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**THE 16TH LOK SABHA ELECTIONS:
AN INTERIM ANALYSIS**

HEBA AL ADAWY

INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL STUDIES ISLAMABAD

CONTENTS

The Congress party: An unlikely phoenix?	4
The incumbency factor	4
Rahul Gandhi: The poster boy	7
The Election Manifesto: Too much, too late?	8
The ‘face’ of BJP’s election campaign	10
BJP Manifesto: A grand-finale	14
A closer look at the Gujarat ‘success story’	17
A Modi referendum?	19
Aam Aadmi’s ‘broom’ for clean-er politics	21
Moving towards regionalization	25
Vidhan Sabha outcomes- 2012 & 2013	25
Emerging regional trends	28
Three regional ‘Queens’: Amma Ji, Behen Ji and Didi	33
Impact of regionalization on the Muslim vote bank	36
The rise and fall of the Third Front	38
Electoral math: Reaching the ‘magic number’	41
The external road ahead	43
Notes and References	45

THE 16TH LOK SABHA ELECTIONS: AN INTERIM ANALYSIS

HEBA AL ADAWY

One of the world's biggest exercises in democratic politics is currently underway in India, as approximately 814 million voters, including 180 million first-time voters, head to the polls in nine different phases held between 7 April and 16 May 2014. If the sheer scale of the electoral exercise and the deftness with which power is transferred not enough to captivate the interest of international observers, the *Lok Sabha* elections of 2014 offer the added ingredient of being one of the most polarizing votes in Indian history. On the one hand lies the incumbent Congress Party, marred by a series of corruption scandals and accused of tilting the economic field too heavily in favour of those with political connections. Rahul Gandhi, the 43-year-old scion of the Gandhi dynasty, stands as the default prime minister candidate of the party, a man with a well-meaning reputation but no ministerial experience whatsoever. On the other hand lies the controversial leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Narendra Modi, the man who presided over one of India's worst communal carnages to occur in Gujarat in 2002, and who had infamously proclaimed in the midst of the massacre, "Each action has an equal and opposite reaction."⁽¹⁾ Between the two political

Heba Al-Adawy, MPhil (Oxon), is a Research Analyst at the Institute of Regional Studies.

heavyweights of India are various regional parties, which are likely to be more empowered by the divisiveness of the ongoing electoral contest. Most prominent is the entry of the Delhi-based *Aam Aadmi Party* led by Arvind Kejriwal, a party that has been steadily attracting disgruntled voters through its anti-establishment ethos.

Although India follows a parliamentary style of government in which, structurally, parties are privileged over candidates during the polls, the electoral format has increasingly fallen into the cult of personalities. This is not to say that the elections are not fought over domestic issues such as economy, corruption, transparency or equitable rights; rather, that the outcomes are likely to be influenced by the way the issues are packaged and sold by the emerging leaders on the political scene. Amidst increasing urbanization, the paradox of “India Shining” is rendered even more acute, a scenario in which a country fighting for global prominence is caught in its own woes of arrested economic growth. While the Congress and BJP showdown typically evokes dichotomies of secularism versus communalism, the ongoing polls indicate that economic concerns — such as the provision of cheap water and electricity, more jobs, and the promise of development and prosperity — may overwhelm any such binaries. A hope for change also animates Indian voters — a promise offered by Modi on economic grounds, and by the debutant Arvind Kejriwal on moral grounds. But if ‘change’ is to be seen alongside ‘stability,’ then Kejriwal, as a political novice, may have little chances of overarching national success. For all his dark communal legacies, Modi has not only sold an attractive development model in Gujarat post 2002, but also stands as the embodiment of the “rags-to-riches” story for India’s predominantly rural population. At the same time, the prevailing cult of personalities is likely to also bear its own share of diminishing returns. The story of Gujarat acts as a critical precipice over which the elections of 2014 stand, and

its deep contradictions are likely to render an electoral outcome that is far more divided than the prevailing projections of Modi's unprecedented rise.

In the South Asian neighbourhood, the Indian elections have been preceded by regime changes in Pakistan, Iran and Bangladesh. They also coincide with a forthcoming regime transition in Afghanistan followed by the projected withdrawal of US and NATO forces; it is a scenario that is not only expected to alter the security calculus of South Asia but to also bring about a paradigm shift in the understanding of national security, particularly in the latter's inevitable dependency on regional co-operation. As an aspiring power, India therefore stands at a critical juncture. It is caught between expectations of playing a greater role for peace and stability by friends and foe alike, and of reconciling the contradictions of its external image against stagnating economy, poverty, corruption and even insurgencies raging in its parts of the country.

The Congress party: An unlikely phoenix?

The incumbency factor

As the Congress party stands poised for the elections, it cannot but brush off the staggering weight of baggage accumulated over the past ten years, during which it ruled in the form of a coalition termed the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). As a party that has ruled the country for the longest period of time since independence, it is not only charged with the blunders of its most recent past — but by default — also with some of the more enduring vices in the Indian political system, such as nepotism, inefficiency and incompetence. Compounding matters are a series of exposed corruption scandals that have dented the party's reputation in its second term of office.

Arguably corruption is a more endemic issue within the Indian polity, its culprits including, but not limited to, members of the UPA coalition. However, the scale of financial irregularities exposed in the recent years has been

unprecedented. Much to the chagrin of Indians, it has also attracted global spotlight on the failings of an aspiring regional power. India's Telecom scandal in 2012, in which the Supreme Court cancelled 122 telecommunications licences awarded to companies in 2008, featured as number 2 in *Time Magazine's* "World's Top 10 abuses of Power."⁽²⁾ Auditors estimated an amount of nearly \$40b(n) lost in revenue. Similarly, the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi was beset with incompetence, poor organization and serious irregularities with bidding and contracts. If the sheer cost of the Commonwealth undertaking (\$4.1bn as opposed to the revenue of \$38m) was not enough to aggravate matters in a country seared with rampant poverty, revelations of corrupt dealings added fuel to the fire. Additionally, a draft report from government auditors leaked in March 2012 revealed an estimated loss of \$210bn in the southern state of Karnataka, due to the sale of coalfields to companies without competitive bidding. The above scandals are a few among the litany of many other revelations, such as bribery charges against a defence industry lobbyist, a housing scam in the state of Maharashtra that hit a residential project intended for war widows, and a Wikileaks cable describing "chests of cash" allegedly used to bribe MPs in a crucial vote of confidence in 2008.⁽³⁾

Although not all corruption scandals were specific to Congress MPs per se, latest revelations regarding the 'Chopper Scam' (2013) and Robert Vadra's real-estate empire seem to have sealed the reputation of the incumbent government. In the former, a number of senior Indian officials are accused of corruption and bribery in their dealings with helicopter manufacturer, Augusta Westland.⁽⁴⁾ Most crucial in this scandal is the alleged involvement of Ahmed Patel, Sonia Gandhi's political secretary who is widely regarded as her right-hand man in political dealings. Meanwhile, Robert Vadra, son-in-law of Sonia Gandhi, has been at the centre stage of a brewing controversy for amassing a fortune

during the Congress era, starting from a small business of costume jewellery in 2009 to now owning a real-estate empire in Rajasthan.⁽⁵⁾

Metaphorically extorted from the sweat, blood and tears of Indian people, this colossal amount of money — concentrated in the hands of a few — makes the current economic predicament of India seem even more atrocious. The incumbent Congress faces the burden of unfavourable statistics, which document a decline in GDP from 7.9 per cent in 2004 to 4.7 per cent in 2013. Increasing inflation, rising food prices and unemployment have become the major concerns of the Indian electorate. To add to the urban woes are glaring structural imbalances in the agricultural sector, upon which half the population depends for livelihood. Despite UPA's public investments in agriculture, food inflation has been on the rise, and its disastrous impact on the population can be gauged from the annual average of suicides committed by farmers, which have increased from 15,369 in 2003 to 1,46,000 in 2012.⁽⁶⁾ In the midst of such realities, Manmohan Singh's reputation as an honest technocrat does little to salvage his party, instead it reinforces the charge of incompetence. The fact that the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi and her son Rahul Gandhi head the central campaign committee also attaches the stamp of dynastic politics to the Congress party, seemingly distant and divorced from the grievances of the masses.⁽⁷⁾

