

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

## Decoding India's 2024 National Elections

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### Introduction

India's 2024 national election is billed to be the biggest election in history. The mammoth exercise which involves the participation of 986 million voters and more than 600 political parties will last 44 days before the results are announced on June 4. It is also billed to be the most expensive elections in the world (Pradhan 2024), overtaking the United States elections. The noteworthy fact about this mega exercise is that nearly the entire process will be conducted through Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs). A staggering 5.5 million EVMs will be used to conduct this mammoth exercise spanning over two months (*Business Standard* 2024-03-16). Further, the 2024 national elections will determine who gets to occupy the Lok Sabha or Lower House of the Parliament. The party or a coalition of parties that gets a majority in the LoK Sabha will get to nominate its Prime Minister and run the government for next five years.

### State of Play

Prime Minister Narendra Modi representing the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is seeking the rare third term to office in mid-June. It may be mentioned that overcoming a three decades of coalition jinx the BJP under his leadership won a landslide election in 2014. His party again swept the national elections in 2019 with 303 seats and the coalition National Development Alliance (NDA) which won 352 Lok Sabha seats (out of 543 seats). This time around, PM Modi is seeking the mandate based on his government's all-round performances on producing stronger economic growth, delivering on welfare promises and bringing down the poverty rate (PIB 2024). His main slogan for 2024 polls is "Viksit Bharat" or a developed India by 2047. The party's strong performances in recent state polls (winning three key heartland states — Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan) and having governments in as many as 12 states (also four coalition governments) gives Modi's government a huge advantage over the opposition (*Al Jazeera* 2023-12-05). What is more important is PM Modi's high popularity among voters even after spending two terms in office makes this election a no contest (Mogul 2024).

The key challenger to PM Modi and his party comes from a coalition of roughly two dozen political parties, many of which having suffered or being systematically targeted by the ruling BJP government. The opposition bloc named INDIA (India National Developmental Inclusive Alliance)

is principally steered by the main opposition Indian National Congress (INC). The united opposition bloc which was formed with a lot of optimism to put up a collective fight against the BJP juggernaut continues to struggle despite initial promises among key state parties. Since its formation on July 18, 2023, two key leaders Nitish Kumar of Janata Dal United (Bihar) and Mamata Banerjee of Trinamool Congress (from a key opposition ruled state of West Bengal) have left the INDIA coalition in the mid-way. Notwithstanding the setbacks, the opposition alliance led by INC has made visible progress in seat sharing with regional partners and rallying national support to stop the BJP led NDA coalition to win the third consecutive election. However, unlike the ruling party which has deep pockets and massive organizational strength, the INDIA bloc is struggling with resources and coherence in campaign narratives. This makes the contest a David versus Goliath kind of fight.

## Key Election Issues

While there are numerous issues or expectations brought out by voters during the course of elections, key concerns are over stagnating income, price rise, lack of jobs, corruption, unchecked spread of misinformation, and growing inequality among others.

### Unemployment and Inflation

Among the major issues in the national election is the rising unemployment and high inflation. A recent pre-poll survey carried out by the well-known CSDS found unemployment and inflation are the top most complaints among most voters (*The Hindu* 2024-04-11). While the Indian economy continues to grow at an impressive pace in recent years, it is not adding up many jobs. The recent International Labour Organization (ILO) India Employment Report painted a bleak future as far as jobs are concerned (ILO 2024). The report noted that “In 2022, the share of unemployed youth in the total unemployed population was 82.9%.” Further, among the unemployed, the proportion of educated youth, particularly those with secondary level education or higher, has nearly doubled to 65.7% from 35.2% in the 2000s. No wonder, the 2024 national poll is witnessing competitive promises by political parties on job creation. The main opposition INC in its manifesto Nyay Patra has promised bring the Right to Apprenticeship Act thereby ensuring a one-year apprenticeship to every degree holder or graduate (below the age of 25) with a stipend of INR 1 lakh (one hundred thousand) a year apart from filling up 3 million vacancies in various central government departments. Not to be left out in the race, the ruling BJP’s manifesto called Sankalp Patra has promised to create millions of jobs for youth and new schemes for women (Kumar 2024).

### Welfare Populism

A key pillar of PM Modi’s consecutive victories is his government’s track record of delivering welfare goods to broad swathes of citizens across the country. Public distribution of key welfare goods such as gas cylinders, electricity connections, toilets, DBT (direct benefits transfer) under New Welfarism has helped the Modi government to create a robust vote bank. For instance, data from recent surveys (in particular National Family Health Survey 2019-21) found an impressive rise in household goods and services particularly electricity, flushed toilets, gas connection, etc (Vaishnav 2023). No wonder, PM

Modi has doubled down on welfare schemes (calling Modi Ki Guarantee) in the recently released party manifesto (*Hindustan Times* 2024-04-14). The ruling BJP's election manifesto has listed a wide array of welfare schemes. Not to be lagging behind the ruling party, the opposition particularly the Congress Party has promised an array of attractive welfare schemes to entice the voters. The party which recently unveiled a 46-page manifesto has promised to provide universal healthcare, free education until Class XII, launch an employment scheme for urban poor and so on. Regional parties too have announced numerous welfare schemes from free rations and education to attract voters. In short, with competitive populism taking the center-stage of the campaign strategy of every party, it is raining freebies/welfare schemes in the 2024 polls.

