

# ISAS Brief

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## India Elections:<sup>1</sup>

### The Perils of Anti-incumbency

*Since Narendra Modi led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to a resounding victory in the national elections in 2014, the party has effectively established its dominance on India's political system. Only a few months ago, few doubted that the BJP would comfortably win the next general elections in 2019, also given the weakness of its main competitor, the Congress party. However, anti-incumbency, particularly at the state level, might have a dramatic impact of the BJP's electoral prospects.*

Dr Diego Maiorano<sup>2</sup>

Lately, there has been a heated debate in India on the possibility of holding simultaneous elections for the National Parliament (Lok Sabha), which must be held before May 2019, and for a number of state legislative assemblies. The President of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Amit Shah, officially supported the call for 'One Nation, One Poll' in a letter to the Law

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<sup>1</sup> India's next general elections are scheduled to be held in mid-2019. It will be the largest electoral exercise in the world involving over 800 million eligible voters, who will decide the fate of the Narendra Modi government. Beginning September 2018, at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, will monitor and interpret the run up to the elections, the poll campaigns and the results. ISAS will publish a series of papers that will focus not only on the big picture, but also the important issues and themes underpinning the 2019 elections.

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Commission sent in August 2018. Since the elections for seven states are to be held together with the general elections anyway – Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Odisha, Maharashtra, Arunachal Pradesh, Haryana and Sikkim – Shah’s proposal in practice means postponing the elections for Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Mizoram (which are due in late 2018) and possibly anticipating those for Haryana and Maharashtra (whose terms ends in late 2019).

The BJP’s proposal has been defended on the grounds that it would save not only money, but it would also lower the election fever that supposedly distracts ruling parties from focusing on governance and development. On the other hand, many critics have pointed out that simultaneous elections would be a blow to the federal nature of India’s democracy – a view shared by many of the opposition parties. Furthermore, the Chief Election Commissioner, O P Rawat, pointed out that holding elections for more than 10 states, along with the Lok Sabha polls, would be extremely difficult, if only for logistical reasons (and leaving aside important constitutional considerations).

The key question is whether the BJP proposal actually provides an advantage to the party. The BJP must clearly think so and this belief is clearly backed by solid evidence. As noted by psephologist Sanjay Kumar, out of the 31 cases of simultaneous elections since 1989, 24 resulted in the dominant party polling similar number of votes in both the Lok Sabha and the state elections. In only six cases, voters clearly differentiated between the two levels of the elections and this occurred only in states with strong regional parties like Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the BJP hopes that, by ‘nationalising’ state elections, the party will be able to cash in the ‘Modi factor’ – Prime Minister Narendra Modi undoubtedly remains the party’s major asset. This must be seen as an act, if not of desperation, at least stemming out of serious concerns for its electoral prospects. In fact, the call for ‘One Nation, One Poll’ can be best understood as a way to counter anti-incumbency, which, evidence shows, has settled in.

The spectacular electoral performance of the BJP in 2014, which won a majority on its own (no other party had done so since 1984), makes it easy to forget that the saffron party received only 31 per cent of the votes. This means that a relatively marginal decline in the vote share

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<sup>3</sup> Sanjay Kumar, ‘Simultaneous polls will be a blow to federalism’, *Asian Age*, 22 August 2018.

could translate in a quite significant reduction of its seat share. This is particularly so if the opposition parties – or at least some of them in key states like Uttar Pradesh – are able to provide a concrete form to their plans of forming an anti-BJP *mahagathbandhan* (Grand Alliance). In this context, anti-incumbency feelings could play a major role in the elections in 2019.

In fact, as political scientist Nirmala Ravishankar has shown,<sup>4</sup> on the basis of electoral data between 1977 and 2004, belonging to the ruling party decreases the likelihood of a member of parliament being re-elected by as many as nine percentage points, on average. However, anti-incumbency has also a more indirect effect at the state level, where anti-incumbency is particularly high. In the last 20 years, as many as 61 per cent of the incumbent governments have been defeated. Ravishankar's research shows that the ruling parties' 'honeymoon' period lasts for about two years, after which being in power becomes a liability and parties ruling at the state level perform significantly worse in the national elections. This means that, for the BJP, which governs 20 out of 29 state governments, the repercussions on anti-incumbency at the national level could be quite dramatic.

