

Focus
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Incha Hussain

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Introduction

From April 19 to June 1, 2024, 970 million voters gathered in seven phases to elect the new Indian Lok Sabha for a five-year term, making it one of the largest democratic elections in world history.¹ Modi's re-election for a third term was highly anticipated. However, this election was not conducted peacefully, as there were arrests of opponents a few weeks before the start of the legislative elections, along with numerous protests and demonstrations in various Indian regions.

The emphasis on the majority religion and the primacy that Modi accords to Hinduism and the ideology of Hindutva allowed him to achieve landslide victories and majorities in 2014 and 2019. However, this time, it did not seem to work, as Modi's BJP only secured 240 seats, far behind the majority needed to govern, which is 273. In previous years, they had a majority of 282 in 2014 and 303 in 2019. Modi seems to have lost some of his voters due to his unfulfilled promise to improve the situation of

* Incha Hussain is working as an intern with the India Program at the Institute of Regional Studies (IRS), Islamabad.

farmers, which has worsened over the past 10 years. Protests and demonstrations have multiplied against New Delhi's policies in this vital and primary sector of the Indian economy.

The agricultural sector is indeed facing a growth and development crisis, even though it should be the main pillar of India, with 60 per cent of India's area being arable, making it one of the largest arable land areas after the US.² Moreover, agriculture involves 228.3 million of the Indian workforce, which itself accounts for 467 million people in a population of 1.21 billion. Thus, agriculture is the backbone of the Indian economy, with 93.09 million farming households, 82 per cent of which are small marginal farmers. The main productions are rice, wheat, and sorghum³, but today the rural areas have suffered too much from Modi's agricultural policies that favour his urban and majority electorate.

This article analyses how this resistance movement of farmers towards Modi's policies influenced the 2024 Indian legislative elections. In doing so, it first looks at the origin of this agitation and how it was reinforced through controversial agricultural reforms introduced by Modi's government, and then understand how this played out in the BJP electorate through an analysis of the voter turnout.

The Origin of the Agitation

Controversial Agricultural Reforms

A significantly overlooked factor by Modi during his previous terms and his preparation for his recent presidential campaign is that farmers constitute the largest electoral bloc in India⁴, surpassing the influence of caste, which is predominant in Indian politics. Therefore, improving the situation of farmers is

favourable to a large part of the electorate. According to a national survey, farming households make up 54 per cent of rural Indian households, and 21 per cent of these households depend entirely on agriculture. Despite India's overall economic growth, which placed it as the 5th largest economy globally, the agricultural sector has only been growing at about 4 per cent per year over the past two decades.⁵ Meanwhile, agricultural growth under the Modi government has stagnated, with an annual growth rate dropping to 1.8 per cent during the three years of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). This rate is well below the 4 per cent, necessary to support the rural sector and the economy in general, a target that was achieved in 2013-2014 under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.⁶ This stagnation has exacerbated the difficulties of farmers, already burdened by growing debts, insufficient remuneration for their products, and unpredictable weather conditions.

This crisis poses a problem and fuels the agitation of farmers, as Modi's rise to power has only reinforced it during his two terms. In 2020, Modi adopted three controversial laws to liberalise the agricultural sector and remove barriers to sales, allowing farmers to sell directly to private companies. However, this initiative is seen as threatening to farmers' livelihoods, who fear that private companies will use their position to force low prices, exacerbating farmers' massive debts. Moreover, the main stakeholders were not invited to join the discussion to implement these reforms. The promise to reform the agricultural sector and double farmers' incomes has failed, as in 2022, farmers earned an average of 10,218 rupees per year, about 28 rupees per day, according to government data. Between 2018 and 2022, over

53,000 farmers committed suicide, overwhelmed by endless debt and poor remuneration for their products.⁷

While farmers do benefit from stable incomes, thanks to the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for wheat and rice, they are now demanding that the MSP be extended to other products due to the depletion of groundwater, making wheat and rice cultivation unsustainable and thus providing little financial resources. This unsustainability of crops is further reinforced by restrictions on the export of agricultural products, such as wheat, rice, sugar, and onions, imposed by New Delhi to protect the purchasing power of urban consumers, weighing even more heavily on farmers' incomes. For example, onion exports were suspended from December 2023 to March 2024, leading to a 58 per cent increase in prices due to poor rains in the western and northern producing states. Weather is notably responsible for the decline in land productivity, especially in Punjab.⁸

Protests and Their Repression

The impact of these reforms, perceived as favouring private companies and consumers at the expense of producers, is rejected by a large majority of the farming community. Moreover, the government's insufficient response to agricultural challenges fuels protests against it, which it does not hesitate to respond to with significant repression. This discontent is notably expressed through prolonged protests on the borders of New Delhi, where thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, gathered in November 2020, with the intention of blocking major highways. This gathering quickly transformed into a camp that lasted more than a year, despite deplorable weather conditions and significant police repression. Authorities deployed numerous

repressive measures to prevent the protests from entering the capital from their border points at Singhu, Tikri, and Ghazipur, using water cannons, tear gas, and physical force. This violence had the opposite effect of what the Modi government intended, as it strengthened the legitimacy of the demands and was joined by various groups of workers, activists, and students. Demonstrating broad public sympathy, it allowed the general public to become aware of the contours of the reforms being implemented, despite the farmers' mobilisation disrupting the local economy.

