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INDIA – The 2024 General Election

What is at stake?

May 2024



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Contents

Background information	2
Election results in 2014 and 2019	4
The growth of BJP in the last ten years	4
The growth of violence against religious minorities in the last ten years	5
Electoral Trends and Analysis of the 2024 elections.....	7
Conclusion.....	9

Background information

The 18th general elections of India began on 19 April 2024 and after going through seven phases of voting, will conclude with results announced on 4 June 2024.



Out of a total population of 1.4 billion people, 970 million people (approximately 69% of the population) is eligible to vote. A total of 543 seats are up for elections with 272 seats required for a majority. The main contestants are the incumbents, Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) leading the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) while the opposition consists of the Indian National Congress (INC) leading the India Alliance. The 543 seats are divided state-wise as can be seen in the table below.

(In the table below, NE denotes North-Eastern states and UT Union Territories)

Name of state	Number of seats
Andhra Pradesh	25
Arunachal Pradesh (NE)	2
Assam (NE)	14
Bihar	40
Chhattisgarh	11
Goa	2
Gujarat	26
Haryana	10
Himachal Pradesh	4
Jharkhand	14
Karnataka	28
Kerala	20
Madhya Pradesh	29
Maharashtra	48
Manipur (NE)	2
Meghalaya (NE)	2
Mizoram (NE)	1
Nagaland (NE)	1
Odisha	21
Punjab	13
Rajasthan	25
Sikkim (NE)	1
Tamil Nadu	39
Telangana	17
Tripura (NE)	2
Uttar Pradesh	80
Uttarakhand	5
West Bengal	42
Andaman and Nicobar Islands (UT)	1
Chandigarh (UT)	1
Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu (UT)	2
Delhi (UT)	7
Jammu and Kashmir (UT)	5
Ladakh (UT)	1
Lakshadweep (UT)	1
Puducherry (UT)	1

The NDA's main party, the BJP, is contesting 443 seats, while the remainder (made up of almost 25 other alliance parties) are contesting the remaining 100 seats. Meanwhile, the India Alliance's main party, the Indian National Congress, is contesting 328 seats while the remainder (also made up of almost 25 other alliance parties) are contesting the remaining 215 seats.

Election results in 2014 and 2019

The BJP-led NDA won the general elections in 2014 and 2019. The prime ministerial candidate for the NDA for both elections was Mr. Narendra Modi of the BJP, erstwhile Chief Minister of Gujarat state from 2001 to 2014. In the 2014 elections, the BJP won 282 seats on its own, while other alliance parties of the NDA won 54 seats taking the NDA total to 336 seats. The INC was only able to win 44 seats while other alliance parties won 16 seats taking the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) tally to a total of 60 seats. Other parties that were neither aligned to NDA nor UPA won a total of 147 seats.

In the 2019 elections, the NDA won even more comprehensively than 2014. The BJP alone won 303 seats, 31 seats more than the majority, while other alliance parties won 51 seats, taking the NDA tally to a total of 354 seats. The UPA lost badly again, with INC winning 52 seats (an improvement of eight seats), while other alliance parties only won 41 seats. Non-aligned parties won 96 seats.

Clearly over the last ten years, the biggest damage has suffered by the Indian National Congress party that crashed from 206 seats in the 2009 elections to 44 seats in 2014 and 52 seats in the 2019 elections. On the other hand, the biggest winner has been the BJP that went from 116 seats in the 2009 elections to 282 in 2014 and 303 seats in the 2019 elections.

The growth of BJP in the last ten years

The BJP came to power in 2014, promising development and modernization, removal of corruption from politics and better governance. Modi's campaign was conducted on a positive note claiming that 'good days' were coming for the ordinary people of India. After ten years of Congress-led rule (from 2004-2014), there was a sense of stagnation and disappointment with the allegations of corruption involving the telecommunications and mining industry. Even though Modi is commonly thought to be responsible for the Gujarat riots of 2002 (when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat) in which more than 2,000 Muslims were killed, his campaign focusing on development and modernization was successful in concealing his and his party's hardline Hindutva agenda. Backed by radical Hindu Rashtriya Swayasevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's Hindutva agenda has the objective of turning India into a Hindu nation with religious minorities accorded second class status. After coming to power in 2014, many observers claim that Modi's BJP has destroyed democracy at every level.

In electoral terms, over the last ten years, the BJP has successfully dismantled many state governments which were led by opposition parties. Often, the BJP enticed opposition Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) to resign from the opposition and join their ranks. Once the governments were dismantled, the BJP would then use the new MLAs to form its own government. Examples of this practice can be seen in Goa in 2019 and 2022, in Karnataka in 2019, in Madhya Pradesh in 2020, in Maharashtra in 2022 and most recently in Himachal Pradesh in 2024.

