



# The 2019 Lok Sabha elections: Part III: Race for Power: Major Campaign Issues

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### ***The phenomenon Narendra Modi***

Narendra Modi is certainly the most popular and charismatic '*leader*' in Indian politics, who resists even the worst attacks by the opposition.

One can wonder how he still finds time for governance, given his permanent electioneering. He possesses a tremendously robust nature and is an excellent orator and communicator. In short he enjoys bathing in the crowd.

What makes this man so popular not only with the middle classes but also large parts of the urban and rural '*masses*'? Is it the personality cult that is systematic built around him throughout the day? Till now, nobody can prove that he is in any way personally corrupt, irrespective of the permanent attacks by Rahul Gandhi with regard to the *Rafale Deal*.

Modi, the undisputed bearer of hopes in 2014, does not possess this aura to such an extent these days, but he has preserved his reputation as a decisive decision-maker.

Is it because of a long period of coalition governments, that many citizens and amongst them especially women, are vying for a strong man? Is Modi therefore also the result of a deep structural crisis in Indian politics and society?

### ***Modi: A danger for Indian democracy?***

Several Indian politicians and academics paint dark scenarios about the future of the country. They use quite often comparisons with the Weimar Republic and the rise of German national socialism and fascism.

Is there a small truth in these statements, irrespective of the different socio-cultural societies? During the current campaign, this is not only an academic question.

Prime Minister Modi is accused, by no less than the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee that a victory for Modi would result in the throwing away of the constitution and to the transformation of India into a totalitarian regime. Possibly, 2019 could be the last *Lok Sabha* election, or so Banerjee says.

### ***L. K. Advani's criticism***

L. K. Advani, co-founder of the BJP, criticized with a veiled attack on Modi and Shah indirectly with his proposition that one should regard the political adversaries not as '*enemies*'.

Advani clearly spoke about the defence of democratic institutions and referred to the era of the *Emergency* between 1975 and 1977. The central tenets together with '*Satya*' (truth) und '*Rashtra*

*Nishtha* (Dedication to the nation) should lead the BJP, according to Advani. All this would form '*Sanskritik Rashtravad*' (cultural nationalism) and '*Su-Raj*' (good governance).

An important value for Indian democracy, according to the former Deputy Prime Minister and ex-editor of the RSS organisation '*The Organizer*' Advani, is the respect for diversity and freedom of opinion. People with different opinions should never be called '*enemies*'.

*"In our concept of Indian nationalism, we have those, who do not agree with us, never regarded as 'anti-national'. The party is dedicated to the freedom of every citizen to choose, be it on the personal and political level."*

This critique, indirectly against Modi and Shah, by the insider Advani, who steered the BJP with its remarkable inner party democratic structures in the past, is quite remarkable.

It is the prerogative of the electorate to decide, where India will head to after these elections. After this, it will be easier to assess if the dark scenarios will be correct or if Indian politics and the Indian society still possess sufficient resilience in order to resist attacks on the institutional framework and the constitution.

Advani is perhaps a lonely voice in the desert, not least because of the transformation of his party that was earlier open with controversial discussions and a liberal economic wing. Under the Modi regime, the party is getting increasingly subdued to its leader. Irrespective of all the socio-cultural differences between the Germany in the 1930's and India now, certain common features are recognizable.

### **Central points of the BJP-Program**

The BJP presented a multitude of election promises in its manifesto '*Sankalp Bharat, Shashak Bharat*' ('Determined India, empowered India'). Modi announced '*one mission, one direction*', in order to transform India in 2047 into a developed country. The party wants:

- To introduce a National Citizens Register
- To abrogate in Kashmir the articles 370 and 35 A, which protect a separate status and property rights
- The return of the *Kashmiri Pandits*, i.e., *Brahmins*
- A Uniform Civil Code
- The build a *Ram Temple* in Ayodhya within the framework of the Constitution
- To abolish the *Triple Talaq*
- To pursue zero tolerance towards terrorism
- To strengthen the armed forces and give them a free hand to counter terrorism
- To introduce a '*Make in India*' policy in the defence sector

The BJP promotes a policy of aspirations, contrary to the alleged policy of entitlements by the Congress, also by changing the tax quota and tax advantages.

