcoming elections. West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, and Congress President Malikarjun Kharge, said with these moves BJP wants to "loot" votes.⁶

However, one of the more serious setbacks for the ruling party came last month when the Indian Supreme Court summoned the State Bank of India (SBI) on the Electoral Bonds issue. SBI was ordered to provide all details of the electoral bonds to the Election Commission. According to the findings, the ruling BJP has been the major beneficiary of these bonds.⁷ Reportedly, more than \$1.9 billion were donated to political parties, while 57 percent of the total money was donated to BJP only. It is expected that the ruling party may have compensated these particular corporate entities for their generosity in the times of elections. Moreover, these electoral bonds can lead to money laundering and corruption at a wider level.

Conclusion:

With all these political manipulations going on, the BJP remains firmly intent on standing ahead and registering another victory in the upcoming *Lok Sabha* elections. While on the one side it is gearing up its political communication and outreach through legalized channels of alliance-making with local parties and announcing welfare schemes for the general public, on the other side, it is putting heightened pressure on the opposition and preventing it from having a level-playing field. The BJP is expected to fare well in North India (so-called Hindi belt) but it needs to perform much better in South Indian states if it aims to cross the 370-seat marks and help NDA secure more than 400 seats.

⁶ Shemin Joy, "PM-Led Panel to Choose 2 Elections Commissioners by March 15," *Deccan Herald*, March 10, 2024, <https://www.deccanherald.com/elections/india/pm-led-panel-to-appoint-2-election-commissioners-by-march-15-modi-adhir-meghwal-ec-arun-goel-2930372>.

⁷ Electoral Bonds scheme was launched in 2018 by the BJP for the sake of transparency in the funding of political parties. An individual or any corporation could buy electoral bonds from SBI and give it to any political party which was authorized to cash it in specific time limit.