

## Assam Assembly Elections: BJP has the momentum

*Assembly elections in India's north-eastern State of Assam were conducted in two phases on April 4 and 11 with the results scheduled to be announced on May 19. The indications are that BJP and its allies are better placed than the incumbent Congress to form the next government in Assam.*

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Of the four Indian States going to polls in April-May 2016, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stands the best chance of forming government in Assam. The BJP has traditionally not been a major player in Assam, having won 5 seats and 11% of the vote share in the 2011 Assembly elections. In the 2014 national elections, however, the party dramatically improved its performance winning seven of 14 Lok Sabha seats and getting 36% of the vote share. For the 2016 election, held in two phases on April 4 and 11, the BJP further strengthened its position by tying up with two regional parties, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodo People's Front (BPF). The BJP is contesting 91 out of 126 seats in the Assam Assembly while its alliance partners are contesting the rest. In a departure from its strategy in Bihar, Maharashtra and Haryana, the BJP projected Sarbananda Sonowal, Union Minister and a Member of Parliament from Assam, as its chief ministerial candidate. The effectiveness of the party's strategy was

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reflected in opinion polls, some of which gave the BJP alliance an edge over the governing Congress and the regional All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF).

### **Advantage BJP**

The combined voter turnout for the Assam elections was 85%, slightly higher than the 2014 election and considerably higher than in 2011. The higher turnout could be welcome news for the BJP since this probably means that a large number of voters below 30 years, who constitute a third of Assam's electorate and are more likely to vote against the incumbent, cast their ballot. Leaving aside the voter turnout, the electoral math is in favour of the BJP alliance. The combined vote share of the BJP and its allies in Assam in the 2014 elections was 43%, significantly higher than the Congress's 30%. If the BJP were to maintain its performance in the 2014 elections, it would end up winning 69 seats or a clear majority. While the numbers could change from 2014, the difference is unlikely to be too much.

The BJP believes that its chief ministerial candidate could be its trump card. At 53 years, Sonowal, who is charge of the youth affairs portfolio at the Centre, is considerably younger than the three-time Congress chief minister Tarun Gogoi. A former member of the AGP and belonging to the Scheduled Tribes, Sonowal was the face of the BJP's campaign in Assam. This was a marked change from the strategy followed in the 2015 Assembly elections in Bihar where no local leaders was projected and Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP president Amit Shah dominated the election campaign. While both Modi and Shah campaigned in Assam, it was nowhere near the intensity with which they did so in Bihar, where the BJP suffered a resounding defeat in 2015.

The BJP also played up the issue of illegal migration from Bangladesh, which is an emotive issue among voters. This had led to polarisation among voters along religious lines which could help the BJP to consolidate the Hindu vote in Assam, but would hurt it in Muslim-dominated areas. During the last phase of campaigning, Shah said that the BJP would "completely free" Assam of Bangladeshis if voted to power. Though there are no reliable estimates of the number of Bangladeshi migrants in India, some put it at 20 million, of which 5 million could be in Assam.

For the Congress, which has been in power in Assam for three successive terms, anti-incumbency could be its biggest enemy. Though Gogoi is still considerably popular, according to opinion polls, his party might not be able to buck the mood for *poriborton* or change. One opinion poll has predicted that the Congress will win 36 seats, less than half the 79 seats it won in 2011. A last-minute tie-up with the United People's Party, backed by the All Bodo Students Union, could, however, help the Congress in Bodo-dominated areas.

The Congress has also been hit by factionalism and a flight of leaders. One of main strategists of the BJP was Himanta Biswa Sarma – a prominent Congress leader and state minister once seen as Gogoi's successor – who left to join the BJP ahead of the 2014 election.

The third player in the state is the AIUDF led by the perfume tycoon Badruddin Ajmal. The AIUDF is popular among Muslims who constitute 34% of Assam's population. The Muslims, who traditionally voted for the Congress, have gravitated towards the AIUDF in recent times. But some opinion polls are predicting that the AIUDF has lost ground and its tally might fall well below the 18 seats that it won in 2011. It must also be kept in mind that the Muslims in Assam don't vote as a bloc and that there is a division among Muslims based on those who speak Assamese and ones whose mother tongue is Bengali. If the BJP alliance falls short of a majority and the AIUDF has sufficient number of seats, there is a possibility that the AIUDF could tie up with the Congress. In his public statements Ajmal has said that there is no question of a post-poll alliance with the BJP, but has kept the door open for the Congress.

## **Conclusion**

By all indications the BJP is well placed in Assam. A victory in the State would give some breathing space to Modi and Shah after the party's debacle in the Bihar Assembly elections and earlier in Delhi. For the Congress, the stakes are much higher since Assam is one of the few States where the party is in power on its own. A loss would mean a further blow to the party's central leadership, which has not recovered from its poor performance in the 2014 national election, and would encourage dissidence in other State units.

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