In the economic sector, the BJP aspires to make India the third strongest economic power in the world by 2032 with \$ 10 Trillion through:

- Promoting Ease of doing business
- Creating an employment generation and self-employment (but without giving details or numbers like in 2014)

- Big investments in infrastructure and the rural areas (Start Up Funds for seeds), interest free loans for farmers and medical Colleges in each district. Solid ('pucca') houses till 2022 and water pipes for all households shall be available
- Doubling of the highway network
- 33% quota for women in government jobs

The Congress alleges that the election manifesto of the BJP *"is full of lies"*. The *Rajya Sabha* MP and Professor Rajeev Gowda, who conducted the *'applied research'* for the Congress program, referred to a large amount of unfulfilled promises and lack of implementation.

*"The landless laborers, the rural and urban poor don't exist in the BJP program. Modi shines, India shines. The amount of the manufacturing sector has gone down."*

Raj Chengappa, in *India Today* Politics, pointed out the ideological differences between both parties and the fact that the BJP would not address unemployment sufficiently. Rajeev Dubey, in *India Today* Economics, was of the opinion that the BJP program is addressed to the aspirational sections of society, whereas the Congress concentrates on justice and growth.

How will the electorate react to the BJP's balance sheet and to some of the not fulfilled promises? How will these promises co-exist with the propagated *'Hyper-Nationalism'* and the polarization along communal lines?

### **Features of the Congress-Program**

Do party manifestos really influence voters, especially in India? The Congress presented its manifesto on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2019. The party hopes to receive more support by the electorate, after identifying major topics for its focus, as a result of intensive discussions guided by the former finance minister P. C. Chidambaan and Professor Rajeev Gowda.

The Congress distanced itself clearly from the BJP, which it accuses *"to have spread hatred and divisions in society during the last five years."*

### *Economy*

The main focus of the Congress is directed to the poorest 20% of families (an estimated total of 250 million people). A minimum annual income of 72 000 Rupees should be guaranteed and accordingly supplemented by the government. Primarily this concerns people in the rural areas, therefore the Congress also focuses on agriculture and the so-called *'agrarian distress'*.

It promises a so-called *'Farmers'* (*'Kisan'*)-budget, waiving of loans, and an institutionally secure access to credits for farmers, adequate prices and cheaper investment costs.

Also, the Congress makes unemployment one of its central topics. The reduction of unemployment is promoted by tax incentives for companies, especially for small- and medium ones.

The Congress endeavours to achieve an increase from 15% to 25% in the manufacturing sector and thereby creating additional employment, also through the so-called *'Make for the World'* program. Foreign investments should be brought increasingly to India.

The Congress promises a simplification of the *'Goods and Service Tax'* (GST) and a control of the fiscal deficit. In view of the crisis in the banking sector, it envisages bank reforms.

The party also aims to lift hundred million people out of poverty, i.e., out of the so-called '*poverty line*'.

Critics refer to the fact that the Congress ironically does not possess any more roots in those states like West Bengal, Odisha, Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, where most of India's poor are living. Besides, they argue, that it is an old concept which reminds people of Indira Gandhi's idea of '*Garibi Hatao*' ('Remove poverty'), as Tavleen Singh, columnist of *The Indian Express* put it.

#### *Parties and election financing*

The Congress, increasingly a victim of defectors from its ranks to other parties, wants to change the so-called '*anti-defection law*', so that such politicians would be immediately expelled.

It points out that anonymous '*Electoral bonds*' benefit mostly the BJP, so they should be abolished and replaced by a '*National Election Fund*'.

#### *Kashmir*

The Congress demands a dialogue in Kashmir and argues against constitutional changes there. The border to the other part of Kashmir and to Pakistan should be better secured, thereby reducing infiltration.

The '*Armed Forces Special Powers Act*' (AFSPA), which gives a lot of protection to troops and leads also to human rights violations should be reviewed.

#### *Infiltration und Maoism*

The party promises a strict attitude towards terrorism, infiltration, Maoists, as well as communal and caste violence, which require respectively specific answers and methods, also with regard to development. "*There will be no space for vigilance groups and moral-policing brigades*".

#### *Battle against corruption*

After many scandals during the 2<sup>nd</sup> United Progressive Alliance regime between 2009 and 2014, the Congress lacks credibility in this regard, in order to make itself a torch-bearer against corruption.

