



# The 2019 Lok Sabha elections: Part II: Campaign strategies of the BJP and the Congress

The 2019 election campaign has started, so the general direction and the tactical moves in the strategies of the two major parties are evolving. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has appealed to a wide spectrum of the Indian society in order to make sure that through voters' consciousness of the election's stakes, there will be a high turnout, which certainly would benefit the BJP. This is despite the fact that about 50% of Indian voters did not vote either for the BJP or the Congress in 2014. This time, 879 million people are eligible to vote between the 11<sup>th</sup> of April and the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2019.

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### ***Advantages and changes of the BJP strategy***

Prime Minister Modi is undergoing an image change. He appears now far more cooperative with regional parties and allies. Best examples of this are the preferential treatment given to the Janata Dal-United (JDU) and the Shiv Sena (SS) by way of yielding substantive number of constituencies. This stance makes the BJP appear quite positive compared to the Congress.

Other advantageous positions put forward by the BJP are:

- The 10% reservation in favour of the economically weaker sections of society.
- No income tax for annual incomes of up to Rs. 5 lakhs (500 000) slab.
- The PM Kisan (farmer) income with direct payments to the accounts of farmers.

Additional welfare programmes most probably will also have an impact on voting behaviour.

### ***Superior Alliance-Strategy of the BJP***

In comparison to the Congress, there seem to be far more flexible alliances and seat adjustments by the BJP with other parties. Until now, it has formed arrangements with more than 30 allies all over the country, which demonstrates its unbent will for power, quite contrary to the Congress, which has also forged quite a number of them, lately in Bihar and Maharashtra. The BJP can draw advantages from the incapacity of the opposition to unite at a 100% level.

But this flexible attitude of the BJP also leads to problems in its strategy, as it has poached the detractors from Congress. The BJP expects the strengthening of electoral results in certain constituencies due to defections. This leads to a cautiously calibrated reduction of aspiring contenders from the BJP itself.

Contrary to 2014, the BJP has this time the burden of managing allies. Kumar Ketkar, Congress *Rajya Sabha* MP and a veteran journalist has argued that the BJP tries to present the dilemma "*Modi against anarchy*". Through hyper-nationalism, themes like '*Gaushalas*', Ayodhya and the economy would be pushed to the background. "*The Sangh Parivaar sees itself isolated and marginalised. Rhetoric has overtaken the media debates, which largely support Modi. In 150 mega rallies, Modi will brand Nehru as the main villain and Rahul Gandhi as irrelevant. One Nation, one Leader is the motto.*"

According to Ketkar, real topics like black money, the decline of manufacturing, and stagnating exports would not be addressed, whereas the middle and upper middle classes are flourishing, irrespective of the agrarian crisis. "*The air attack is praised as the defining moment of nationalism. Drought conditions are worsening, farmers suicides are growing in Punjab, Karnataka and Maharashtra and education is no campaign topic, also due to the opposition.*" Kumar Ketkar adds that "*Modi is omnipresent and omnipotent. In these elections, everything revolves around perception management instead of real questions.*"

The BJP seems to be clear about which topics it wants to be addressed, be it national security, the '*Lokpal*' or the leadership role. Finally the BJP has nominated, albeit reluctantly and under pressure, a '*Lokpal*', kind of '*Ombudsman*' against corruption as part of its 2014 election promises.

The air attack on the terrorist camp at Balakot, deep in Pakistan, changed substantially the campaign's narrative and took literally the wind out of the Congress's sails. Instead, the Congress still stresses the allegations on the deal making for fighter planes with *Rafale*. Exacerbating things more, and contrary to the opposition, the BJP is absolutely clear about who will occupy the office of the Prime Minister.

The relentless attacks by Rahul Gandhi against Narendra Modi ('chowkidar chor hai', or the 'Nightguard is the thief') was countered by the BJP with [#MainBhiChowkidar](#) ('I am also a nightguard') - Campaign, which developed into a leading Twitter trend and therefore serves as an example of an effective treatment of social media by the BJP.

Overall, the BJP has tried to repeat its success story from 2014 in the social media. Experts are of the opinion that the Congress lacks innovative ideas and an aggressive presentation.

Complementing its media strategy, the BJP has also been sending a whole range of well-versed spokespersons and a number of ministers to television debates such as Arun Jaitley, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Piyush Goyal, Nirmala Sitaraman, which is not the case on the Congress side.

Will we witness a surreal campaign, or will the Indian voters, like they have done it after the '*India Shining Campaign*' with Vajpayee, teach Modi a lesson? Currently it does not look like it, which as suggested also has to do with a fairly incapable opposition.

### **Building blocks and deficits of the Congress strategy**

After the surprising successes of the Congress in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Rahul Gandhi emphasizes now the achievements there and propagates them as part of the national strategy. At the same time, he attacks the "*Modi model of government leadership.*"

During the campaign, Gandhi refers to the waiving of loans for farmers, an unemployment allowance scheme for youngsters, and the return of forest land to *Adivasis* in Chhattisgarh. He also refers to the increase of *Minimum Support Price* (MSP) and the universal healthcare system in Chhattisgarh.