After many physical confrontations with the police and negotiations held between November 2020 and January 2021 that did not reach a consensus—since farmers wanted a complete repeal of the laws—along with other peaceful means of pressure like hunger strikes, the farmers managed to get the law repealed a year later.⁹

However, the farmers' fight did not stop there, since they have resumed their protests on the model of 2020, with more numerous demands, and this was just a few months before the general elections. According to them, the Modi government has not kept the promise it made two years ago, namely to ensure MSP scrutiny for all production via the creation of a committee. In addition, the demonstrators are now demanding pensions for the elderly and the cancellation of their debts, which they feel they would not have incurred if good governance on the subject had been in place. They also want to double the number of working days under the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, from 100 to 200 days. Finally, they demand that India withdraw from the World Trade Organisation (WTO), as free trade agreements would put their crops at a disadvantage.¹⁰

While Modi does not seem to be giving in to the demands, or even taking them into consideration a month before the elections, the situation is particularly critical for him due to the geographical scope of this mobilisation. This is not limited to Punjab, but is spreading throughout India, making the situation difficult for the BJP government to ignore. Despite this, the government continues to use tear gas and physical force, as it did in 2020 on the protesters, but Modi, for his part, seems as prepared as the protesters during his campaign visits.

Indeed, several farmers were arrested in the short period of electoral visits so they could not protest during the visits. This was the case for farmers in Yavatmal in Maharashtra, who were once ardent admirers of Modi's BJP. The current Prime Minister had made this region an electoral opportunity in 2014 with the promise of addressing the agricultural crisis. A decade later, the enthusiasm is no longer the same with Modi and his candidates, as the crises have worsened, and the freedom to protest and express themselves is being violated. While some states managed to ban BJP candidates from entering, others tried to establish a dialogue with Modi, if only for two minutes. This was the case for Dighole, a farmer in the onion-growing belt, one of the most affected products in the last six months, who was placed under house arrest when he expressed his desire to personally present the problems and difficulties of farmers to Modi and the officials.¹¹ Given the normalisation of visits to agricultural sites after a violent repression of protests, it seems that the BJP considers the farmers' vote as assured.

The Electoral Stakes

The Political Organisation of Farmers

The impression that the BJP government took farmers' support for granted has led to a sense of betrayal among them. This sentiment has driven farmers to prioritise their agricultural identity and vote accordingly, weakening the BJP's position in rural areas. They have organised politically to counter New Delhi's repression and to truly make their voices heard beyond protests.

Agricultural unions, such as the Samyukta Kisan Morcha, have been essential in mobilising farmers and combating proposed agricultural reforms¹², highlighting the importance of solidarity and collective resilience in facing political challenges. Despite the government's efforts and some allied media portraying protesters as anti-national elements or manipulated by external forces, and smear campaigns aimed at weakening public support, farmers have managed to strengthen their unions and increase their influence in the public sphere on future agricultural issues. The fact that farm leaders come from the local community helps reinforce the dynamic and trust of populations who personally know the concerns of the field.

However, this political mobilisation of farmers has not been without challenges. The diversity of interests within the agricultural movement, regional tensions, and ideological differences have sometimes threatened the movement's unity. Additionally, government repression, including arbitrary arrests and communication restrictions, has tested farmers' ability to maintain continuous pressure on the government.

This shows that farmers and their political organisation have an important place and impact in Indian politics. According

to the leaders of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), it is the target of internal attacks orchestrated by the government, aimed at dividing the group. SKM members are urging farmers and their supporters to 'punish the BJP'¹³ in the 2024 Indian general elections for what they see as anti-farmer policies.

The BJP, for its part, seems to be reacting by trying to divide the movement from within, which has led to the creation of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (Non-Political), based on caste and culture-specific divisions. This fragmentation of the original group, accentuated by the infiltration of RSS members to misguide people, also reduces their bargaining power. This has led, according to the SKM leaders, to clashes, such as the one on 26 January 2021 during the tractor march to the Red Fort, which SKM sees as a plot to tarnish the farmers' image. Although Indian farmers are organising themselves politically to counter the Modi government, they have to overcome internal divisions and external manipulations. Their ability to remain united and effectively mobilise their electoral base will be crucial to their success in their demands.

Despite these obstacles, the resilience and determination of Indian farmers have not only led to symbolic victories against agricultural reforms but have also laid the foundations for a new era of political mobilisation and democratic participation for rural communities in India.