### Misinformation and Election Integrity

A key issue in the national election is the alarming rise in fake news, misinformation and disinformation heavily distorting voters' choices. While fake news and disinformation were already major challenges in the 2019 polls, the major uptick in disruptive technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfakes, suggests that the scales and intensities of these challenges will greatly vary in 2024. As it stands, India is the global capital of disinformation (Sahoo 2024), and with increasing access to internet and cheap internet data, the 2024 election is speculated to be on very shaky ground as far as disinformation and electoral integrity are concerned. While most political parties and candidates have shown great alacrity to aggressively deploy digital and social media tools in their campaigns, the Election Commission of India has issued guidelines as well as warnings to parties and tech platforms to desist from spreading mis-and disinformation (*The Hindu* 2024-03-20). One has to wait and watch how the bodies like the Election Commission would manage the daunting challenges of disinformation (growing deployment of AI and deep fakes) and hate messages during the course of an important election so as to protect the integrity of elections and make it free and fair.

### Level Playing Field for All?

One of the running themes of 2024 elections is ruling party's disproportionate advantages (in terms of well-oiled party machineries, money, institutional arbitrage, etc.) and lack of a level playing field for the opposition parties (Punwani 2023; *Financial Times* 2024-04-16). With the ruling party using every instrument of state to target and marginalize the key opposition parties and their top leaders, there are growing concerns including some major western governments (such as Germany and the United States) about the fairness of the electoral processes (*The Hindu* 2024-03-27). Since coming to office in 2014, the Modi government has weaponized federal investigative agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Income Tax and Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) against key opposition figures. As per the investigative media report, a total of 130 political leaders have been probed (questioned, raided and arrested) by the ED alone. Out of them, a staggering 115 (95%) are opposition figures (Tiwary 2022). The most alarming trend is the arrest of Mr. Arvind Kejriwal, Chief Minister of Delhi and Hemant Soren, Chief Minister of Jharkhand by ED on unproven charges in the middle of national elections.

Even more concerning is the IT department has frozen the accounts of main opposition INC and has sought recovery of INR 100 crore (1 billion) over allegations of discrepancies. While there may

be basis for such action, such measures in the middle of general elections hugely impact the ability of the opposition to put up a decent campaign and avail a fighting chance against the BJP behemoth. Fact of the matter is that many opposition parties, particularly INC, are precariously placed in terms of party finances. This is in contrast to the ruling party, which sits on a cash pile and enjoys huge institutional and organizational advantages over the opposition. On the top of this, the ruling party is leaving no instrument to deny opposition parties a level playing in the elections. Where and whenever possible, the ruling party has aggressively engineered defection in opposition ruled states (sometimes bringing down governments) and co-opted key leaders from opposition. Many such acts have been facilitated by selective deployment of state agencies such as ED, IT and CBI (Tiwary 2022).

To conclude, the national election in decades is seen as a one-sided contest as the Modi government has gone overdrive to disallow the opposition a fighting chance (Ellis-Petersen 2024). This has prompted the INDIA alliance to launch the “Save Democracy” movement in the country.

### **A Predictable Outcome?**

While predicting election outcomes is a hazardous business in a complex and politically diverse polity like India, the results in this round appear predictable. All recent pre-poll surveys strongly suggest an easy victory for Prime Minister Modi’s party. Riding on personal popularity of Modi, the BJP led NDA coalition set to sweep the polls across all regions except probably the south. The largest opinion poll by *India Today* has projected 335 seats for the ruling NDA, while the opposition INDIA bloc is likely to secure 160 seats (Bhattacharya 2024). However, sensing visible disunity among the opposition coalition and continued high popularity of PM Modi even after two-terms in office, the ruling BJP has been eyeing to cross 400 seats in Lok Sabha (out of 543 seats).

Although victory for the BJP looks certain, the incumbent party is leaving nothing to chance given the course of elections can often change and the party’s electoral limits in the southern and eastern regions. This is precisely why the ruling party is going all out to woo every known leader from the opposition ranks and is using every instrument of the state to undermine the campaigns of rival parties. Notably, the party has also gone aggressive in recruiting social media influencers, celebrities and media moguls in its bid for third term (NDTV 2024).

### **Conclusion**

With nearly one billion eligible voters and ever-increasing participation of women and the most marginalized sections of the populations in the elections, this once-in-five-year electoral exercise remains a great success story of democratization in a very diverse country with large impoverished populations. It is no wonder that due to its sheer democratic weight, India’s national election and the unfolding electoral processes are being intensely watched from all over the world. Yet, the manner in which the election is shaping (particularly the denial of a fair chance to the opposition and the weakening of vital democratic institutions), India’s democracy appears to be heading into uncharted territory. Another overwhelming victory for the right-wing BJP, coupled with a weak and fragmented opposition, means India risks further descent into illiberalism and democratic backsliding. ■

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