The growth of violence against religious minorities in the last ten years

Violence against religious minorities increased drastically from 2014 onwards. The BJP is a political party but RSS is its mother organization. The latter has hundreds of smaller organizations under its wing including the student group Akhil Bhartiya Vidhyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the farmers' association Bhartiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) and women's union Rashtriya Sevika Samiti. These all call themselves 'cultural organizations' with membership running into millions, all of whom are Hindus wanting India to be a purely Hindu country. Vigilantes from these organizations have wreaked havoc on religious minorities, with cases of Muslims being lynched regularly appearing on social media. Protected by unofficial impunity under the BJP government, vigilante mobs can launch attacks and get the authorities to hold the victims responsible for virtually any violence occurring.¹ Hindu religious festivals, in particular, have become occasions for Hindu mobs to physically assault Muslims and intimidate them by taking over public spaces in a show of strength.

In the period 2014-2019 alone (i.e., during Prime Minister Modi's first term), there was a 500% increase in hate speech by politicians inciting hatred against non-Hindus on the basis of religion.² Correspondingly, from 2014-2022, there were at least 878 cases of hate speech and hate crimes against religious minorities in India.³ Online platforms have been taken over by paid trolls who regularly harass outspoken critics, especially if they are from a religious minority.⁴ The BJP fielded only one Muslim candidate in the 2024 elections.⁵

Similarly, violence against Christians and Sikhs⁶ has also increased drastically, with violence against Christians increasing fourfold in the period 2011-22.⁷ Even though Christians face more hate crimes than hate speech when compared to Muslims, in terms of absolute numbers, the number of incidents against Muslims is higher. This means that violence against smaller religious minorities such as Christians or Sikhs has received relatively less coverage even by independent media in India.

In 2021, with more than 50,000 cases of hate speech and hate crimes against Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis) recorded, caste-based violence and discrimination was clearly on the rise, increasing by 1.2% compared to 2020. Nearly 50% of caste-violence cases have been concentrated in the three states of Uttar Pradesh (26%), Rajasthan (17%) and Madhya Pradesh (14%).⁸ Overall, crimes against Dalits have risen by 46.11% and crimes against Adivasis have risen by 48.15% since 2013.⁹

¹ <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/india-muslims-marginalized-population-bjp-modi>

² <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/under-narendra-modi-government-vip-hate-speech-skyrockets-by-500-1838925>

³ <https://thewire.in/communalism/from-speech-to-crime-to-genocide-its-clear-to-see-how-hate-travels>

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/26/hamas-to-halal-how-anti-muslim-hate-speech-is-spreading-in-india>

⁵ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/bjp-muslim-candidates-9267817/>

⁶ <https://time.com/6342873/india-sikhs-persecution/>

⁷ <https://thewire.in/communalism/data-rise-in-attacks-on-christians-in-india-up-four-times-in-11-years-2012-2022>

⁸ <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/02/12/increase-in-crimes-against-dalits-and-other-scheduled-castes-in-india/>

⁹ https://www.business-standard.com/politics/crimes-against-dalits-up-by-46-11-since-2013-adivasis-by-48-15-kharge-123120800218_1.html

Law and order in India has been seriously affected by BJP-led state governments passing so-called anti-conversion laws (officially called the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Acts) which criminalize religious conversions. The constitutional validity of these laws has been challenged in the Supreme Court since they tend to violate a citizen's constitutional right to freely practice and propagate any religion of their choice. Shockingly however, in as many as 12 states such laws continue to operate preventing both Muslims and Christians from freely practicing and propagating their religion.¹⁰

In addition to these laws, the Modi government has also imprisoned several of India's leading human rights activists on trumped-up charges, by reportedly inserting fake documents into the digital devices of these activists.¹¹ Many of them have spent more than five years in prison, while in most cases, even the trial against them has not yet started. Clearly the legal process *is* the punishment in such cases. In addition, in the months leading up to the 2024 general elections, chief ministers from opposition parties – such as Hemant Soren of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha party¹² and Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Admi Party in Delhi¹³ – have been arrested under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. Investigative agencies supporting the BJP can arrest any individual based on accusations of money laundering and other related economic offences without waiting for evidence to substantiate the accusation or justify the imprisonment.¹⁴

Finally, poverty, unemployment, inflation and economic inequality have reached unprecedented levels in India under the last ten years of the Modi-ruled BJP government. While the overall Gross Domestic Product of India is growing,¹⁵ the distribution of wealth is highly uneven, mainly benefiting the already wealthy. In other words, there is little or no trickle down of wealth from the rich to the poor. India's top 1% income share is among the very highest in the world, higher than in Brazil, South Africa and the USA.¹⁶ India's unemployment rate climbed to 6.1% in 2017-2018, the highest in 45 years,¹⁷ and rose to 6.8% as of January 2023, according to data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.¹⁸ Despite claims about India emerging as an economic superpower in the global economy, Prime Minister Modi has nevertheless had to promise free food aid to more than 800 million Indians until 2029,¹⁹ indicating that the majority of the population depends on food aid rather than achieving economic independence through sustainable livelihoods.