Rahul Gandhi: The poster boy

Whilst propping up Rahul Gandhi as the 'poster boy' in its election campaigns, the Congress has simultaneously refused to name him as the prime minister candidate ahead of the polls, making it clear that it does not intend to play presidential style election. In some ways, it is a strategic move on the part of the Congress party, as it allows more room for open and negotiable coalition building post-the-post election. The figure of Rahul Gandhi comes as a clean chit to the Congress, without the baggage of corruption scandals or criminality,

intended to evoke the enthusiasm of the youth. Rahul Gandhi himself has treaded over thin ice in terms of condemning corruption within the ranks of his party, without alienating some of the standing party members and their allies. When Manmohan Singh's cabinet issued an executive order allowing convicted lawmakers to hold office and stand for elections, Rahul Gandhi stunned his own colleagues in a public outburst that the ordinance should be "torn up and thrown away."⁽⁸⁾

Although this brief assertion of authority propelled the government to withdraw its decree, it is questionable whether Rahul Gandhi has managed to attain the stature of a 'strong leader and statesman,' a quality that many Indians are looking for in their next government. In fact, much of the electronic and social media has relentlessly portrayed Rahul Gandhi as the butt of all jokes, to the extent that even *The Economist* had to intervene on behalf of his public-speaking skills after he delivered his first one-to-one television interview with Arnab Goswani.⁽⁹⁾ To his supporters, Rahul Gandhi, albeit a well-meaning individual, has also made statements that would at best make them laugh, and at worse, cringe.⁽¹⁰⁾ In *Decoding Rahul Gandhi*, Aarthi Ramachandran describes him as a simple and well-intentioned person. "What you see is what you get," she says, before adding that it "is not enough to run a country."⁽¹¹⁾ Furthermore, Ramachandran describes Rahul Gandhi as someone who is torn between seeing himself as an activist who will transform Indian politics and a Congress die-hard fan who will work to keep the dynastic rule in power.

Perhaps compounding Rahul Gandhi's image as a weak leader is his own inclination to remain aloof from the equations of power. Leadership matters in the context of Indian elections. And particularly after the Manmohan Singh era characterized by policy paralysis, such a characteristic does not bode well for many. Within this context, the Congress dilemma over not naming a PM candidate has also given a free ride to the opposition, who are portraying it as a

sign of weakness and as Sonia Gandhi's reluctance to sacrifice her son at the altar of politics.⁽¹²⁾ Writing in the *Outlook*, Harish Khare, for instance, urges the Congress party to declare Rahul as its prime ministerial face. "The country desperately wants to be reassured that the Congress won't again opt for the 2004 model of divided authority and responsibility – under whatever pious organizational theory. That model suited that moment. And that moment has passed."⁽¹³⁾

The Election Manifesto: Too much, too late?

Meanwhile, the Congress ahead of the Lok Sabha polls has taken baby steps to remedy the perception of institutionalized indifference associated with it. According to Harish Khare, not all is lost for the party. "What the Congress leadership has to do is to try to understand honestly the nature of its current afflictions. Only a genuine dissection of how things have gone wrong can enable the party to reconnect with the people's democratic sentiments and anxieties." In some of the latest attempts to salvage its prospects, Manmohan Singh adopted a more labour-friendly stance by pushing for food-security and direct benefit transfers before the election. In attempting to mend the distance between the party and the electorate, the Congress also introduced a more consultative process in the formulation of its manifesto. A series of well-publicized meetings were held with different interest groups – minorities, women, Dalits, tribals, fishermen and even rickshawalas – in order to seek suggestions for the manifesto.

In this spirit of remedying past wrongs, the Congress released an extensive manifesto 10 days ahead of the polls, covering a breadth of issues from infrastructural development, judicial reform, health care and women's empowerment to the issue of minority representation. The manifesto pledges to restore India to 8 per cent plus growth rate within three years and boost manufacturing to 10 per cent with special emphasis on small and medium

enterprises. The manifesto reflects the consultative process undertaken by the party and attempts to court various interest groups by addressing their grievances of the past several years. From taking a stronger stance in favour of Tamils in Sri Lanka, a reason cited by Tamil Nadu's regional party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) for parting ways with UPA, to intervening on behalf of the transgender community, particularly in the aftermath of liberal outrage over a Supreme Court judgment banning homosexuality. There is even an allusion to the controversial expulsion of Kashmiri students over their cricket match allegiances in a clause that promises to end discrimination for students from Kashmir and the Northeast. Among other promises to empower women and minorities, an important feature is the endorsement of the Communal Violence Bill in India. This clause serves to specifically target BJP, given the party's fierce opposition of it earlier on the grounds that it interfered with the state's right to maintain law and order.

Although the manifesto offers many concessions to diverse constituencies, the crucial question for the Congress party is whether a 50-page document of promises can offset 10 years of rule at the Centre. While some of the interest groups may be appeased, it is also true that the electorate attaches greater weightage to governance and deliverance, rather than rhetoric. For many, the promises may be too much, too late. Furthermore, for the vast majority of the Indian electorate, simple messages put forward by dynamic leaders resonate more deeply than extensive documents. In both these areas, the party's record has not been favourable.

The 'Face' of BJP's election campaign

As India gears towards the 16th Lok Sabha elections, the face of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is being increasingly dominated by Narendra Modi, a humble *chai seller* trained in the ultra-communal *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*

(RSS) who rose to notoriety during the 2002 Gujarat massacre, and is now touted as the icon of ‘development and prosperity’ in India. Backed by the support of the Indian corporate community, the BJP campaign took an early start in 2013; it was not long before Narendra Modi was declared as the prime ministerial candidate in September 2013, with the central campaign panel, including Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley, Murli Manohar Joshi, placed under his stewardship. In the ensuing months, the BJP witnessed a steady transformation within the rank and file of the party, and increasing centralization at the hands of a narrow clique of members.

This trend was particularly evident in the series of seat-sharing squabbles that emerged just in the wake of the Lok Sabha polls. In March, L.K Advani was refused the seat of his preference in Bhopal, and was unceremoniously allotted Gandhinagar despite his initial objections. That the former veteran leader of BJP did not see eye-to-eye with Modi was clear, for it was Advani who had earlier raised his objection to Modi’s nomination as a prime minister candidate.⁽¹⁴⁾ Soon after, Jaswant Singh, a former minister of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition, parted ways with the BJP cadres after being refused a seat in Barmer, Rajasthan, where he claimed to have considerable support. Unlike his counterpart, however, Singh did not hold his peace and slammed the BJP for sidelining its senior leadership. Opting to fight as an independent candidate from Barmer, Singh said: "There is no longer any collective leadership. I don't know if the BJP can be called fit to govern the country today."⁽¹⁵⁾

Outside the BJP, critics have blamed the RSS for Modi’s ascent within the party cadres. Indeed, there has been considerable mobilization within the *Sangh Parivar* in the run up to the polls, and RSS sources have indicated their plan to loan 2000 men to BJP to ensure that the *Sangh* ideology remains afloat.⁽¹⁶⁾ But such notorious connections notwithstanding, BJP’s external campaign for 2014 has relentlessly projected an image of inclusiveness, as symbolized by the slogans “Ek Bharat, Shreshta Bharat (One India; Strong India)” and “Sabka Saath; Sabka

Vikaas (Participation of all); development for all),” in an attempt to belie previous associations with communalism and Hindu partisan politics. Keen to shed the stigma of 2002, and as if haunted by the ghosts of Godhra, Modi ended his year-long “Sadbhavna mission” in 2012, in which he fasted on 32 different occasions for the sake of “inter-faith harmony.” Interestingly, the impetus for the “Sadbhavna mission” was triggered by a series of petitions filed against the decision of the Supreme Court’s Special Investigation Unit (SIT) in 2011, which had absolved Modi from complicity in the Gujarat massacre. The “Sadbhavna” undertakings in many ways served as a prelude to the election campaign, with each fast ending with an ostentatious display of support from the community and statements hailing “economic development as the ultimate leveler” in society.⁽¹⁷⁾ When in October 2013, a series of bomb blasts triggered off in close proximity to the venue of a BJP rally in Patna, people waited, with abated breath, for Modi’s reaction. The attack was subsequently attributed to the Indian Mujahideen, and Modi famously uttered: “Impoverished Muslims can either fight Hindus, or fight poverty; and impoverished Hindus can either fight Muslims or fight poverty.”⁽¹⁸⁾

It is worth questioning at this point the extent to which the 2014 pre-election scenario represents a departure from the 2009 one. Although the BJP has kept a relatively low Hindutva tone for the major part of its election campaign, the concomitant assertions of “India Shining” and “India First” bring a sense of déjà vu from the previous national polls. What is different in the 2014 scenario is the sheer weight of the incumbency factor against the Congress and the worsening economic situation in India. This has allowed the BJP to exploit popular anger over the inconsistencies of “Brand India” — an image of a burgeoning regional power — versus the stark realities of inflation and unemployment on the ground. In his “Vision for 2014” speech in January,⁽¹⁹⁾ followed by another speech to the Indian business community,⁽²⁰⁾ Modi promised to put ‘Brand India’ back on the map, in the same vein as he offered the prospect of better employment through the

incorporation of skill development in the educational sector. He emphasized the 5Ts, Talent, Tradition, Tourism, Trade and Technology, all of which in tandem would bring about a paradigmatic change in India. In addition, he presented the prospect of 100 smart cities, natural gas and optic fibre grids across the country and, continuing from where Atal Bihari Vajpayee left off, the construction of bullet trains.

