

# Can the Centre Hold?

The political hegemony of the BJP seems near complete with the president and possibly the veep emerging from the party, but that doesn't make 2019 a foregone conclusion



PM Narendra Modi congratulates Ram Nath Kovind on being elected as the 14th President of India

**:: Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay**

**I**s the political hegemony of the Bharatiya Janata Party the new normal? The question has been posed repeatedly in the wake of the comfortable victory of President-elect Ram Nath Kovind and the almost certain triumph of the party's vice-presidential candidate, M Venkaiah Naidu. These two elections, though for mainly titular posts but for the vice-president's ex-officio charge as Rajya Sabha chairman and no yardstick to measure people's choice, lend credence to Omar Abdullah's "forget 2019, start preparing for 2024" statement.

Coming close on the heels of the spectacular performance of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand alongside the stealing-from-behind act of forming governments in Manipur and Goa, it appears that Indian polity is witnessing a neat replay of a party system theorised by political scientist Rajni Kothari. Back in the 1960s, he postulated that India's party system was effectively a Congress system in which the party had a hegemony over India by virtue of being the inheritor of the national movement. Early psephologists in the 1980s coined the term Index of Opposition Unity (IOU) postulating that the Congress dominance was inversely proportional to it.

In 2014, political scientists theorised that domination of the Indian polity by the Congress party had been replaced by the supremacy of the BJP. A new "BJP system" has emerged from the debris of the Congress system.

Data from various elections since January

2014, collated by Datanet India, a company specialising in socio-economic and political statistical information about India, demonstrates the BJP's increasing influence. In January 2014, a few months after Narendra Modi became the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, the party had a total of 117 members in the Lok Sabha and 889 MLAs in state assemblies. Its vote share was around 18.5%. In the past three and half years, during which period, besides the 2014 Lok Sabha poll, there have been several other state elections, the BJP's vote share has risen to 25.5% in state elections and 31% for the Lok Sabha.

**For Project Modi to run its course sans hiccups and get an extension, it will have to focus on areas where people expect actual deliverance**

The number of party MLAs has grown to 1,351, an increase of 462, of which a major chunk has come from UP. In contrast, the main national opposition, the Congress, has slipped from 205 to 45 in the Lok Sabha and from 1,119 to 856 in state assemblies. The narrative is clear: the BJP is rising steadily and the Congress is slipping.

Between now and 2019, elections are due in BJP bastions like Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. While the party's absolute numbers may not increase dramatically in these states, the BJP is hopeful of adding to its tally significantly from Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh besides registering an impressive show in Tripura. From all accounts, as the party prepares for the next parliamentary polls, its defeats in Bihar (where the IOU was high), Delhi and West Bengal (where the party did not repeat the euphoric performance of 2014) will remain the only set-

backs since 2014. Even in Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the party remains almost inconsequential, it has secured greater presence compared with the past.

## State Polls Are No Weathervane

Absolute numbers always evoke awe like the above figures do. But when assessed relatively, we get a better perspective. In 2012, Pranab Mukherjee (ironically, also backed by Nitish Kumar, who broke NDA ranks at that time) won the presidential poll against Opposition-backed PA Sangma by a bigger margin than Kovind. In two years, the Congress slumped to its worst performance. Moreover, good performance in assembly elections never guarantee a repeat showing in parliamentary polls. In 2003, the BJP swept MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh but was voted out in the 2004 parliamentary polls. Between 2011 and 2013, the Congress won Kerala, Assam, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram yet was humiliated in 2014. Unmistakably, victories in successive state elections enthuse party workers but doesn't immunise a party from parliamentary defeats. The BJP can publicise continuing victories to further dampen opposition spirits but cannot be certain about future developments.

The BJP victory in 2014 stemmed from four factors in almost equal measure: the Modi wave, hope and expectations he generated, disenchantment with the UPA, and the Sangh Parivar machinery coupled with modern campaign methods. In 2019, Modi's political fraternity will continue backing him solidly and voters will use the same yard-

sticks except that the assessment of Modi's performance will replace faith in his abilities. Additionally, in place of anti-incumbency against UPA, disarray in opposition ranks will benefit the BJP. In 2014, while one section voted for Modi because they saw a development messiah in him, another group backed him over expectations that his triumph would stimulate the dominance of Hindutva-centric ideas. After more than three years, while achievements on the economic front continue to be in the making, the Hindutva idea has been considerably strengthened. This socio-political "progress", if one can call it so, has occasionally sullied Modi's image, and the government, party and the Sangh leadership have denounced targeted violence, like lynching. Yet the ecosystem that strengthens majoritarian elation is not politically confronted and legally restrained because it remains a bulwark against possible erosion of support triggered by disillusionment over non-delivery of promises.

Without a doubt, the "new" BJP is the dominant party and unlike the Advani-Vajpayee partnership characterised by low-voltage rivalry, the Modi-Shah duo are a team only in implementation and the frontage is singularly Modi's. Besides discrediting the Opposition, the party has systematically delegitimised the intelligentsia, secularists and the media by publicising offensive slangs for them – libtard, sickular and presstitute. Yet, elections are rarely lost due to opposition from civil society. The role of the opposition parties too is restricted to channelising and harnessing people's frustration. The recent farmers' stir demonstrated that it takes little time for discontentment to spill out in the open. For Project Modi to run its course sans hiccups and get an extension, it will have to focus on areas where people expect actual deliverance. Despite new fanciful alliterations, the proverbial roti, kapda aur makaan and bijli, sadak aur paani remain the principal phrases that motivate voters, especially when reiterating their previous choice. ■



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