Influence on Electoral Results

These symbolic victories are particularly evident in their significant impact during the 2024 legislative election, highlighting notable political changes. The BJP lost in several key regions, notably in the Faizabad constituency.¹⁴ This occurred

despite Modi dedicating the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya on the ruins of the Babri mosque, destroyed by Hindu partisans in 1992.

In the onion belt, a key product in Indian cuisine, farmers' discontent with falling prices was reflected in the BJP's loss, winning only one seat among all onion-producing districts. For many farmers, the hesitation to vote was more due to New Delhi's reaction to protests than the agricultural policies themselves. The fact that the Modi government lifted the ban on onion exports one day before the elections was seen as anecdotal and did not help the BJP gain more votes, favouring the opposition.¹⁵

Overall, the election results showed a significant decrease in the number of BJP seats in Maharashtra. In 2019, the BJP won 23 seats in this decisive state, the second most populous in India, sending 48 MPs to the Lok Sabha, whereas in 2024, they only obtained nine. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which won 41 seats in 2019, secured only 17 this time.¹⁶ This pattern was repeated in many key agricultural belts in India. Nationally, the BJP lost its majority after a decade of dominance.

An analysis of the results suggests that millions of rural voters in some of India's largest food-producing states abandoned the BJP this time. In Haryana, the BJP, which had won all the seats (10) in 2019, won only five this time, with the opposition Congress winning the other five. The BJP suffered a total defeat in Punjab, one of the country's main rice and wheat producers. In Rajasthan, the BJP won 14 seats out of 25, compared to 25 seats previously, with a leader of the Communist Party of India winning against a BJP representative by capitalising on farmers' anger.

In Uttar Pradesh, where 65 per cent of the population depends on agriculture, the BJP won only 33 seats out of 80, compared to 62 in 2019 and 71 in 2014. Nationally, the NDA saw a 2.2 per cent decrease in rural votes, while the INDIA alliance's share of votes increased by 10 per cent. This trend manifested in many food-producing states, showing that farmers' concerns and their dissatisfaction with the government's handling of protests and the agricultural crisis were decisive in their voting choices.¹⁷

But in addition to the government's mismanagement of the crisis, the results of these elections have been fuelled by political manipulation by the opposition. For example, the photograph taken by Ravi Choudhary,¹⁸ a photojournalist with the Press Trust of India, after going viral has led to widespread criticism from the opposition, which is exploiting the image to denounce the way farmers are being treated. The photo, showing a paramilitary policeman presumably trying to beat up an elderly farmer, was quickly played down by the BJP. While Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Congress Opposition, took the opportunity to point out the extent to which the government had not kept its promises and was trying to violently repress the voice of farmers. This enabled him to rally more support. As a result, the Congress did not hesitate to promise a legal MSP for every farmer if elected, a promise that directly opposes the current government by positioning itself as the defender of farmers' rights.¹⁹

In addition to the Congress, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has no hesitation in criticising the BJP and questions the country's ability to develop if those who produce food are treated so brutally and unfairly.

The opposition is using the farmers' unrest to question the Modi government's management of the country, but above all to

strengthen their own political position. The massive mobilisation and media coverage of the protests have given the opposition parties a strategic opportunity to win the support of farmers and their supporters, thereby changing the Indian political landscape in the 2024 Indian parliamentary elections.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the agitation of the farmers is part of a more complex and delicate reality than just Modi's mandates, as this crisis existed before the BJP came to power. Farmers, who represent a significant majority of the electorate, have seen their living conditions deteriorate for several years despite promises of economic growth from various ruling parties. Slow agricultural development, rising debts, insufficient remuneration, and unpredictable weather conditions have exacerbated their difficulties. Modi's initiatives to liberalise the sector, perceived by farmers as benefiting private companies, have led to massive protests and severe repression, revealing a glaring failure in the dialogue between the government and farmers. This mismanagement of the crisis has weakened Modi's BJP position in several key regions, allowing the opposition to gain ground.

Although Modi won these elections thanks to his NDA alliance, this situation could have significant repercussions on the next general elections, weakening the position of Narendra Modi and his government. The widespread protests and growing frustration among farmers could also favour the opposition, which is showing increasing solidarity with farmers' demands. The coming weeks will be crucial for the current government, which will have to navigate this crisis while preparing for a decisive election campaign.

Furthermore, the impact on the 2024 legislative election is significant, as it demonstrates both the farmers' ability to influence the course of national politics and their organised denunciation of widespread discontent. This "farmers versus BJP"²⁰ phenomenon has been decisive for an initial change in the Indian political landscape.. This situation highlights the necessity of inclusive and sensitive agricultural reform that also addresses the needs of farmers. Otherwise, India could suffer economic and social losses that might hinder its overall economic growth.

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