Through his ceremonious campaigns, during which the stock markets have recorded an upward gradient, Modi has presented a message that would resonate with each of his constituencies, from the business elite and the disgruntled middle class to the aspiring youth. Whilst courting the business elite through the model of Gujarat's development, where private investment was open to all, Modi has not missed a chance to also emphasize his own humble background, as a chai seller, to strike a chord with the masses. In one statement ridiculing the dynastic politics of the Congress, Modi said: "They think they should fight in elections. They think they should win elections. But (to compete) against a chaiwallah, they feel insulted."⁽²¹⁾ Modi has also not hesitated from highlighting his own background as an OBC (Other Backward Classes) during the election campaigns, notwithstanding the RSS aversion to playing up caste affiliations.

In the face of such multifaceted campaigning, it would be simplistic to equate potential support for BJP with Hindu nationalism. According to the attitudinal "Lok surveys" conducted by the Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI) at University of Pennsylvania, in conjunction with the Carnegie Endowment, the BJP has made considerable gains over a number of social groups, such as the youth, the upper caste and urban dwellers, and the Other Backward Castes.⁽²²⁾ Although Muslims and Scheduled Tribes form exceptions to this rule, the BJP has closely trailed behind the Congress in terms of Dalit support. While no doubt the BJP is likely to attract the support of many hardliners, there is also a growing liberal constituency, indifferent to communal issues, in support of Modi

and the perceived “success story” of Gujarat. As one supporter of Modi put it: ‘Today what we want are not temples and mosques but for our lives to improve. The reason why we have come to listen to Modi is because we think he is someone who can change Uttar Pradesh in the same way that he changed Gujarat.’⁽²³⁾ According to Ashok Malik, an Indian columnist, communal politics are a matter of the past: “His [Modi’s] mandate is an economic mandate. Twenty or 30 years ago, Modi may have believed a lot of those things to different degrees, but Modi’s experience as a chief minister for the last 12 years, especially in a state like Gujarat, has proven an enormous learning process for him.”⁽²⁴⁾

BJP Manifesto: A grand-finale

Riding on a wave of publicity, BJP released its manifesto fashionably late on 7 April, after the polls had commenced in the Northeast. Originally drafted by Murli Manohar Joshi, the manifesto was re-edited by Modi for “greater clarity and sharper focus.” The ban imposed on airing the manifesto on the electronic media, in accordance with the rules of the Election Commission, only turned it into a greater talking point. It arrived as the grand-finale to BJP’s campaign, in which Modi had served as ‘a walking manifesto,’ delivering his message in various instalments and selling the Gujarat model in practice.

The BJP manifesto shows a mix of corporatist and socialist strands, reflecting a ‘congressification’ of policies particularly in the continuation of welfare and pro-poor schemes. On paper, there is little substantial difference in the economic agenda of the two parties, save semantics and the issue of FDI in multi-brand retail that BJP opposes in order to protect the livelihood of small shopkeepers. Both manifestoes promise the creation of 100 urban cities or clusters.⁽²⁵⁾ On the issue of taxation, BJP promises the simplification and rationalization of the tax regime, whilst curbing the ‘tax terrorism’ of the previous UPA regime. Similar refrains are also found in the Congress manifesto, in which

it promises to ensure “that the unpredictable risk of retroactive taxation is avoided.”⁽²⁶⁾

On the issue of governance and administrative reforms, however, nuances of difference can be seen between the two documents. BJP makes a special mention of leveraging IT and e-governance in order to combat corruption, whilst also generating IT-based jobs in rural and semi-urban areas. Among other administrative reforms, BJP promises the digitization of government records and the opening up of expertise from industrial, academic and other social circles in congruence with its aim of “People-centric Policy,” “Time-bound delivery,” and “Minimum government, maximum governance.”

The major points of departure within the BJP manifesto are in the socio-political and cultural domains. These relate to the construction of Ram Temple over the disputed site of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution that gives special provisions to Kashmir, the endorsement of Uniform Civil Code at the expense of personal laws, and the legislation to “protect and promote cow.” While overtly this may suggest a resurgence of Hindutva agenda, a comparative look at previous BJP manifestoes reveals a relatively diluted tone on paper. The construction of Ram Temple in the manifesto is mentioned under a seemingly benign heading of “Cultural heritage,” and with a follow-up clause that the possibilities will be explored “within the constitutional framework.” This contrasts with the strident tone of the 2009 manifesto, in which BJP stated its commitment to the Ram Temple construction under the pretext of “defending its civilization.”⁽²⁷⁾ In relation to “Cow and its Progeny,” the 2009 manifesto reads, “Cow protection is an article of faith with the BJP. This will be pursued relentlessly,” whereas the 2014 manifesto refers to the clause within the broader context of “agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of the country.” Similarly, while BJP reiterates its commitment to Uniform Civil Code in the interest of “modern times” and “gender equality,” it simultaneously puts forward

a number of clauses for the Muslim community in a break from its previous manifestoes. For instance, it aims to strengthen minority educational institutions in the light of modern requirements, and initiate a national madrasa modernization programme. It further stipulates the empowerment of Waqf boards in consultation with religious leaders, taking steps to remove unauthorized occupation of Waqf properties. In another token gesture, the manifesto promises to set up a permanent inter-faith consultative mechanism to promote harmony under the auspices of religious leaders.

So how is one to view Modi's commitment to Hindutva clauses, albeit diluted, alongside the seemingly pro-Muslim clauses? One way to view the apparent dissonance is to acknowledge a manifesto for what it is: an open document flouting promises that may or may not be fulfilled. Equally important are the implicit silences within the document. For instance, what would be the nature of the madrasa modernization programme? How representative would it be, particularly if the All India Muslim Personal Law Board is no longer relevant? What would be the implications of BJP's anti-terror mechanisms, and the expansion of National Investigation Agency (NIA), particularly in the context of 'fake encounters'? While no clause is set in stone in the era of coalition politics, some policy implications can be drawn from an examination of Modi's previous model of governance.

A closer look at the Gujarat 'success story'

Given the centrality of the Gujarat model in election discourses, it is useful to pause and analyze the trajectory of the state's development. In February 2002, a train coach carrying Hindu pilgrims caught fire at Godhra station in Gujarat through the alleged involvement of a Muslim mob. Within hours of the incident, Chief Minister Modi had the charred bodies parade the city of Ahmedabad and endorsed a three-day strike throughout the state. In the ensuing

days, attackers clad in saffron clothes and armed with swords, *trishuls* and explosives descended onto the city, guided by printed voter lists of Muslim homes and properties. According to government estimates, the figure of casualties was approximately 1000, whereas independent tallies such as Amnesty International have estimated a figure of more than 2000. Since then, Modi has distanced his party from the violence, characterizing them as spontaneous and uncontrolled, even as various human rights organizations have clearly indicted the Gujarat government apparatus in the orchestration of the violence.

Current discourses provide a deeply politicized picture of Gujarat. Supporters of Modi have hailed the unprecedented economic growth in the state after 2002, pointing also to the number of Muslims appointed in top leadership positions and the ‘reign of security’ in the region. His detractors, on the other hand, have argued that Gujarat’s prosperity predates the BJP era, and the inclusiveness of the model is merely cosmetic. Much of the debate revolves around economic growth, but little space is devoted to the indicators that measure BJP’s main election plank – good governance.