¹⁰ <https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20India%20Apostasy%20Issue%20Update.pdf>

¹¹ <https://scroll.in/article/1040023/reports-say-evidence-against-bhima-koregaon-accused-was-planted-so-why-are-they-still-in-jail>

¹² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-68163338>

¹³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-68767574>

¹⁴ <https://thewire.in/rights/stop-misuse-pmla-target-scholars-activists-open-letter>

¹⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/29/economy/india-gdp-growth-economy/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.newsclick.in/economic-inequality-india-now-sharper-under-british-rai>

¹⁷ <https://scroll.in/article/1063428/a-decade-under-modi-rising-unemployment-declining-wages-poor-quality-jobs>

¹⁸ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/explainers/unemployment-rate-in-india/87441/1>

¹⁹ <https://thewire.in/economy/indias-amrit-kaal-hunger-inequity-and-a-30-trillion-economy>

Electoral Trends and Analysis of the 2024 elections

At the time of writing, two phases of voting have been completed (on 19 April and 26 April 2024), with five more phases of voting yet to be completed. In the first two phases, voting took place for a total of 190 seats distributed across the country. At this stage, it is significant that voter turnout has been lower than in the 2019 elections. It is difficult to say how the lower voter turnout will impact the BJP-led NDA or INC-led India Alliance, although it should be noted that out of these 190 seats, the reduction in voter turnout has been higher in BJP or NDA stronghold seats (a drop of around 7%) than in INC or India Alliance stronghold seats (a drop of around 3.5%).²⁰

The low turnout indicates voter fatigue over the lengthy electoral process and the state of the nation after ten years of BJP-ruled government. In 2014 and 2019, elections in India effectively became American-style presidential elections with voters choosing Modi as their leader. In reality, Indian voters choose their Member of Parliament and it is these MPs who vote for a Prime Minister. Presidential-style elections are centralized elections that are fought between two leaders, whereas in 2024, the elections seem to be more localized with voters more focused on the candidates for Members of Parliament and local governance issues and caste equations, for instance, rather than elections being about choosing a candidate for the office of Prime Minister.

In the 2014 and 2019 elections, several regional parties stood for election without being aligned with either the BJP or the Congress party. In the 2024 elections, the India Alliance in several states has decided to only select one candidate to fight the BJP or its alliance partners. In this way, the anti-BJP vote will not be split between several opposition parties. However, the success of the India Alliance will depend on whether party workers and cadre will actually ‘transfer’ their votes to such candidates where they are not from their own party. For example in Delhi, Aam Admi Party (AAP) and Congress are in alliance against the BJP. In the past, AAP and Congress have bitterly fought each other in local and general elections. For the 2024 elections, in all seven seats of Delhi, there will only be an AAP candidate or a Congress candidate on any given seat to fight the BJP. The question is whether Congress voters will support an AAP candidate and whether AAP voters will support a Congress candidate. There are similar challenges in various other states for the parties belonging to the India Alliance. These questions notwithstanding, preventing the splitting of anti-BJP votes is likely to make the 2024 elections a much more closely fought battle compared to previous elections.

In caste terms, the BJP and its alliance partners have stitched together a unique caste coalition comprised of Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) – a sub-category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs). According the last national caste census undertaken by the British government in 1932, the OBC population was close to 52%. Such a large category of deprived peoples only received the benefit of affirmative action (27% reservation in government jobs and public colleges) in the 1990s through the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. However, over the last four decades, the benefits and protections accruing to OBCs has been uneven and

²⁰ <https://thewire.in/politics/narendra-modi-voters-phase-one-feedback>

enjoyed by only a few dominant OBC castes. There are large groups (castes) within OBCs that remain poor, uneducated and unemployed. These have been categorized as EBCs in some states and over the last ten years, the BJP has captured the EBC vote in several states (Bihar, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan etc.). Today the caste coalition of the BJP is comprised of its historical core voter base of dominant castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas – together forming about 20% of the Hindu population), and over the last ten years it has also added EBCs (about 35% of the population). Over and above this coalition, the BJP has also been successful in adding some dominant OBCs (such as the Yadavs in North India,²¹ the Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka,²² or dominant caste communities such as the Marathas in Maharashtra²³), offering incentives such as special reservations for jobs and education or a symbolic space in the project of Hindu nationalism.

