

# ISAS Brief

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## **Gujarat Assembly Elections: BJP Ahead Despite Voter Discontent**

*The Indian state of Gujarat, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi was a three-term chief minister, goes to polls in December 2017. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, which is in power in Gujarat and at the Centre, is looking to make a strong statement by winning more seats in this state than it has ever won. He has made several visits to the state, and the party has used the delay in the announcement of the election dates to offer a variety of government schemes to win over the voters.*

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The Indian Election Commission (EC) has announced the dates for the Gujarat Assembly elections, which will be held in two phases on 9 and 14 December 2017. However, for the past two weeks, there has been controversy around the EC's delay in announcing the elections dates for Gujarat, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in power. On 12 October 2017, the EC had indeed announced the dates for Assembly elections in Himachal Pradesh but not for the Gujarat elections. It broke with the practice of simultaneously announcing the poll dates for states where incumbent governments are due to complete their

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five-year terms within six months. Himachal Pradesh goes to polls on 9 November 2017, and the results for both states will be announced on 18 December 2017.

The importance of the EC's announcement of election dates has to do with the practice of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) coming into immediate effect, which forbids the incumbent government from trying to influence the voters through financial grants and developmental activities or promises in that regard.<sup>2</sup> The delay in announcing the poll dates for Gujarat was justified by the EC on the grounds that relief work in seven flood-affected districts of Gujarat would be hampered by an early announcement.

The EC's decision, however, led to criticism from the opposition parties as well as former chief election commissioners. One of the former commissioners pertinently pointed out that the MCC does not stand in the way of emergency relief work.<sup>3</sup> That their criticism had some merit was underscored by the announcement of several sops in Gujarat by the government prior to the formal announcement of the election dates. On 23 October 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced in Vadodara several projects worth Rs 1,140 crore (approximately S\$239 million). The Vijay Rupani-led state government has additionally announced several measures to woo the voters.

## **BJP's Mission 150 in Gujarat**

Putting aside the controversy over the election dates, the BJP seems to be in a strong position to return to power in Gujarat, where it has been the ruling party for nearly two decades. Its biggest asset is Modi, who was Chief Minister of the state from 2001 to 2014 and still enjoys considerable popularity there. The BJP also has a well-oiled party organisation. That Modi continues to nurse his home state is evident from the fact that he has visited Gujarat almost every month in 2017. In October alone, he visited Gujarat three times. During his tenure as

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://documents.gov.in/UA/992.pdf>. The relevant clause of the code says: From the time elections are announced by the Commission, Ministers and other authorities shall not – (a) announce any financial grants in any form or promises thereof; or (b) (except civil servants) lay foundation stones etc. of projects or schemes of any kind; or (c) make any promise of construction of roads, provision of drinking water facilities etc.; or (d) make any ad-hoc appointments in Government, Public Undertakings etc. which may have the effect of influencing the voters in favour of the party in power.

<sup>3</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/ex-cec-krishnamurthy-frowns-on-election-commissions-delay-in-gujarat-state-polls-dates-4894116/>.

Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi had projected himself as a symbol of Gujarati *asmita* (pride) and still plays up his Gujarati identity. The combination of Modi's charisma and a party organisation with deep roots has ensured that the vote share of the BJP has not dipped below 48 per cent in the last three Assembly elections. That has encouraged BJP President Amit Shah, who is also from Gujarat, to set his party a target of winning at least 150 out of a potential 182 Assembly seats in the coming election. The target of 150 is not just a round figure but would also represent the best-ever performance by any party in Gujarat, bettering the 149 seats won by the Congress under Madhavsinh Solanki in 1985. That was the time when the Congress had stitched together a formidable caste-and-community alliance of Kshatriyas, Harijans (or Dalits), Adivasis and Muslims, which was known by the acronym KHAM. The BJP's best performance till date in Gujarat is the 127 seats it won in 2002 under Modi in the aftermath of communal riots there.