According to a report released by the Economic Freedom of the States of India (EFSI) in 2013, Gujarat has ranked no. 1 in economic freedom in the last three years, and also highly in agricultural freedom.⁽²⁸⁾ To BJP’s credit, Gujarat has also shown the lowest Muslim rural poverty rate amongst all states between 2010-11. Still, any comparative assessment of Modi’s success would also require the consideration of other variables, including the historical, geographical and socio-political contingencies of other states. And although some indicators for economic freedom are also used to ascertain good governance, not all are transferable. Using the physical quality of life index (an average of literacy, infant mortality, and life expectancy rates), for instance, Nagaraj and Pandey show that Gujarat’s social development continues to lag behind its economic development: “The findings reinforce earlier research that reported a divergence between

Gujarat's economic performance (which is almost at the top of the table) and its social development (which is close to the national average).”(29)

In terms of administrative efficiency, however, Modi's governance has earned considerable fame, particularly among business elites. The efficiency with which Tata Nano, India's largest automobile manufacturer, was able to transfer its industry to Gujarat in 2008, particularly after its cumbersome experience in Communist-ruled West Bengal, reinforced Modi's administrative credentials. Subsequently Ratan Tata, chairman of India's Tata Group, publicly praised Modi by proclaiming: “It is stupid if you are not Gujarat.” Currently, Maruti-Suzuki, French car-maker Peugeot, General Motors and Ford are setting up plants in the state, with Ford having announced nearly \$1bn in investment.(30)

Nevertheless, Oxford academic Nikita Sud tempers this ideal picture by highlighting some important caveats.(31) “The deal between the Tatas and the government of Gujarat remains a secret,” she writes. “Details of the price of land handed over, tax concessions and additional benefits of the company and the contents of the memorandum of understanding signed by the two parties are not part of public knowledge.” Within this context, any assessment of accountability or distribution of benefits across stakeholders is rendered ambiguous. If good governance implies public administration that is democratic, transparent and consensual in decision-making, then Sud argues that the Nano dealing indicates the lack of transparency and accountability. Questioning the decentralization paradigm that Modi endorses, Sud argues that even “the core of Gujarat's government had no inkling of the deal till they saw a beaming Modi and Ratan Tata at widely televised press conference.”(32) Modi also has no second-in-command in Gujarat, with ten ministries including the crucial ones of Home Affairs, Internal Affairs and Industry, being directly under his control. Furthermore, a controversial Samras Gram scheme has been introduced in the state in which village councils or panchayats nominated without electoral contest

are awarded special cash incentives for development. The Samras Gram scheme represents an example of ‘manufactured consensus’ pursued by Modi, in the belief that electoral contest in villages creates enmity and, therefore, hinders development. One need not point out the implications for minorities and other backward castes under such a scheme.⁽³³⁾

Extrapolating from Gujarat, therefore, transparency and accountability are not Modi’s forte, even if Gujarat may have outdone other states in economic freedom and administrative efficiency. In terms of the latter, it is all the more ironic that a Chief Minister who prides himself over control and administrative credentials can claim utter dissociation with the events that unfolded in 2002 under his reign.

A Modi referendum?

By singling out Narendra Modi as the face of BJP’s election campaign, the party has turned the upcoming polls into a ‘Modi referendum.’ But while BJP views this in a positive light, i.e. Modi as a ‘vote-ATM machine’ as many have dubbed it, it has turned a blind eye to the intense polarization that this figure can evoke. Indeed Modi’s figure has the potential to swing the elections both ways, and even to the party’s own detriment. For all his dynamic rhetoric of development and his ‘Sadbhavna’ undertakings, Modi is equally known for some of his “Freudian slips” during the elections campaigns. Most prominent was an interview with Reuters in July 2013 in which Modi was asked whether he regretted the incidents of Gujarat 2002. Whilst asserting that his government used its ‘full strength’ to do the right thing, he added that he was sad about the riots just as he would be sad about a puppy coming under the car.⁽³⁴⁾ As much as the puppy analogy caused an outrage, the subtle implication in his words, denying the orchestrated and planned nature of the violence as countless human rights reports have evidenced, was unmistakable.

Meanwhile, some of Modi's fiercest critics on the domestic as well as the international platform have likened Modi's rise to that of Adolf Hitler in Weimar Germany, and the increasing centralization within the party to 'Fuhrer Principle.'⁽³⁵⁾ The ascent of Modi in India has equally stirred alarm bells among activists and journalists across the globe, many of whom are unwilling to gloss over his crime of commission (or omission) in the Gujarat massacre. Reza Azlan and Michael Brooks, recently, urged the Obama administration to spell out their disapproval of Modi: "In the end, it will be up to India's voters whether Modi becomes the next PM or not. But it will also be up to American policy makers to demonstrate that even in the realist world of international diplomacy, being complicit in genocidal acts is simply unacceptable. Modi demands such a response."⁽³⁶⁾ Others have warned that India would "cross a moral line of no return" if Modi is elected into power. Although Modi enthusiasts have dismissed such statements as Western interference or American exceptionalism, the consternation stirred among the international community at large nevertheless indicates the potential 'diminishing returns' of Modi's figure in the upcoming elections.

Aam Aadmi's 'broom' for clean-er politics

Riding on the crest of the anti-corruption campaign launched by Anna Hazare in 2011, the *Aam Aadmi Party* (AAP) made a spectacular entry into Indian politics by picking up 28 out of 70 seats (30 per cent of the votes) in Delhi's state assembly elections in 2013. In only its first year of inception, AAP headed by a civil-servant-turned-politician, Arvind Kejriwal has confronted head on the issues of corruption and criminality, raising some consternation among India's long-standing political parties. Hailing the symbol of a 'broom' (*jhadoo*), AAP serves as a repository for disgruntled voters from both the BJP and the Congress. Unlike other parties with roots in regionalism or identity politics, AAP has emerged as a

non-status quo party, comprising mostly of urban, middle class and constructed around the principles of governance and accountability. In a testament to its professed ideals, AAP also demonstrated its poll spending model during the election campaign, banking on transparent and open donations from the public as opposed to black money, and the support of volunteers taking time off from their jobs to work for the party.

Some of the enthusiasm associated with AAP withered once Kejriwal stepped down from the local government after the legislative assembly refused to pass the Jan Lokpal (anti-corruption bill) in its entirety.⁽³⁷⁾ For his hardline supporters, it was yet another example of AAP refusing to compromise on its principle of anti-corruption. To its credit, AAP managed to dispel the notion that it served as the B team of the Congress or of the BJP. But this simultaneously reinforced a perception that AAP was not mature enough to lead the central government and deal with other areas of governance. Although this step-down represented a springboard to jump for national politics, historian Dipankar Gupta believes that the party should have entrenched itself locally before venturing onto the national platform.⁽³⁸⁾

Consequently AAP has also faced considerable pressure to prove its mettle and define a niche beyond corruption. In line with its foundational message, the AAP manifesto promises to push for an effective Jan Lokpal bill that would bring everyone from the prime minister to the peon under the same ambit. It equally emphasizes on judicial, electoral and police reforms, with CCTVs in courtrooms to ensure transparency in judicial system, and on expanding the purview of RTI. The manifesto attempts to venture outside its primary domain by promising time-bound delivery of services, employment, cheap electricity and water; but even in the economic domain, it retains the thrust of accountability by promising to fight against crony capitalism, black economy and to promote honest businesses. “We believe that most businesses are honest, but the current environment does not let

them flourish,” the manifesto reads. “AAP’s policies will aim to foster healthy competition in the market economy, and curb monopolistic and anti-competitive businesses. It will focus on open and transparent governance, which will create a level playing field for honest businesses to thrive and succeed on their own merits.”⁽³⁹⁾ Whilst focusing on rural economy and the livelihood of farmers, however, there is little evidence to court business elites in the manner that BJP or Congress have indicated. AAP describes its economy as “neither Left nor Right,” but “in the interest of India.” But despite its claim as the *aam aadmi*’s party, AAP provides little for the unorganized sector that represents over 90 per cent of India’s workforce. AAP has also come under the criticism of ultra-leftist intellectuals, such as Arundhati Roy, for only targeting political corruption whilst leaving much unsaid on corporate corruption.⁽⁴⁰⁾

An interesting feature of AAP’s manifesto on social justice is the specific inclusion of the Valmiki community, in addition to the oft-repeated promises for women, OBCs, scheduled tribes and Muslims. The plight of the Valmiki community, primarily employed in solid waste management and sanitation-related work, recently caused an outcry among activists and journalists, and the inclusion of this issue is indicative of the party’s own support base among social and political activists. This can also be seen in some of AAP’s other unconventional clauses focusing on the empowerment of persons with disabilities (PwD) and the promotion of animal welfare (as opposed to BJP’s specific clause on cow and its progeny). But despite its claim as the *Aam Aadmi*’s Party, AAP provides little for the unorganized sector that represents over 90 per cent of India’s workforce, reflecting its composition of urban and middle class members rather than those of the working class per se. As far as foreign policy is concerned, AAP reiterates its stance on ‘zero tolerance’ for cross-border terrorism, but includes a clause for the need to address the “root causes of citizen’s disaffection” and to humanize

“draconian laws” in an implicit reference to Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA).⁽⁴¹⁾

