

ISAS Brief

No. 531 – 6 December 2017

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



The Bharatiya Janata Party Confident Ahead of Gujarat Elections

The Assembly elections in the Indian State of Gujarat will be held in two phases on 9 and 14 December 2017, with the results being announced on 18 December 2018. While the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is predicting that it will win over 150 seats in the 182-member Assembly, the Congress is banking on a coalition to improve on its performance in the State. This paper examines the election strategies of the BJP and the Congress in the State.

Ronojoy Sen¹

The stage is set for the two-phase Assembly elections in the Indian State of Gujarat on 9 and 14 December 2017. The two main contenders, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, have announced their candidates with the deadline for the withdrawal of nomination of candidates for the second phase ending on 30 November 2017.

While the BJP is the frontrunner in Gujarat, the high stakes in the State are apparent from the amount of time that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who was Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, and senior BJP ministers are spending on the campaign trail.

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

Modi is expected to address 35 rallies by the time campaigning ends on 12 December 2017.² Several BJP ministers, including Arun Jaitley, Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj and Nitin Gadkari, as well as BJP chief ministers, such as Yogi Adityanath of Uttar Pradesh, are taking part in the campaign. BJP President Amit Shah, who hails from Gujarat, has been campaigning in the State for the past two months.

For the Congress, party Vice-President, Rahul Gandhi, has been campaigning in a sustained manner, which is a departure from the past. This will also be the first election under Rahul's watch as Congress President since he is expected to be appointed the leader of the party shortly, possibly on 11 December 2017.³

The BJP's List of Candidates

The BJP's list of candidates for Gujarat's 182 Assembly constituencies contained few surprises. Most of the incumbent members of the legislative assembly (MLAs) have been re-nominated. Only five MLAs have been dropped, with one of them being former Gujarat Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, who had announced that she would not be contesting the elections. The current list is in contrast to the 2007 and 2012 Assembly elections, where the BJP denied nominations to 47 and 30 incumbent MLAs respectively. At the same time, in what has become a common practice, the BJP has nominated five Congress MLAs, who had rebelled against their party in August 2017, before the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) elections in Gujarat.

The BJP has been mindful of the resentment within the Patidar community, spearheaded by Hardik Patel, and has nominated as many as 53 Patidar candidates.⁴ The Patidars or Patels make up around 12 per cent of Gujarat's population but have the ability to swing the verdict in 70-odd constituencies. The BJP will be encouraged by the 2012 Assembly election results

² "Gujarat elections: BJP plays the Modi trump card in final phase of campaign", Gyan Varma, *Livemint*, 30 November 2017. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/Kiz9Gf9rg6WgmdrUVDcNtK/Gujarat-elections-BJP-plays-the-Modi-trump-card-in-final-ph.html>. Accessed on 3 December 2017.

³ "Highlights: Rahul Gandhi only valid candidate, set to take over as Congress chief on Dec 11", *Hindustan Times*, 5 December 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/live-updates-rahul-gandhi-set-to-take-over-as-congress-president/story-IDHL72fX9QHK8ZzcOgRFLM.html>. Accessed on 5 December 2017.

⁴ "Gujarat election: Can the Hardik-Alpesh-Jignesh troika end BJP's 22-year rule?", Uday Mahurkar, *India Today*, 30 November 2017. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gujarat-elections-hardik-patel-alpesh-thakor-jignesh-mevani-bjp/1/1100113.html>. Accessed on 2 December 2017.

where the Gujarat Parivartan Party, formed by a BJP rebel and former Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel, and banking on the Patidar vote, won only two seats. The BJP had then won 115 seats and the Congress 61.

In addition to putting faith in incumbent MLAs, the BJP has, in the run-up to the elections, tried to assuage the sentiments of small businessmen and traders who have been hit hard by demonetisation and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The GST Council's reduction in rates, announced in October 2017, is likely to benefit several sectors in Gujarat, including textiles, and would work to the BJP's advantage.⁵

The Congress Strategy

The Congress is aware that it does not have either the grassroots organisation or a leader with state-wide popularity to match the BJP. Hence, the Congress has revived an alliance, which it used to good effect in the 1980s. Then, it was an alliance of the Kshatriyas, Harijans (or Dalits), Adivasis (tribals) and Muslims, which was known by the acronym 'KHAM'. This time around, the Muslims have been replaced by the Patidars, which has led the new alliance being labelled 'KHAP'. Indeed, the Congress has given tickets to 47 Patels for the coming elections.