Whether the BJP, which holds 121 seats in the outgoing Assembly, can reach the 150-seat target or even substantially increase its seat share from its 2012 numbers is a moot question. Though Shah is known to set stiff targets, as in Uttar Pradesh, and often achieves them, there are several factors going against the BJP improving on its performance from 2012. First, the Patidar community, which comprises 12 per cent of Gujarat's voters and has voted as a bloc for the BJP, is not happy with the party. In 2015, a virtually unknown Hardik Patel demanded reservations for the Patidars, and the state responded in a heavy-handed fashion, resulting in the BJP losing significant support among the community. Although Hardik has not joined the Congress, the only other serious contender in Gujarat, he has consistently opposed the BJP.<sup>4</sup> Second, a popular Other Backward Classes (OBC) leader, Alpesh Thakor, has joined the Congress in the run-up to the election. The OBCs constitute 40 per cent of the voters in Gujarat and have backed the BJP in recent times. Third, Dalit leader Jignesh Mewani, who shot to prominence as the face of the protests against violence inflicted on the Dalit community in Una in Gujarat in 2016, is also engaged in talks with the Congress. Fourth, demonetisation and the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) have hit the small traders, who form a committed support base of the BJP, as well as the farmers. Fifth, Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi's *Navsarjan Yatra* (March for Regeneration) earlier this year in central Gujarat and Saurashtra had drawn a good response. This has made some

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/will-support-congress-in-gujarat-says-patidar-leader-hardik-patel/story-roVJVWgCqK11s2N3gtgjrJ.html>.

analysts portray the Gujarat election as a Modi-Rahul showdown. Finally, in the absence of any major corruption scandal, the Congress could use the allegations against Amit Shah's son, Jay Shah, as political ammunition to target the BJP.<sup>5</sup>

The BJP has devised its own strategies to counter these factors. It has tried to break the unity of the Patidar movement led by Hardik and even allegedly offered inducements to some of the Patidar leaders to switch allegiance.<sup>6</sup> It has held its own *Gaurav Yatra* (March for Honour), which has covered 149 of the state's constituencies over 15 days. The *yatra*, however, was marred in certain places by Patidar protesters.<sup>7</sup> The Gujarat government has also provided concessions, particularly to the farmers and government employees, to mitigate the effects of the GST and demonetisation. Finally, the BJP is also expecting some of the smaller parties, such as the Aam Aadmi Party, the Nationalist Congress Party and an outfit floated by Congress rebel, Shankarsinh Vaghela, a former Chief Minister of Gujarat who was earlier with the BJP, to wean votes away from the Congress.

## Conclusion

Despite the changed ground reality in Gujarat, the BJP's performance might eventually depend on Modi's popularity in his home state as well as the strength of the party machinery that he helped to put in place. Opinion polls have predicted that BJP is likely to win convincingly. The one conducted by *India Today-Axis* has forecast that the BJP will win in the range of 115 to 125 seats,<sup>8</sup> which is around the number that it won in 2007 and 2012. Another opinion poll has put the range of seats slightly higher at 118 to 134.<sup>9</sup> For the Congress, whose organisation in Gujarat has decayed over the years, a victory does not seem within the realm of possibility. However, it should look to build on the momentum that Rahul

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<sup>5</sup> <https://thewire.in/185512/amit-shah-narendra-modi-jay-shah-bjp/>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/bjp-offered-one-crore-to-join-party-patidar-leader/article19904904.ece>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/patidars-disrupt-amit-shah-speech-before-flagging-off-gaurav-yatra-4870106/>.

<sup>8</sup> <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/gujarat-opinion-poll-2017-india-today-axis-my-india-opinion-poll-gujarat-election/1/1074463.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-set-to-win-big-in-gujarat-assembly-polls-times-now-vmr-survey/articleshow/61228233.cms>.

has built in Gujarat and improve on its 2012 performance. That would help dispel the notion of Rahul being a part-time politician, and it may even have a ripple effect in the other states.

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