Still, the political journey ahead for AAP is marked with a number of obstacles. While AAP activists emphasize that their objective is to reform a compromised political system and not to attain power, the process of change would require participation from within. In a political system characterized by coalition politics and tactical alliances, AAP will inevitably face difficult options and make compromises in order to maintain its political credibility. Already, raising an army of candidates for the Lok Sabha polls has been an uphill task for the party, with many withdrawing in the last minute.⁽⁴²⁾ As senior analyst Kuldip Nayar puts it: “If the AAP could clean the system and make sure that it stays that way, this will be a great contribution even if the AAP does not last.”⁽⁴³⁾ But according to the Association for Democratic Reforms, 21 per cent of Congress candidates, 46 per cent of BJP candidates and 7 per cent of AAP candidates have been involved in some form of criminal charges.⁽⁴⁴⁾

During the state assembly elections in 2013, AAP benefited from the smallness of Delhi in terms of publicity and campaign. Delhi was also the home turf of the anti-corruption campaign launched by Anna Hazara in 2011, which made it a natural base for its offshoot political party. Additionally, its urban and cosmopolitan culture, less infested with identity politics, also worked to AAP’s advantage. Replicating the same kind of popularity throughout India would be a difficult task. It is likely to gain some support among the youth and the first-time voters who are genuinely seeking change. But beyond urban centres, knowledge of local languages, door-to-door campaigns and monetary resources are crucial for garnering support. According to a recent study carried out by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,⁽⁴⁵⁾ the reason why many political parties tend to supply candidates with criminal backgrounds is because they have resources or liquid cash at their disposal, which in turn buys viability. Furthermore, criminality

also serves as a badge of honour, reflecting the capability of the candidate to protect the interests of his/her community in India's complex and caste-ridden society. It is also not uncommon for politicians, on the local level, to bribe supporters with cash payouts or alcohol, though elections are considered free and fair on the whole. In fact, according to a Reuters report, the recent state elections also saw innovations such as money given to voters via mobile phone credit or envelopes of cash delivered in morning papers.⁽⁴⁶⁾ While some of this status quo has been challenged by AAP's promise of ostensibly *clean-er* politics, it is questionable how pervasive its support base would be in the face of such realities.

Nevertheless, one must not underestimate the challenge posed by AAP. In the current election scenario, even a parliamentary presence of 10-20 seats can tilt the balance in favour or against the emerging national party. AAP has maintained its criticism that BJP is no different from Congress with regard to corruption. Given that the AAP phenomenon is predicated on anti-corruption, forming an alliance with the Congress or giving it outside support in parliament could compromise the party's core ideology. At the same time, the Congress is reportedly keen to marshal AAP, along with different regional parties, to form government in the Centre if need be, leaving no stone unturned to keep Modi out of power. Regardless of how the cards may fall in the Lok Sabha polls, AAP's parliamentary presence, whether in opposition or in coalition, would ensure that the pressure for greater accountability and transparency is not lifted from the next government.

Moving towards regionalization

Vidhan Sabha outcomes- 2012 & 2013

After the end of Congress dominance in the late 80s and BJP's failure to capture the political space in the mid-90s, regionalism within the Indian polity has been on the rise. Single-party rule has given way to coalition politics, with

regional parties rooted in ethnic, linguistic and caste-based identities emerging as key power brokers. In the 2014 Lok Sabha, regional parties are likely to emerge even stronger.

Within the Indian federalist structure, *Vidhan Sabha*, or the state assembly, elections are held every five years, the timings of which may or may not coincide with the Lok Sabha national polls. Although Vidhan Sabha are fought over local issues and may not always reflect the national mood, their proximity to the national polls makes them an important indicator of waxing and waning electoral allegiances. In the distance between the two polls, however, incumbent local governments are also tried and tested in terms of performance, and can potentially pave the way for other parties to gain seats in the national assembly. In 2012, Vidhan Sabha elections were held in Goa, Manipur, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the first quarter of the year, displaying a close contest between Congress and BJP. In the second quarter of 2012, the elections were held in Gujarat and Himachel Pradesh. Dubbed as the “semi-finals” to the *Lok Sabha*, the 2013 elections were held in two phases, with Tripura, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Karnataka heading for the polls between February and May, whilst Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Mizoram and Rajasthan elected their local governments in December.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In tandem, three major trends can be deduced from the election outcomes. Firstly, the Congress party experienced a relative decline in its influence whereas the BJP made concomitant gains. In the partial eclipse of Congress party’s previously overarching shadow, BJP was able to wrest away Goa and Rajasthan from the party, and form government in Punjab through an alliance with its long-term ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). In what was the worst performance of the Congress since 1977, the ruling chief minister of Rajasthan, Ashok Gehlot, faced a particularly humiliating drubbing at the hands of BJP candidate, Vasundhara Raje, who formed government with 81.5 per cent of the assembly

seats.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Meanwhile in Madhya Pradesh, BJP came to power for the third consecutive term in office, winning 111 of the total 165 seats (67 per cent) by victory margins of over 10,000 votes.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Chattisgarh and Gujarat also showed status-quo victories for the BJP; the Congress gained only one additional seat vis-à-vis the 2008 polls in Chattisgarh, and the BJP lost only one seat vis-à-vis the previous polls of 2007 in Gujarat.⁽⁵⁰⁾

A second trend of the *Vidhan Sabha* elections shows the enduring strength of regional parties in their home turfs. Notwithstanding BJP's bright prospects in the western and central states, the northeastern hinterlands proved to be a difficult terrain to penetrate. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) emerged as the strongest in Tripura and the Naga People's Front stole victory in Nagaland, followed by the Congress gaining second place in both states. In Uttar Pradesh, commonly known as the gateway to India's throne, neither of the two national parties could make substantial inroads. The contest remained confined between the two regional parties, the Dalit-backed Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the socialist Samajwadi Party (SP) in which the latter emerged victorious.⁽⁵¹⁾ Similarly, in Delhi the newly emerging *Aam Aadmi Party* threw the two national parties off-guard through its splendid performance in the assembly polls.

Finally, the last trend indicates that the Congress party could still serve as a challenging contender even as its support base has shrunk. For instance, Uttarakhand displayed a close contest between the two national parties, with the Congress winning 32 seats and the BJP 31. Himachel Pradesh gave the majority mandate to Congress with a margin of 10 seats. Similarly, in the Karnataka assembly elections, corruption allegations against B.S Yeddyurappa, the ex-chief minister and a former BJP ally, allowed the Congress to increase its net share by 42 seats while the BJP suffered a net decline of 72 seats. Overall, the BJP is ahead in terms of its vote share in a number of states, but the better geographical spread of the Congress is to its advantage. Since victory or defeat in *Lok Sabha* is

determined at the constituency level, BJP's surplus votes, concentrated in specific geographical constituencies, may not translate into additional seats. On the other hand, the Congress Party — by demonstrating its presence in the northeastern states of Mizoram, Manipur and Meghalaya, and in pockets of the North — may still put up a good fight in the vote-to-seat conversion ratio for the *Lok Sabha*.

Emerging regional trends

In the small window of time between the last *Vidhan Sabha* elections and the *Lok Sabha* polls, a number of emerging trends need to be taken into account in order to get a more holistic picture. Ideological leanings and identity politics provide a static picture of electoral allegiances, discounting the ebb and flow influenced by the strengths or weaknesses of different campaigns, the incumbency factor and party rivalries within a state.

Divided mandates

Uttar Pradesh, which holds the greatest number of *Lok Sabha* seats (80 seat), is currently up for grabs and is likely to deliver a fractured *Lok Sabha* mandate. In its diverse demography of 19% Muslims, 21% Dalits, 21 % Brahmins and a scattered population of OBCs, Christians, Sikhs and Jains, Uttar Pradesh is a microcosm of India. Since the induction of Akhilesh Yadav (son of Mulayam Singh) as the Chief Minister in 2012, the Samajwadi party has experienced a steady decline in popularity for not acting upon the lofty promises of its pre-election campaign. Crime and hooliganism have been on the rise, and little has been done to quicken the pace of development. For all his pro-Muslim promises before the 2012 polls, the recent riots of Muzaffarnagar, leaving 59 people dead and thousands displaced, have cast a shadow of doubt on Yadav's ability to protect the interests of the Muslim community. Taking advantage of this, the Congress party and the BJP have been trying to gain from the post-conflict polarization of the Muzaffarnagar riots. The Congress party has set up

rehabilitation camps to solicit the Muslim vote, and though it seems well poised to do so, Rahul Gandhi may have blown this chance by enraging the Muslim community with his recent remark on ISI agents within the Muzaffarnagar camps.⁽⁵²⁾ Meanwhile, BJP has attempted to gain sympathy votes from the lower-caste Jat community and the Hindutva base (disturbed by demographic displacements caused by the riots). Voter disillusionment with Yadav together the post-conflict scenario may bring about an upper caste reconsolidation around the BJP, increasing the party's share in the state.

