



# **The 2019 Lok Sabha elections: Part I: Most important national and regional players - strengths, weaknesses, options, perspectives**

**With the election dates in April and May 2019 declared, the election campaign is slowly starting. But all the possible alliances are not yet formed, particularly within the opposition camp where parties still negotiate details and seats.**

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### *Power factors relating to the BJP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)*

Irrespective of all the surveys, which weeks ago partly projected a so-called ‘*hung Parliament*’, the BJP stands again as the favourite at the beginning of the campaign, especially after the air attack in Balakot in Pakistan. Indeed, the winning image of the BJP might have been slightly damaged after the defeats in Rajasthan Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, but the party has regained ground since then.

Its costly but effective publicity machine and its organizational potential, supported by its cadres and the hardline Hindu RSS group followers, make it superior in nearly all aspects vis-à-vis the Congress.

It is not yet clear if the new narrative by the BJP of this being a “*patriotic election*” will be appreciated and remembered by the voters on election day or if the opposition will succeed in the meantime to put BJP and NDA argumentatively on the defensive, shifting the discussion to other topics like the agrarian crisis or the massive unemployment.

Despite the existing differences with some of its NDA partners, the BJP could form solid country-wide alliances, not least on the basis of having offered relatively far-reaching concessions with regard to constituencies for its partners, like the Janata Dal United (JDU) in Bihar or the Shiv Sena (SS) in Maharashtra.

Since the BJP has to consider seat losses in the Hindi heartland, it hopes to compensate this partly through additional wins in the Northeast and possibly, but not likely, in the South, especially Karnataka, but also perhaps in Tamil Nadu and in Kerala.

Under the umbrella of the *North Eastern Democratic Alliance*, the BJP allies are the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), the Bodoland People’s Front (BPF), the Indigenous People’s Front of Tripura (IIPFT), the National People’s Party (NPP), the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and the Sikkim Democratic Morcha (SKM). The BJP wants to win - together with its partners - at least 22 of the 25 seats there. BJP Secretary- General Ram Madhav has confirmed this, by stating that “*the NDA is today a much stronger coalition than before.*”

### *Congress and United Progressive Alliance*

The Congress faced the threat of ending up in a state of complete electoral ‘oblivion’ during the Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in 2018; simply put, it was a do-or-die battle. But the party bounced back with narrow victories in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh and a clear majority in Chhattisgarh, by proving its survival instincts and forming its own governments.

With its weak organization in many states, the Congress hopes to win perhaps up to 100 or even 125 seats in 2019 and thereby could even theoretically provide the Prime Minister, although as it has been suggested by some “*Rahul Gandhi does not want this currently, since he wants primarily a regime change.*”

The Congress could form alliances with the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Janata Dal Secular (JDS) in Karnataka – after tough negotiations - and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra. The situation in Bihar is now clear with the formation of an alliance with the Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD) and some smaller caste-based parties. There is no alliance formed in West Bengal nor in Delhi, while in Jammu and Kashmir the situation is still open.

The Congress experienced a sort of 'rejection' in Uttar Pradesh, since the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party rejected the Congress as an alliance partner and conceded only the constituencies of Amethi (Rahul Gandhi) and Rae Bareilly (Sonia Gandhi) to them. Together they could have defeated the BJP decisively in India's biggest state.

#### *The role of non-aligned regional parties*

Quite a number of regional parties are attached to alliances. Nevertheless, there are parties like the Trinamool Congress, the Biju Janata Dal, the YSR Congress, the Telangana Rashtriya Samithi and the Telugu Desam Party, which will possibly decide if they remain in opposition or join a new government only after the 'verdict' of Election Day. Some of these parties are more inclined to join the Congress or the BJP, but others, like the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), emphasize explicitly their distance towards both big parties.

The Indian Communists are a fading political force and have lost a lot of strength after losing their governments in West Bengal and Tripura. Even in their erstwhile stronghold West Bengal, "*they could become an irrelevant force*", according to Sumit Chakravarty, editor of the left-leaning weekly '*Mainstream*'.

#### *Perspectives*

As expected, the outcome of the election is not at all decided. Until the terror attack on Indian security forces in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir and the Indian air attack in Balakot on a Jaish-e-Muhammed training camp deep in Pakistan, the BJP did not seem to be fully convinced about its victory.

It is also not fully clear how far the security issues will influence electoral behaviour, or whether the truly existential topics like the agrarian and employment crises will influence the voters more. A very interesting element though is the phenomenon of the continuing high popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which is partly also the result of a personality cult, which is unusual in a democracy.

Yet, there is no visible anger nation-wide against Modi and also no major sign of discontent with Modi's populist rhetoric and his management of events. The Modi government announced benefits for farmers, upper castes as well as medium, small and micro companies.

The Congress is continuously plagued with faction fights, intrigues and delayed decisions and therefore did not venture into necessary initiatives.

Rahul Gandhi seems to have no mentionable management capabilities or sharp political instincts, in order to appear as a natural competitor for power. He is not a 'magnet' for the entire opposition. He did not succeed to build a **"Team Rahul" with young and dynamic political leaders around him**. In terms of the campaign, he has concentrated until now too much on the accusations against Modi with regard to the Rafale deal - fighter planes from France - and far too less on the agrarian crisis, the loss of jobs and the not realized promises of the government. **More importantly, the much spoken about 'great alliance' ('Mahagathbandhan') of the opposition parties has not been able to come up with a common minimum programme or a platform that goes much beyond Modi bashing until now.**

The BJP has a big advantage with regard to financial resources, its party machine and the media, compared to the Congress, “*a poor party with wealthy leaders.*”

The Congress has to decide, if it only wants to become stronger as a party in this election or to really reduce the number of seats for the BJP in the whole of India. The BJP won 42 seats in 2014 with more than 300 000 votes against the second place party, 75 with more than 200 000 distance and 38 with more than 150 000, which really requires a strong anti-incumbency trend in order to change this.

However, it can also be questioned whether the chemistry on the ground will correspond to the arithmetic between the BSP and SP, particularly since the welfare measures of the government cut across traditional caste differences.

In any case, Pulwama and Balakot have changed the agenda and made national security most probably the central topic of the narrative in this election. **The young ‘Hindutva’ voters and the right core electorate of the BJP from the middle classes are attracted to the ‘muscular nationalism’, advocated by the BJP.**

The central topics of the campaign and the resonance of the voters will most probably indicate in which direction the wind will blow. There is also of course the element of surprise that needs to be factored in, as in 2004, where nobody assumed that the majority of voters would not agree with the *India Shining* campaign and would simply vote out the NDA government, led by the very popular Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.