

# Congress may fail to secure leader of the opposition post again

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The Congress is unlikely to get the post of the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in Lok Sabha for a second time in a row as it has yet again failed to get 10% seats in Parliament's lower House. To get the LoP post, a party should get 55 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats. At the time of filing this report, the Congress had won or was leading on 52 seats, three short of the numbers needed to get the post.

After the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance government came to power in 2014, it refused to give the LoP post to the Congress arguing that with 44 members it did not meet the requisite criteria.

There were protests from the Opposition as the LoP is part of the selection panels for key appointments to statutory bodies such as the Central Vigilance Commissioner and the Lokpal. The LoP is also on the panel to select the Central Bureau of Investigation director. The Congress raised the issue with then Speaker Sumitra Mahajan insisting that it should get the post as it was the largest opposition party and had pre-poll alliances in certain states. But she too declined the request, citing the past precedents and the attorney general's opinion. The government was finally compelled to include Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge in the selection panels



but it refused to accord him the LoP status. Previously, it was in 1985 that the then Lok Sabha Speaker Balram Jakhar did not give the LoP post to the Telugu Desam Party, which was then the second largest party after the Congress.

It depends entirely on the government whether to give the LoP post to the Congress considering it has marginally improved its performance this time.

The Congress will separately now deliberate on the poll outcome. The Congress Working Committee (CWC), the party's highest decision-making body, is meeting on Saturday to draw up its future plans. Congress president Rahul Gandhi has taken the responsibility for the poll debacle and might even offer to step aside at the CWC meeting. His entire team of

general secretaries and in-charges of states may also follow suit.

In 2014, after the drubbing in the Lok Sabha elections, then Congress chief Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, the then party vice-president, offered to resign but the CWC unanimously rejected it.

Saturday's meeting could see a repeat of that. The CWC will also review the shortcomings in communicating the party's Nyay (Nyuntam Aay Yojana) promise to the voters. The party had promised a minimum guaranteed income of Rs 72,000 annually to the country's 20% poor families under the scheme.

But reports from the ground suggested that the voters were not excited about the poll promise, given that Congress leaders and workers failed to effectively publicise the proposed poverty alleviation scheme.

Rahul Gandhi, who lost his

family pocket borough of Amethi but won from Wayanad in Kerala, is also expected to carry out an extensive overhaul of the organisation.

Four states — Maharashtra, Haryana, Jharkhand and Jammu and Kashmir — will be going to the polls later this year. Assembly elections in Delhi will be held in February next year. Rahul Gandhi has the task cut out for him now — to make the party fighting fit in these states, especially to take on the BJP which boasts of well-oiled machinery on the ground.

Rahul Gandhi is expected to change many state chiefs and also appoint new general secretaries and in-charges of states.

By doing this, he would seek to send a message that the Congress was ready to shed its status quoist tag and take hard decisions as it prepares to fight the BJP in state assembly elections.

# Quietly, relentlessly RSS worked behind the scenes to power BJP win

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For the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) big win is not only a referendum on the saffron party's performance on national security and on economic and international fronts, but also a sign that its social engineering has been successful in coalescing Hindu votes.

The RSS, the BJP's ideological parent, has been persistently working behind the scenes to help the party overcome caste-based polarisation that posed a challenge, especially in the Hindi heartland states that contribute a sizeable number of seats to the Lok Sabha.

Senior RSS functionaries said on condition of anonymity people had chosen a government that did not demur from taking decisions on security, policies and international affairs perceived as "drastic". But it is the BJP's showing in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar, where caste fault lines run deep, that has pleased the Sangh.

The alliance of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), relying on the caste calculus in UP, was expected to upset the BJP's chances. This concern overshadowed all others for the RSS.

"On issues of national

security, this government scored well. After the Balakot strikes [on a terror camp in Pakistan], not even China could stand with Pakistan," said a senior RSS functionary. For the RSS, indications that caste-based parties are losing their grip on the electorate have emerged as a high point of the general election. Manmohan Vaidya, RSS joint general secretary, said, "It was a contest between the idea of Bharat, which is all-inclusive, holistic and integral and the un-Indian school of thought that sees India as several identities and divides society on the basis of caste, religion etc for its personal gains."

The improvement in the BJP vote share, a functionary said, was vindication of the party's assertion that it is not anti-minority or against Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes as was alleged by the Opposition. "There was a concerted campaign to drive away the Dalits and the Adivasis (STs) from the BJP, even though they benefitted from the government's inclusive policies," a second functionary based in UP said.