Bihar is another key state with diverse demography and 40 seats for the *Lok Sabha*. After the announcement of Modi as a prime ministerial candidate, the incumbent Chief Minister Nitish Kumar from Janta Dal United (JDU) parted ways with the BJP, throwing long-standing electoral allegiances into disarray. While Nitish Kumar's gesture may have been calculated to secure the Muslim vote during the upcoming assembly elections in 2015, it could equally cost him some friends. Some of the upper-caste votes to JDU due to his alliance with the BJP may gravitate towards the saffron party. With Modi playing the OBC card, Nitish Kumar may also lose some of his grip over the more marginalized sections of the community. As far as the Muslim community is concerned, the BJP may have succeeded in presenting a soft image particularly after the bomb blasts in Patna; but recent statements by BJP members in Bihar, proclaiming that Modi's critics should be sent to Pakistan, will undoubtedly turn this tide. The Muslim vote may be split, along class lines, between the JDU and the RJD (Rashtriya Janta Dal) led by Lalu Prasad Yadav. Meanwhile, the BJP, in its seat maximization project, is courting smaller parties, and has taken a softer stance towards Lalu Prasad Yadav. In the face of this strategy, Bihar – much like Uttar Pradesh – is also likely to deliver a fractured mandate.

The Northeastern hinterlands

Following BJP's failure to penetrate five northeastern states during the 2012 and 2013 assembly elections, the party has stepped up its campaign for the region. In tandem, the northeastern states, including Manipur, Meghalaya, Tripura, Assam, Arunachel Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Sikkim, offer 25 Lok Sabha seats. The region as a whole is an embodiment of the "resource curse," showcasing under-development despite the advantages of fertile farmlands and access to Southeastern markets. In BJP's reinvigorated campaign for the Northeast, Modi has offered a special development status for the region. In the past, the prevalence of communal identities (particularly in the Christian dominated regions) was attributed as a major reason behind the northeastern intransigence towards the 'Hindutva' BJP. The Vajpayee era, however, managed to subvert the dominance of religious and ethnic identities by assuring the autonomy of fringe cultures and by making limited inroads into the region. In the run up to the polls, Modi has been campaigning to revive the Vajpayee charm. On other issues of electoral concern such as the repeal of Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) or the prevalence of illegal immigrants, the BJP is not expected to bode well. By indicating his preference for Hindu immigrants as opposed to Muslim Bangladeshi immigrants, Modi has demonstrated that a leopard does not change its spots. Given these contradictions, the BJP is unlikely to attract pan-northeastern solidarity. It can, however, make some dent into the political foray of three northeastern states that have been attributed special focus in the campaigns – Assam (14 seats), Manipur (2 seats) and Arunachel Pradesh (2 seats). By increasing the presence of its party members in these states, BJP is hoping to woo the populace through the promises of development and good governance. In Assam, where the local government has done little to curb unemployment, the BJP could cause some polarization in votes. In the more intransigent states such as Tripura, Sikkim and Nagaland, Mizoram and

Meghalaya, the BJP is playing strategy by courting smaller regional parties into its fold.

AAP inroads?

In Maharashtra, Punjab and Haryana, with 48, 13 and 10 Lok Sabha seats, respectively, AAP is expected to make some inroads after its claim to fame in Delhi in 2013. The 2012 *Vidhan Sabha* elections in Punjab delivered a verdict that was split between Congress, BJP and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), but now AAP is expected to emerge as the fourth force. The days preceding the Lok Sabha polls have seen AAP candidates draw spontaneous crowds of enthusiastic constituents in one district after another.⁽⁵³⁾ By offering a new style of politics and by recommending a Special Investigation Team (SIT) for the anti-Sikh riots of 1984, AAP seems to have struck a new chord among the Sikh community.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Meanwhile, in both Haryana and Maharashtra, which have been under Congress rule since 2009, the anti-corruption sentiment is very strong. An example of the scale of corruption and nepotism in the state of Maharashtra can be seen in the 2010 housing scam for war widows, a controversy that ultimately compelled the Chief Minister to resign. The Congress party also faces a double incumbency of 10 years rule in the Centre and 15 years rule in the state. All this combined with Mumbai's urban and cosmopolitan ethos may allow AAP to bag at least a few seats from the state. In Haryana, on the other hand, the anti-incumbency sentiment combined with the absence of meaningful opposition from the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) may herald brighter — albeit still limited — prospects for the debutant AAP.⁽⁵⁵⁾

On the Eastern and Southern front

All eyes are now on Andhra Pradesh, which heads for a bifurcation into Telangana and Seemandhra (25 and 17 seats respectively) ahead of the *Vidhan Sabha* and the Lok Sabha polls. Protests against the bifurcation in Seemandhra,

which lags behind in development as compared to Telangana, are fuelling anti-Congress sentiments. Meanwhile BJP is tapping into this anger by promising Seemandhra “special status” for three years if elected in the Centre.⁽⁵⁶⁾ The scenario may herald a stronger alliance between the Telugu Desam Party and the BJP in Seemandhra, but to a lesser extent in Telangana, which is the bastion of the Telangana Rashthra Samithii (TRS) and a long-time advocate of the bifurcation. In a recent unfortunate development for the Congress party, the TRS is appropriating all credit for itself, and has ruled out an alliance with the party. Notwithstanding its accession, it seems that the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh is not likely to win the incumbent central government any favours in Seemandhra or in Telangana.

On the southern and eastern front, Kerala (20 seats), Orissa (21 seats) and Karnataka (28 seats) are also among the most watched states for the Lok Sabha polls. While Karnataka serves as a swing state, showcasing a bipolar contest between the BJP and the Congress, Orissa and Kerala have largely been dominated by regional parties. The status quo is likely to remain for the Lok Sabha in the two states. Two major coalitions predominate Kerala and have ruled alternately, the United Democratic Front led by the Congress party and the Left Democratic Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). In Orissa, which is expected to elect its state assembly at the same time as the Lok Sabha polls, the key figure to watch is Naveen Patnaik, the Chief Minister of the incumbent Biju Janta Dal Party. No matter how the BJP fares in Orissa, the support of Biju Janta Dal would prove instrumental past the post election.

Three regional ‘Queens’: Amma Ji, Behen Ji and Didi

Three key players posturing for national politics are Jayaram Jayalalitha from the incumbent AIADMK party in Tamil Nadu, Mamata Banerjee from the incumbent Trinamool Congress party in West Bengal, and Mayawati from the

Dalit-backed Bahujan Samaj Party. Popularly known as *Amma*, *Behen ji* and *Didi* respectively, the three leaders hold considerable clout in their respective states, or in the case of Mayawati, among the lower-caste constituency. Given the divisiveness of Modi's figure and the eclipse of the Congress party, the trio is likely to play the role of 'Queens' in the political chessboard that is Indian elections.

As the seventh-most populous state of India, Tamil Nadu is a key power-broker in that it generates 42 seats for the Lok Sabha. Former movie star Jayaram Jayalalitha is popular for her charisma in Tamil Nadu, a state where cinema and politics are often enmeshed. Under a splinter group of the previous state regional party (DMK), Jayalalitha ruled as the chief minister of Tamil Nadu sporadically since 1991, and assumed office once again after the state assembly elections in 2011. Propelled by this recent victory, Jayalalitha is hoping to score greater seats in the Lok Sabha vis-à-vis her rival state party, which faces an anti-incumbency factor by virtue of its coalition with Congress in the previous polls.

In the manifesto released by AIADMK, Jayalalitha devotes a large section to grievances against the Congress government titled "Betrayal of Tamil Nadu by the Congress Coalition Government and the DMK."⁽⁵⁷⁾ She not only blames the government for introducing foreign direct investment in retail trade but also for relinquishing Katchatheevu and for not taking action against Sri Lanka's treatment of the Tamil population. Needless to say, the extent to which the BJP would push for greater action against Sri Lanka on the Tamil issue is questionable, given the uncomfortable precedent that would set in Kashmir and Northeast. Nevertheless, Jayalalitha's manifesto levels no criticism against the BJP. Given a number of Tamil-centric clauses, the manifesto fails to capture the pan-Indian imagination; instead, in its omissions it stands as a reflection of Jayalalitha's inclinations to side with the BJP and support a strong Centre in order to pursue development at home.