If one follows Ravishankar's approach, the BJP is at risk of suffering from anti-incumbency in as many as 11 states – Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Maharashtra, Manipur, Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa, Jharkhand and Assam – where the party, by the time the general elections will be held, would have governed on its own for more than two years. The BJP won about two-thirds of its total seats from these states. This means that it will be very difficult for the party to retain most of the seats that it conquered in 2014 in its core areas of support in North and West India. This might be a key reasons why the BJP is keen on holding elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh together with the national elections, hoping to counter anti-incumbency with the 'Modi factor'. In fact, recent opinion polls indicate that the Congress party has a strong lead in Rajasthan and a small advantage in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nirmala Ravishankar, 'The Cost of Ruling: Anti-Incumbency in Elections', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44(10), 2009.

<sup>5</sup> "BJP may lose 3 upcoming polls in MP, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan but win Lok Sabha election due to Modi factor: C-Voter survey", *Firstpost*, 14 August 2018. <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/bjp-may-lose-3-upcoming-polls-in-mp-chhattisgarh-rajasthan-but-win-lok-sabha-election-due-to-modi-factor-c-voter-survey-4959221.html>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.

This might be the most viable strategy for the BJP, the alternative being expanding its electoral presence to new areas in the east and south of the country. Since Modi came to power, the BJP has made important inroads in the Northeast but these states are scarcely populated and do not count much in electoral terms. In other states, like Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala and Odisha, the BJP's presence remains marginal and strong regional parties will most likely win the majority of the seats. In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party has walked away from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), accusing the central government of renegeing its promises of granting special assistance to the state to compensate for the losses due to its bifurcation in 2014. Only in Telangana, there might be some space for the BJP, mainly because of the absence of any credible alternative to the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi. Overall, it seems unlikely that the BJP will be able to win significant number of seats in the southern or eastern states that could offset the likely losses in North and West India.

Of course, it is way too early to make any reliable prediction on the general elections, especially in light of the fact that many Indian voters take a final decision on who to vote for during the last two days before the polls – as many as 24.5 per cent of the voters did so in 2014.<sup>6</sup> The electoral campaign matters greatly and Modi is India's undisputed star campaigner. In fact, in 2017, the BJP was able to reverse a significantly negative trend in opinion polls in Gujarat, when Modi started campaigning in the state a couple of weeks before the elections.<sup>7</sup> Importantly, according to the latest round of Mood of the Nation Survey conducted in July 2018,<sup>8</sup> Modi remains, by far, the most popular leader.

However, the same survey should alarm the BJP. Modi's approval ratings declined from 65 per cent in January 2017 – shortly after demonetisation and just before the elections in Uttar Pradesh – to 49 per cent in July 2018. If elections were held today, the BJP would fall short of a majority and the NDA would barely cross the 272 threshold. However, if the opposition will form an anti-BJP *mahagathbandhan*, the survey calculates, the NDA and the opposition Grand

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<sup>6</sup> All-India post poll 2014 survey findings, *Lokniti*, available at: <http://www.lokniti.org/pdf/All-India-Postpoll-2014-Survey-Findings.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Michelguglielmo Torri and Diego Maiorano, India 2017: Narendra Modi's continuing hegemony and his challenge to China, *Asia Maior*, Vol. 28, 2017. <https://www.asiamaior.org/the-journal/india-2017-narendra-modis-continuing-hegemony-and-his-challenge-to-china.html>. Accessed on 25 August 2018.

<sup>8</sup> "On a slippery slope", *India Today*, 18 August 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20180827-on-a-slippery-slope-1315660-2018-08-18>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.

Alliance would be neck-to-neck, winning 228 and 224 seats respectively. Clearly, as political scientist Milan Vaishnav put it, the 2019 elections ‘won’t be a cakewalk’ for the saffron party.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Milan Vaishnav, ‘2019 Election Won’t Be a Cakewalk for BJP’, Carnegie Endowment for International peace.<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/29/2019-election-won-t-be-cakewalk-for-bjp-pub-76465>. Accessed on 26 August 2018.