Anticipating hiccups in tribal areas, in SC regions and in MP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, where the BJP lost the assembly elections in 2018, RSS pulled out all stops to canvass for BJP. It worked to win back tribal votes in MP, where loss of their support was seen to have contributed to BJP's

reverses in the assembly elections.

Its social engineering was seen at play in Rajasthan this year, when it helped woo Gujjar quota protest leader Kirori Singh Bainsla, and in its efforts to engage with the Jats in Haryana where the agitation for Other Backward Class reservations in February 2016 put the BJP government in a precarious position.

The RSS cadre also tried to assuage the upper castes, who were against the ordinance that restored the provisions of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act after the Supreme Court banned automatic arrests under it last year.

"The results are a sign of waning caste-based politics, which is long overdue. It is also a sign that areas traditionally considered fortresses that the BJP could not breach are also looking at the party as an option," said a third functionary, referring to the southern states.

According to RSS general secretary Bhaiyyaji Joshi, India was fortunate to once again have a stable government. "This is the triumph of national forces. Many compliments to each and everyone who has contributed to this victory of democracy," he said.

"We wish that with the completion of polling process, all bitterness will end and the verdict of the masses is welcomed with humility."

# CM Ashok Gehlot's son Vaibhav Gehlot loses to union minister GS Shekhawat

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Chief minister Ashok Gehlot's son and Congress' Jodhpur candidate Vaibhav Gehlot lost to BJP candidate and union minister of state for agriculture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat by a margin of 2,74,440 votes.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, Shekhawat had defeated Chandresh Kumari of the Congress from Jodhpur by 4.10 lakh votes. There were 13 contestants in the constituency

in 2014 and the BJP's vote percentage was 66.15. This time Jodhpur registered

7,88,888 votes and Vaibhav 5,14,448 votes.

**Also read:** Lok Sabha election results 2019: BJP's alliance with RLP's Hanuman Benival pays off

Ashok Gehlot visited Jodhpur more than six times and even launched a door-to-door campaign in support of his son. Considering the Congress

victory in last year's assembly elections, Jodhpur was considered a safe seat for Vaibhav, but a Modi wave spoiled all political equations. Of the eight assembly seats under the Jodhpur parliamentary constituency, the Congress has now six legislators. In none of the assembly seats, Vaibhav got an edge.

Shekhawat even took a lead of 18827 votes from Sardarpura, CM's home assembly constituency.

# How Opposition failed to stop the Modi wave, despite unity effort

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They came, they met and they lost the game. The opposition league, which was toying with names such as Secular Democratic Front, failed to dent or stop the Narendra Modi wave. "Today I won't go into what led to the loss," said Congress chief Rahul Gandhi.

"It is a fight of ideologies and I congratulate Prime Minister Narendra Modi." To defeat Modi, Gandhi had agreed to give up several things. He hadn't insisted on being the opposition's PM candidate and he let regional leaders Sharad Pawar and Chandrababu Naidu take the lead in stitching the alliance. In the end, it simply wasn't enough. The Bharatiya Janata Party had successfully

conveyed that Gandhi was attempting to flee the threat in Amethi and he lost the seat, which had been with his family for three decades, other than in 1998. After five years of having the Congress at its lowest Lok Sabha tally of 44, Gandhi could only improve the count by less than 10 seats.

The other regional leader to take a hit is Nationalist Congress Party chief Sharad Pawar. His daughter Supriya Sule managed to hang on to the Baramati family seat, but his nephew Parth Pawar, who was hoping to make his Lok Sabha debut, lost out. While Parth described the results as "shocking", his uncle termed them "unexpected", which may be an understatement for the NCP that managed just four seats despite farmers' distress impacting Maharashtra. In the

last few days, Pawar was the man trying to get allies such as BJD's Naveen Patnaik on board. Now, it is unclear if Pawar will ever be able to realise his dream of being prime minister.

Prime ministerial ambitions were there for India's two power women, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee and BSP's Mayawati. The BJP threatened both by having a gap of just four MPs in Bengal and limiting the grand alliance to 15 seats in Uttar Pradesh, 10 of them for BSP.

"It was too polarised," said a TMC MP. "We should have made it about Bengal because when we focussed on that in the last phase, we did well." Banerjee now has two years for the fight in the assembly polls, though the BJP contends that 50 of her MLAs want to quit.