Meanwhile, the ‘Queen’ of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has strongly condemned both the BJP and the Congress. Her enduring popularity in a state that carries 42 Lok Sabha seats indicates that she will emerge as a key power broker in the 16th Lok Sabha. During the 2009 polls, she forged an alliance with the Congress but withdrew in September 2011 after protesting a hike in petrol prices and the imposition of FDI in retail markets. Her move could have equally been strategic so as to distance from the incumbent government that was fast losing its popularity. Nevertheless, she has maintained an equitable distance from both parties during the elections. In a categorical statement against the BJP, Banerjee has ruled out support even if the post-election scenario demands and has bluntly called Modi “the butcher of Gujarat.” Meanwhile she has taken a similarly aggressive stance on the Congress. “They have lost all credentials. All credibility. They have given us nothing.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ Banerjee’s manifesto expresses strong support of the Third Front and attaches great importance to the rights of minorities, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and OBCs.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Although Banerjee, in a recent statement, indicated her willingness to support Jayalalitha as a prime minister candidate of the Third Front, Jayalalitha’s own leanings ironically lie elsewhere.⁽⁶⁰⁾

The third key figure is Mayawati of Bahujan Samaj Party, who has served as the Chief Minister for four terms in Uttar Pradesh, before losing her seat to the rival Samajwadi Party in 2012. As the first Dalit woman to have held such a high post in India, Mayawati has been hailed as the Queen of the Dalits and her journey to the top itself has been an inspiration among the lower-caste constituencies. In the 2007 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, her victory was unprecedented in that it was also backed by upper caste Brahmins who had gravitated towards her out of disillusionment with the status quo. Since then, however, Mayawati’s claim to fame has somewhat declined due to a number of corruption allegations against her. Opposition parties have accused Mayawati of

spending billions of rupees on the construction of statues of herself, of other Dalit leaders such as Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, and of her party's election symbol (the elephant).⁽⁶¹⁾ The ongoing polls are likely to factor this decline in Mayawati's popularity. The fact that her party has not released a manifesto ahead of the polls, in the belief that action matters more than slogans, is also not expected to work against her favour, especially given her past record as a Chief Minister.⁽⁶²⁾ Still, she remains a key figure whose support will be undoubtedly solicited by any emerging coalition. During the election campaigns, Mayawati has been a vocal critic of Narendra Modi as well as the Congress party. Given her own declining prospects, however, it would not be far-fetched to imagine her lending support to whichever party emerges strongest in the ongoing polls.

Impact of regionalization on the Muslim vote bank

Advertisement

WE ARE SURE IF NARENDRA MODI IS PM THERE WILL NOT BE ANY COMMUNAL RIOT IN INDIA IN FUTURE

Now we Muslims have realized that Modi is good for us.

BJP

Muslims are with Modi

Zafar Sareshwala

Under Congress Raj the Muslims have suffered for 64 years in this country and lived like a second class citizens. What happened in Meerut and Bhagalpur? People were killed in cold blood but no action was taken, In the Mumbai riots of 1993, not even a single action was taken. Those who were perpetrators are now secular because they are now in Congress party. It is only, in Modi's Gujarat that the perpetrators are behind the bars. In past 12 years, there is not a single riot in Gujarat.

- Mr. Shahid Siddiqui
Nai Duniya - Editor

The most safe place for Muslims today is Gujarat.

- S. M. Mushruff
(Former IG Police of Maharashtra)

I dealt with several states. But no Chief Minister is as good, as strong and determined as Modi. Now even Muslims realize that Modi is good for them.

BJP Karyalay
Vapi

Source: *Indian Express*, February 2014

In late February 2014, a BJP-endorsed advertisement caused a stir for portraying the support of Muslims for Narendra Modi. The advertisement showed two Muslims discussing that the Modi era would bring an end to communal riots,

and also included endorsements by Zafar Sareshwala, a Muslim businessman in Ahmedabad, and Shahid Siddiqui, the editor of *Nai Dunya*, New Delhi. Both Siddiqui and Sareshwala later retracted their statements, claiming that they were taken out of context and without prior permission.⁽⁶³⁾ For all its irony, the advertisement stands as an example of how the Muslim population suddenly gains visibility in the election campaign. Much in the same way, the Muslim “skullcap” has become a politicized symbol during the campaigns; BJP President Rajnath Singh, for instance, donned the skullcap in order to portray a soft image to the Muslims, while Modi refused to do so, drawing a mixture of criticism as well as praise for his action.⁽⁶⁴⁾ Forming 13.5 per cent of the population, Muslims are indeed a force to be reckoned with, and their vote is estimated to influence at least 100 out of 543 parliamentary seats in the Lok Sabha. And BJP is by no means the only party to actively court Muslims during the elections.

Vote-bank politics pursued by various parties, especially during the late 90s, seem to have entrenched the idea that Indian Muslims act *en masse* as a bloc. The reality, however, is much more nuanced. There is no one Muslim community in India, but several Muslim communities along linguistic, regional and ethnic divides, whose aspirations are shaped by their context, their economic status and geo-location. In several constituencies of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, for instance, Muslims voted in large numbers for the BJP candidates, for reasons as diverse as possible intimidation to opportunism or personal gain. There is also an absence of a unified leadership within the Muslim community; while many clerics seem to have reasoned that Modi may be more moderate in government rather than in opposition in BJP-dominated states, other Muslims in the eastern states have expressed their aspirations for economic and material security, as opposed to physical security alone.⁽⁶⁵⁾ In eastern Bihar, many live without the fear of violence but in abject poverty. According to Michael Kugelman, from the Woodrow Wilson Centre in D.C, some of the most important

issues for Indian Muslims today are economic and development-related, wherein Modi's perceived strengths lie.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Other factors defying the notion of a monolithic vote bank are class and generational divides. In his seminal study "India's Muslim Spring," Hasan Suroor describes a quiet yearning within the community for change and integration with mainstream society. For the younger generation in particular, identification with their "Muslim" identity exists alongside their secular aspirations for jobs, economic status and for moving past the emotive issues of communalism that the older generation is hinged on.⁽⁶⁷⁾

But above all, it is the presence of various regional parties — and now even smaller Muslim parties — that is resulting in the dispersion of the Muslim vote bank. Although Muslims have historically supported the Congress party, there has been a growing sense of disillusionment on being used as a commodity by the so-called 'secular' Congress. Regional parties, offering a number of pro-Muslim promises, have claimed this political space.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Whereas previously Muslim parties seldom existed outside of Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala and Hyderabad, the recent years have seen a proliferation of Muslim parties, seeking votes on their own terms, in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

No doubt, Modi's popularity has caused a palpable concern among the Muslim community at large. But whether the Muslim vote bank as a whole can tilt the elections against him remains a question mark. There are chances that Muslims will vote strategically during the elections. Still, the current scenario is attracting a number of previously ambivalent voters into its fold, including Christian minorities as demonstrated by the Goa assembly elections. In such a scenario, the dispersion of Muslim votes could render the vote bank insignificant in tilting the elections. More importantly, victory or defeat in the Lok Sabha would primarily be dependent on past-the-post electoral alliances between parties.

The rise and fall of the Third Front

While the regionalization of politics offers greater choice to Indian voters, and promises to diversify as well as dilute the politics of the Center, it simultaneously produces the prospect of unwieldy governments. This time, like the preceding elections, the Third Front has also loomed its head over the 16th Lok Sabha. On 25 February 2014, 11 regional parties sealed an alliance to campaign as one bloc in national elections, and offer an alternative to Congress and BJP. Among the parties were the Communist Party of India, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Janata Dal (United) of Nitish Kumar (Bihar), Janata Dal (Secular), India Prakash Karat, Janta Dal (United), Samajwadi Party and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam of Jayaram Jayalalitha (Tamil Nadu). Criticizing the “massive corruption” of the Congress and the “the divisiveness, disunity and communal disharmony” of the BJP, the bloc proposed an agenda of fighting corruption, promising economic development and strengthening federalism. In tandem, the parties in the group represented around 92 seats out of the 545 in the incumbent house of parliament.

Between February and now, however, the bloc dubbed the “Third Front” is showing signs of disintegration. It began with AIADMK parting ways with the Left and further disintegrated with signs of in-fighting between the staunch left parties, i.e. the CPI and CPI(M) in the state of Andhra Pradesh with the former aligned with Jagan Mohan Reddy’s YSR and the latter with the Telugu Desam Party. Meanwhile, Naveen Patnaik of Biju Janta Dal in Orissa skipped the meeting in February despite his earlier commitment to participate in it. According to party sources, the rising popularity of Narendra Modi has forced a rethink in BJD’s stance regarding its commitment to the “Third Front.”⁽⁶⁹⁾ Similarly other smaller parties of the Front, such as the state political party in Assam (Asom Gana Parishad), and Janta Dal (Secular), are also weighing their options before making an outright commitment. Even the Samajwadi Party (SP) is keeping its options

open; it recently pledged support to the UPA alliance, but Mulayam Singh Yadav is known to change his stance more than any other leader.