Although toning down a little bit its rhetoric against the *Rafale* deal, the Congress intends to get this and other cases investigated, also to bring back economic offenders like the former liquor and Airlines baron Vijay Mallya.

There is a number of intentions, from changes in the *Aadhaar* law, an increased engagement with civil society, press freedom, an anti-discrimination law vis-à-vis religion, caste, gender, language as well as the abolition of the colonial '*sedition*' law, in which the Congress adheres to the more liberal traditions of the Indian freedom movement and its own policies.

Basically, one can observe that the Congress has tries to emphasize its social components, e. g. the increase of expenditure in the health sector to 3% of GDP, in favor of the poorer and disadvantaged sections, like Dalits, Adivasis etc., of the Indian society, which in earlier decades, together with the minority communities of Muslims and Christians, formed parts of the core constituency of the Congress. Only this the Congress believes, can the party be revitalized.

### ***Parliament without a clear majority?***

An articulate Congress Member of Parliament is convinced that the 17th *Lok Sabha* will have no clear majority. *“There is a mood in the country against the BJP and also the Congress. Companies are not too happy with Modi’s style of governance and the rise of Amit Shah.*”

The collective psychological condition of the population is partly portrayed by concerns about *“anarchy, chaos and a political vacuum. One cannot trust poll surveys, they are manipulated and paid for. A lot of money is flowing.”*

The MP expects 180 to 200 seats for the BJP, in the worst case scenario 150, and about 225 for the NDA altogether. This assessment is based on talks with people in all areas, including RSS cadres and leftists etc.

The BJP started a costly advertisement ‘*Blitzkrieg*’ with crores of Rupees, which one could not expect to such an extent in earlier times. *“Modi controls each and every institution as well as the electronic and print media. There is a big aggressiveness from the side of the BJP, less from the Congress.”*

Modi sees the BJP and Shiv Sena ahead of the Congress and National Congress Party in Maharashtra, seeing instead his own party as a *“weak opposition”* to him, and therefore does not envisage new ‘ammunition’ from the Congress in the electoral battle.

In general, there will be no major surprises in the campaign, but it could not be excluded that new military events with Pakistan could happen.

In Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party/Bahujan Samaj Party/Rashtriya Lok Dal combined could win 40 to 45 seats, 4 to 5 for the Congress and about 36 for the BJP. In Bihar, the BJP would also lose some seats. But in West Bengal the BJP could win 10 to 12 seats. But altogether the BJP could lose 80 to 100 seats, according to this estimate. The Congress could get a maximum of 135 seats, but probably only between 75 and 100 seats.

Will there be elections in 20 different states? Only in 9 states, there will be an exclusive confrontation between the BJP and the Congress. But in the South, the BJP is on a weak wicket. In Andhra Pradesh and Telengana, Modi is not a factor.

The MP expects surprisingly *“huge parliamentary chaos and at 100% a Parliament without a clear majority (‘hung Parliament’). The total of seats of the split opposition will most probably be bigger than the seats of the BJP. Nevertheless, I expect that Modi will be asked to form a government by all means, to remain for at least six months in power, followed by a new election.”*

The MP is worried about the low and sometimes even vulgar level of the political discourse without ideology and convictions. *“Politicians are ready for sale. These are dangerous indicators. Expert opinions are thrown out of the window. I am worried about a free for all of OBC’s, upper castes, Muslims and Hindus. There will be identitarian confrontations.”*

The MP referred to the recent statements by Mehbooba Mufti on Kashmir and potential parallels in India to the former disintegration of the Soviet Union, which according to him lasted about 8 years. *“We move in this direction during the next five years. 2024 corresponds to the end of the Gorbachev Era. I hope only that I am not correct.”*

## ***Perspectives***

The domestic atmosphere during these campaigns is fairly tense and between the main contenders quite aggressive. This led the Election Commission of India to intervene and stop certain politicians to campaign for 48 or even 72 hours.

How these campaigns, arguments and even often hate speeches, also with insinuations against Muslims, will influence the outcome, has to be seen.

It seems sure that this time there will be no '*Modi wave*'. According to the ground reports, on the one side is the aggressive 'nationalism, including the Hindutva ideology', on the other side are the attempts by the opposition to focus on the existential questions of poverty in rural areas, the agrarian distress and the issue of unemployment.

After the completion of all the seven rounds of voting, we will know on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May which alliance can finally form the next government.

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