In Madhya Pradesh, the state government doubled the *Other Backward Class* (OBC) quota and implemented the reservation of 10% for '*economically weaker sections of society*'. All these programs are building blocks of a development strategy propagated by the Congress. But it should also be remembered in this context that the Congress was not in a position to counter Modi's so-called '*Gujarat Model of Development*' with substantial arguments in 2014.

### *Deficits of the Congress campaign*

The BJP geared up its election machinery, already close to its full capacity, whereas this is not quite the case with the Congress. This is also true with regard to the main campaign themes. This has put the BJP in a clear leadership role until now, also on social media and in TV debates, which could be an advantage in this long-drawn campaign.

The Congress failed to form alliances in some of the states like Uttar Pradesh. It had to be content with 9 constituencies in Bihar. It failed to form an alliance with the Left in West Bengal with *All India Trinamool Congress* (AITC) and in Delhi with the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP). This shows the limited options of the Congress. In West Bengal, the left parties decided not to put up their candidates in certain constituencies where the Congress has put.

Overall, with regard to forming alliances, the BJP is absolutely superior to the Congress.

The nomination of Priyanka Gandhi as General Secretary for Eastern Uttar Pradesh points out to one of the essential long-term aims of the Congress to regain this mega-state having more than 200 million population for the party.

Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi are candidates for the party's two last bastions, Amethi and Rae Bareilly. It can be expected that this time Rahul Gandhi will face a far harder battle against cabinet minister Smriti Irani and an unsure election outcome, especially since the BJP won four out of the five Assembly seats from his constituency in 2017. Therefore, there are rumours that Rahul Gandhi might additionally be a candidate in a so-called 'secure' constituency in Karnataka or Kerala, offered to him by the party units there, similarly like Narendra Modi in 2014. But such a move could be seen by the electorate in Amethi as 'running away' by its long-term MP Rahul Gandhi, which could harm his personal image and altogether that of the party.

### ***Perspectives***

Opposition unity does not seem to be the highest priority for the Congress. There is even a suspicion that Rahul Gandhi has tried to make the Congress again a visible political force in this election, taking a long-term perspective.

Does this mean that the Congress, at the beginning of the 2019 campaign, has already given up on this election? Does the Congress endeavour to climb from 44 to 100 or more seats all over the country in 2019 in order to fight the real battle for the top position in 2024? This would also imply that the Congress tries to strengthen itself against parties which share a similar ideology and appeal to the same voter base rather than to defeat the BJP under all circumstances.

The BJP has formally announced pre-election alliances. The Congress and the UPA have also agreed on some informal pre-election alliances in order not to contest against each other, with the possibility to work after the election outcome with political forces opposed to the BJP in some states.

Currently, it looks like, the Congress does not envisage an immediate defeat for Modi and instead pursues a five-year plan to defeat Modi and the BJP decisively only in 2024.

### ***Congress: Minimum income***

Election promises, be it the loan waivers for farmers or land rights for 'Adivasis' have already been a powerful weapon in the state elections in 2018, since the BJP lost 26 out of the so-called 28 'tribal seats' in Chhattisgarh and nearly half in Madhya Pradesh. These reserved seats for ST's and SC's have been the backbone for the rise of Hindu nationalism since the late 1980's, thanks to the work of RSS and BJP cadres.

The Congress has attempted to regain the initiative in a campaign characterized by hyper-nationalism, inter alia through the promise of a minimum income for the poorest families. Rahul Gandhi announced this initiative, according to which 20% of the poorest families or 250 million people would receive a supplement to their existing monthly income of sum up to Rs. 12 000. He described this program "as a surgical strike against poverty, and the BJP as [being] against the poor, whom they want to destroy, whereas we want to destroy poverty."

Rahul Gandhi added that this decision for a minimum income means, "that we can't have two Hindustans of the poor and the rich. We will have one Hindustan. We cannot have poverty in India in the 21<sup>st</sup> century."

The required amount for this program is about 2% of the GDP, or 20% higher than the defence budget, six times the employment guarantee scheme MGNREGA. From where would the funds come from and what are the expected problems while implementing minimum income for the poorest? Will it lead to high inflation or to more black money in the economy?

The BJP reacted sharply and ridiculed this proposal. The BJP General Secretary Ram Madhav described it as populism. *"If You are certain of Your defeat, You can promise the moon. Who takes this serious? In various programs, poor families get already far more support."* Others like Narendra Pani, Professor at the Tata Institute of Advanced Studies in Hyderabad, speaks *"about a much required change in the political debate."* The experienced journalist Shekhar Gupta said, *"every politician promises today everything."*

One has therefore to wait and see if the Congress will present more details about this scheme. Equally crucial will be details about how it wants to provide lower qualified jobs on a large while increasing incomes of the poorest.

The coming weeks will indicate if this latest proposal by Rahul Gandhi will change the priorities in the election campaign and lead to an intensive debate about the more existential problems facing the Indian voters.