The Congress has reached out to four key leaders to cement the KHAP alliance – the Other Backward Classes (OBC) leader Alpesh Thakore, the Dalit activist Jignesh Mevani, the Adivasi leader Chhotu Vasava, and Hardik Patel, who has been heading an agitation of the Patidars. Of these four, only Thakore has formally joined the Congress and will contest from Radhanpur, an OBC-dominated constituency. While Hardik is too young to contest the elections, members of the organisation that he leads, the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti, are contesting the elections on the Congress tickets. Mevani is contesting as an independent candidate from the Vadgam constituency,⁶ with backing from the Congress, while Vasava's

⁵ "GST Council meeting: New steps announced help election-bound Gujarat in particular", Sandeep Singh and Anil Sasi, *Indian Express*, 7 October 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/new-steps-announced-help-election-bound-gujarat-in-particular-4878404/>. Accessed on 1 December 2017.

⁶ "Jignesh Mewani to contest in Gujarat polls from Vadgam", *The Hindu*, 27 November 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/jignesh-mewani-to-contest-in-gujarat-polls-from-vadgam/article20953898.ece>. Accessed on 3 December 2017.

newly-formed outfit, the Bharatiya Tribal Party, is contesting three seats as part of an electoral arrangement with the Congress.⁷

Of the four leaders that the Congress has tied up with, Hardik is, by a long stretch, the most popular in Gujarat. He has channelled the discontent among the Patidars and their demands for reservation under the OBC quota. He has been campaigning tirelessly against the BJP over the past few months and his public meetings have been pulling in large crowds.

That the BJP sees Hardik as a threat is apparent from the amount of time that the BJP has spent in criticising him and his alliance with the Congress. The primary line of attack is that the reservation for the Patels under the OBC quota is legally untenable. Gujarat's deputy Chief Minister, Nitin Patel, himself a Patidar, has repeatedly attacked Hardik. Shah has also dismissed the Congress-Hardik tie-up, saying recently, "I believe that it has become clear in the elections that the Congress's promise is not possible on the issue of reservations."⁸

In his election speeches, Modi has not made much reference to the Congress' allies in Gujarat. Instead, he has restricted his attacks to the Congress and Rahul, repeatedly raising the issue of dynasticism and the Congress' bias against Gujarat and Gujarati leaders, such as Vallabhbhai Patel and Morarji Desai. Following the Supreme Court hearing on the disputed religious site in Ayodhya on 5 December 2017, Modi has raised the issue of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, an emotional issue for the Hindus, in his campaign speeches. During his campaigning, Rahul, in response, has not only brought up issues such as the faulty implementation of the GST, but has also questioned the BJP's track record on human development in Gujarat.

Conclusion

In spite of the ground reality in Gujarat being quite different from the last three Assembly elections, the BJP has maintained a confident front. In the midst of the election campaign,

⁷ "Gujarat elections: Congress seals seat-sharing deal with Chhotu Vasava's party", Maulik Pathak, *Livemint*, 22 November 2017. <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/aoBxKHtig06tc3XeXTylyJ/Gujarat-elections-Congre-ss-seals-seatsharing-deal-with-Chh.html>. Accessed on 3 December 2017.

⁸ "Gujarat polls: Congress' quota formula for Patidars is constitutionally impossible, says Amit Shah", *Scroll.in*, 3 December 2017. <https://scroll.in/latest/860081/gujarat-polls-congress-quota-formula-for-patidars-is-constitutionally-impossible-says-amit-shah>. Accessed on 4 December 2017.

Shah has repeated his earlier claim that the BJP would win over 150 seats in Gujarat.⁹ Whether this is a mere bravado will be revealed when the results are announced on 18 December 2017. Most opinion polls have predicted a comfortable victory for the BJP. However, one of the latest such polls by Lokniti-CSDS-ABP has forecast a close finish, with both the BJP and Congress getting 43 per cent of the vote share.¹⁰ This is in contrast to an earlier survey by the same organisation, which had said that the gap in vote share between the BJP and the Congress stood at five per cent.¹¹

Given the importance of Gujarat for Modi, coupled with Shah's predictions, even if the Congress can keep the BJP to less than 110 seats or so, it would regard the result as a moral victory. Like the BJP, Rahul and the Congress also have a lot riding on the Gujarat results, not only because of the effort Rahul has put into campaigning, but also since this would be the first election to be held under his watch as the party's president.

.....

⁹ "150 seats is neither ambitious nor impossible: Amit Shah", Vasudha Venugopal, *The Economic Times*, 3 December 2017. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/150-seats-is-neither-ambitious-nor-impossible-amit-shah/articleshow/61896029.cms>. Accessed on 4 December 2017.

¹⁰ "It may be a photo finish for BJP, Congress in Gujarat polls: survey", *The Hindu*, 4 December 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/it-may-be-a-photo-finish-for-bjp-congress-survey/article21261571.ece>. Accessed 4 December 2017.

¹¹ "BJP will win in Gujarat: Pre-poll survey", *The Hindu*, 10 November 2017. <http://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-2017/bjp-will-win-in-gujarat-pre-poll-survey/article20112178.ece>. Accessed on 3 December 2017.