While Congress and BJP leaders have been dismissive about the “Third Front”, calling them ‘migratory birds’ or ‘third rate,’⁽⁷⁰⁾ analysts in India are equally skeptical about the strength of such a bloc. For one, many of the parties comprising the so-called “Third Bloc” are pitted against each other in their respective states, and when push comes to shove, regional compulsions may triumph over national ones. Greater decentralization for states, as suggested by the BJP’s recent manifesto, may also placate regional stakeholders and keep them from brandishing nationalist ambitions by granting them sufficient autonomy at home. The Third Front has also evaded the question of who will be named its PM candidate. Although Banerjee has taken an amenable stance by supporting Jayalalitha if need be, the same cannot be said of others, particularly since Jayalalitha has a very specific Tamil following. Many fear that the Third Front may not survive once the votes are cast and the support base may fragment as one region rejects the PM from another.

But above all, the Third Front lacks a cohesive ideology or plan at a time when Indians need to be assured of stability and economic recovery. The business community is particularly skeptical of the Third Front’s ability to drive structural reforms for an ailing economy, particularly given the gaping policy differences among the members.⁽⁷¹⁾ A coalition of various groups only for the sake of power could also prove to be unwieldy. Past memories of a Third Front in government also do little to assuage concerns of instability. The Janata experiment of 1977, VP Singh’s government of 1989 and the United Front of 1996 were all associated with unstable governments that could not survive for more than two years.

Given the declining prospects of the Third Front serving as an entity in and of itself, it all comes down to how the various members will position

themselves vis-à-vis the three major national trends, the BJP, the Congress and AAP.

Electoral math: Reaching the ‘magic number’

Any ruling party or coalition must command 272 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha. The current coalition of United Progressive Alliance has 229 seats in parliament (out of which 206 belong to the Congress, and 23 to allies). The Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party with 21 seats each are key supporters of the UPA coalition, raising its mark to a total of 276 seats. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by BJP, on the other hand, has 136 seats in the parliament (of which 116 belong to BJP). The highest number garnered by the NDA thus far has been 182 seats during the 1998 elections that ushered in Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

According to prevailing polls, BJP is expected to surpass the 182-seat mark in what has been termed as a ‘Modi wave.’ If it captures at least 200 seats, smaller parties would, with all likelihood, gravitate towards the Centre. Though exit polls constitute an important part of the psephological exercise, they often simultaneously serve as covert instruments used by political parties and media houses to influence the electorate. Exit polls aside, the pre-election scenario by and large yields two different trends. One is a converging dynamic, with the BJP centralizing more and more of its power into the hands of a narrow clique, even to the chagrin of its allies. The other is the diverging dynamic of regional players who will carry great stakes in the coalition. How these two trends will play out against each other is the story of the 16th Lok Sabha.

Strong anti-incumbency sentiments against the pan-Indian Congress party alongside the divisiveness of Modi’s figure herald an uphill task for the BJP in cobbling together support. A range less than 200 (but more than 150) would keep the BJP dependent upon regional stakeholders such as Jayaram Jayalalitha in

Tamil Nadu, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Mayawati from Bahujan Samaj Party, Mulayam Singh Yadav from Samajwadi Party or even Nitish Kumar from Janta Dal United. It would also present a scenario in which the BJP would be expected to make a number of concessions to its coalition partners. A different Prime Minister candidate other than Narendra Modi may as well be on the list -- and in the event that this is not conceded, it could only serve as a greater bargaining tool. Already, BJP's controversial clause to reconsider Article 370 on Jammu and Kashmir has raised the voices of the opposition, including former allies such as Nitish Kumar. Subsequently, BJP's former president, Nitin Gadkari has clarified that the clause represents BJP's stance, rather than that of the National Democratic Alliance as a whole.⁽⁷²⁾

Ironically for all his claims of ushering in strong and stable governance, Modi's potential victory could equally lead to an era of unstable coalitions, a scenario from which the Congress Party or the *Aam Aadmi Party* may emerge as eventual beneficiaries. No doubt, BJP will have to play a tricky role balancing the support of its hardliners with the liberal constituency that is indifferent to communal politics, and with those who put aside identity politics in the promise of economic prosperity. Modi has dexterously raised the mantra of 'inclusive development' and 'participation for all,' whilst eluding the specific issue of "equitable development." Infrastructural investments certainly benefit the entire community, regardless of caste or creed, but do not necessarily mainstream for structural imbalances existing along gender, caste or ethnic lines. So even in Modi's perceived forte, i.e. in replicating the Gujarat model of development in other states and in managing the subsequent windfall, he is likely to encounter challenges given the varying demographic and socio-political differences across the states. On other issues such as the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code for the sake "gender equality," India's vibrant civil society is likely to serve as an important counterpoint, particularly since many feminist organizations are

arriving at a consensus for bottom-up (rather than top-down) approaches to gender reforms.

The external road ahead

Although political transitions typically evoke a sense of periodization between one regime and the next, empirical research often points to a greater existence of continuity in foreign policy, with changes only being incremental over time. This time, the possibility of Modi's victory has generated a greater international buzz. In the domain of foreign policy, Modi is known for his limitations and idiosyncrasies, as a man who may lack the insight of a bureaucrat but still has plenty of stormy pronouncements to offer on the external platter, warranted or unwarranted. On Pakistan and China, he is known for his muscular posture. In another such display, Modi has promised to revise the 'no first use' policy in India's nuclear doctrine, raising some consternation in the neighbourhood. But were he to come to power, a change in style rather than in substance would be the most probable scenario. Regardless of what shape the new government takes, the status quo is not likely to change on some of the intractable territorial disputes governing India-Pakistan relations, such as that of Kashmir, Siachen and Sir Creek. In the long run, meaningful change in these quarters could only come at the helm of a strong impulse from the people of India and Pakistan. The exchange of hot and cold with China may also continue in the face of border disputes on one hand and warm trade relations on the other hand.

Still if politics, to reverse a saying by Michael Clausewitz, is the continuation of war by other means, then Modi's usual rampage on Pakistan would do little to bridge the trust deficit existing between the two countries. Both Pakistan and India also remain distrustful of each other's "game of proxies" in Afghanistan. The diverging dynamics of coalition politics may temper down BJP's internal policies, but there would be little reason to rein in his rhetoric vis-

à-vis Pakistan. In the altered security calculus of South Asia following the endgame in Afghanistan, however, regional co-operation would be in the interest of all the stakeholders, notwithstanding any surmounting disputes. Much as it is in Pakistan's interest to have a cooperative regime in India, it is similarly in India's interest to have a stable and secure Pakistan – and not an unstable Pakistan that is teeming with non-state actors that are now beyond its control. Such is the necessity posited by the intricate boundary lines separating the two countries. The onus, therefore, will lie with Pakistan to hold its ground in normalizing relations with India by pursuing trade and cultural exchanges, and by spelling out a clear regional policy. From the Indian side, Pakistan will also be expected to demonstrate its commitment to peace by expediting the trial of those accused in the Mumbai terror attacks of 2008.

Regional players, likely to be further empowered in the 16th Lok Sabha, may also hold considerable clout in foreign policy dictates, particularly as it pertains to the treatment of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, and the Teesta Water Treaty that Mamata Banerjee opposes in West Bengal. Meanwhile, U.S- India relations have already experienced a bumpy ride following the recent diplomatic debacle involving Devyani Khobragade, and India's support to Russia over its “legitimate interests” in Ukraine.⁽⁷³⁾ There may be a few more complications on the road ahead, especially since the US is keen to normalize relations between India and Pakistan in the wake of its departure from Afghanistan. Still, India forms a critical part of the US pivot to Asia and serves as fertile terrain for investments by the international corporate community. In the event of Modi's victory, India may be under some pressure to seek a more favourable relationship with the West and shed the stigma of the Gujarat violence in 2002, which had compelled the US and the European Union to impose a diplomatic boycott of Modi. In fact, some changes are already under way in the pursuit of national interests. In 2012, Britain revoked the diplomatic ban against Modi, followed by Germany, Denmark,

Sweden and Belgium. Acknowledging the 13 billion euro trade between the two countries, the Belgium consul general to Mumbai has indicated that the EU is “positive and constructive about reaching out to Gujarat” and keen to take their business relations forward.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Save for protestations from the human rights community, the US approach is not likely to be any different.

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