# Amit Shah's master plan for Uttar Pradesh derails SP, BSP

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In the middle of last year, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president, Amit Shah, told an interlocutor he doubted that Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav would actually come together. But he quickly added, "Par agar aana hai toh aa jayen. Dekh lenge. Yeh bhajiya unse ladega. (But if they have to come together, let them. We will see. This BJP will fight them.)" Privately, the party's state strategists were rattled. How could they beat the might of the two strongest regional leaders across the Hindi heartland? After all, the party's success in 2014 and 2017 had relied substantially on a split in the anti-BJP vote. But much before Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) came together, the BJP hunkered down and crafted a strategy to take them on.

## SOCIAL COALITION

The first element in the plan was to go back to the 60-40 formula. This was devised when Shah was the general secretary in charge of Uttar Pradesh (UP) back in 2014. Yadavs, Muslims and Jatavs together comprise around 40% of the electorate. The BJP had relied on mobilising the other 60% in both 2014 and 2017. This would include upper castes, all backward groups except Yadavs, and all Dalit groups except Jatavs. This time, the party would need to replicate this social coalition, but ensure their voters turned out in even higher numbers. There was, however, a

problem. The upper caste base looked shaky at the end of last year.

The BJP, hence, first got into damage control mode to get back its core vote. It announced a 10% reservation for the economically weaker sections of general castes; it reached out to the RSS, VHP and Hindu saints associated with the Ram Jannabhoomi movement to neutralise their anger. Finally, it raised the pitch on nationalism after the Balakot strikes. Slowly but surely, the upper castes returned to Modi.

To the non-Yadav backward castes, the BJP machine spoke of the sunwai, the voice, which had gained in the present dispensation and reminded them of the days of Yadav domination. It made microalliances where necessary, like the one with Apna Dal's Anupriya Patel or Nishad Party. The PM Kisaan scheme played a role in regenerating support of this segment of voters as well. A large segment of these caste groups — from agrarian backgrounds — were furious at the end of last year at the stray cattle menace. In January, the state government began to address the issue by constructing cow sheds.

Many voters we met expressed their anger at the issue, but saw it as a state-specific concern rather than one which would affect national election voting patterns. To non-Jatav Dalits, the party's political message was of equity. Modi, in his campaign speeches, invoked Ambedkar and how the government had done more to

honour him than any government in the past. National security may seem like an elite concern, but with both these social groups, the message of delivering a strong response to terror resonated. The BJP now had its messaging in place, targeted at all social groups.

## "LABARTH"

The party was aware that political messaging in itself was not enough. It needed to show to the constituencies which had supported it in the past — and possibly newer voters — that the government had delivered. This is where it constructed the idea of labarthis, or beneficiaries. The Modi government's flagship achievement in its first term in office has been the delivery of rural assets: Housing, toilets, gas cylinders, and electrification. This has been supplemented with Ayushman Bharat. There has been special attention, with regard to role in these schemes, in UP. The Adityanath government, monitored by the Prime Minister's Office, was tasked with ensuring last mile delivery, a special challenge in UP.

The schemes had their flaws and challenges. But in a remarkable instance of synergy between the party and the government, the BJP machine, from the middle of last year, began reaching out to individual beneficiaries directly. The BJP went to each village, and to each booth, to identify labarthis (data was available from government records). "We went so many times that anyone who got a toilet knew Modiji had given

the toilet, anyone who got money for housing knew Modiji had given the house, anyone who got a cylinder knew Modiji had given the cylinder," said a UP BJP leader. These government schemes, the party believes, constructed a vote of the poor for Modi, expanded the BJP's class base.

## NARENDRA MODI

But the micro-messaging needed a common thread. And that thread was the persona of Narendra Modi. As a party strategist, sitting in the BJP campaign office in Varanasi, told this writer last week, "Modi is fighting in each of the state's 80 seats. Nothing else is relevant. It is all about one question: Do you want him as PM or not? And mark my words, his popularity has increased." Indeed, the Modi wave was palpable on the ground and we met voters who had one thing in common: They wanted Modi back.

The party used Modi strategically, getting him to address close to 30 rallies, especially in constituencies seen as vulnerable and where it was felt a Modi push would make all the difference. It was this mix of Narendra Modi's appeal, a formidable party structure, a robust social coalition sustained by micro-messaging, government schemes, and the slogan of nationalism that delivered UP to the BJP yet again in the face of a formidable coalition. Modi, Shah, and the party's UP team have rewritten the rules of the political game in the heartland.