The India Alliance led by Congress, on the other hand, have stitched together a coalition of dominant OBCs (roughly 30% of the population) and the Muslim population (14 to 15% of the population).²⁴ The Scheduled Caste (SC or Dalit) voter either votes for their own party – the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) contesting mainly in North India – or their vote is split between the BJP and INC.²⁵ The Scheduled Tribe (ST or Adivasi) voter is reeling under the unprecedented assault on forest lands acquired for large-scale privatized mining.²⁶ In these conditions, it is likely that the indigenous voter (of whom a large percentage are Christian) is going to vote for the India Alliance and not for the BJP, except in pockets where the BJP has won over specific indigenous communities on hyper-local issues. Against the BJP's dominant caste plus EBC coalition, the INC's dominant OBC and Muslim coalition is numerically weaker. In the 2024 election, the choices made by the Dalit and tribal voter are likely to prove decisive. At the time of writing, there is a common perception amongst Dalits and Adivasis that if the BJP comes back with a strong majority, it will change the Constitution and remove any welfare or protections accorded to Dalits and Adivasis.²⁷ If this perception persists through the month of May, then Dalits and Adivasis across India are likely to vote against the BJP, or at least cut into the BJP's voter base.

²¹ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/india/at-mega-meet-bjp-tries-to-woo-yadavs-bihars-most-populous-caste/articleshow/105214835.cms>

²² <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/bjp-woos-karnatakas-powerful-castes-with-reservation-sop-ahead-of-assembly-election/article66525254.ece>

²³ <https://theprint.in/statedraft/devendra-fadnavis-has-a-problem-how-to-appease-marathas-not-anger-obcs/154837/>

²⁴ <https://thewire.in/politics/obc-reservation-narendra-modi-muslim-congress>

²⁵ <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/lok-sabha-election-2024-bihar-caste-cauldron-battle-of-alliances-bjp-led-nda-vs-rjd-congress-left-india-bloc-nitish-kumar-tejashwi-yadav/article67954238.ece>

²⁶ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/articles/india-indigenous-under-attack>

²⁷ <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha/dalit-anger-threatening-to-trip-bjps-subaltern-hinduism/article68102806.ece>

Conclusion

Although the BJP has tried very hard to polarize the 2024 elections along religious lines (Hindus versus Muslims), voters are likely to vote on core economic issues such as unemployment and inflation,²⁸ rather than on religious issues. The BJP had previously focused on the construction of the Ram Temple in Uttar Pradesh as a key example of how it is working towards making India a Hindu nation. However, since late January 2024, this issue simply disappeared from public view and from the minds of voters. These signs are encouraging and indicate that the average Hindu voter is tired of religious polarization, vigilante violence and the general deterioration in law and order. Rather, it seems that the average Hindu voter is likely to vote on secular issues that concern all Indians.

Even if this analysis is proved right in the last instance, it should not be interpreted to mean that the average Hindu voter sympathizing with BJP/RSS has stopped feeling any hatred towards religious minorities. There is consistent evidence that such sympathizers are becoming increasingly hostile towards religious minorities, who are seen as being a threat rather than as equal citizens. However, after ten years of living in this environment built on religious majoritarianism, the BJP has not been able to deliver prosperity to ordinary Indians and – due to the general hardship – it is becoming increasingly difficult for even RSS sympathizers to sustain attitudes of hate, victimhood, fear and anger on religious issues.

Even if the BJP loses the 2024 elections, the culture of Hindu religious majoritarianism among large numbers of ordinary Indians, and the political authoritarianism of the BJP, are likely to remain as core features of Indian society. However, it is nonetheless important that the BJP does not come back to power for a third period of government since their taking-over of state apparatus has resulted in a sharp increase of physical violence against religious minorities, greater impoverishment of already marginalized sectors of society and the latter's near total loss of confidence in the neutrality of the police, administration and legal system. If the India Alliance comes back to power, hatred towards religious minorities will still persist but at the very least, the institutions of law and order would likely stop harassing religious minorities, and the vigilantes would not be able to wreak havoc so easily in the public sphere. Thus, there would be some hope of a level playing field for all citizens regardless of their social identities.

²⁸ https://www.business-standard.com/elections/lok-sabha-election/lok-sabha-polls-csds-survey-reveals-unemployment-a-key-issue-for-voters-124041100296_1.html