

India: To beat BJP in three poll-bound states, Congress is working on an alliance with civil society groups

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This follows the party's successful strategy in Gujarat to partner mass leaders Jignesh Mevani, Hardik Patel and Alpesh Thakor.

After its partnership with civil society groups and leaders of mass movements [came close to dethroning](#) the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in Gujarat in Assembly elections in December, the Congress is working on a similar blueprint for poll-bound Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan.

As in the case of Gujarat, the tacit support extended by the Congress to civil society groups in these states will eventually culminate in open coordination between the two as the year-end Assembly polls draw close. Madhya Pradesh Congress leaders will be meeting representatives of civil society groups on June 22 in Bhopal to chalk out their plans and identify matters to be highlighted in the poll campaign.

The Congress has been in regular touch with the Ekta Parishad, a federation of non-governmental organisations and several other groups that work among the poor and marginalised. Its founder PV Rajagopal shared the stage with Rahul Gandhi during the Congress president's two-day visit to Chhattisgarh in May.

Sanjay Singh, national convenor of the Jal-Jan Jodo Abhiyan that works for water and food security, said organisations working with tribals, Adivasis, Dalits and landless farmers have drawn up a charter of demands and will share this with the Congress at this meeting. "We will place these issues before the Congress and expect the party to include these in its election manifesto," Singh said. "We also aim to organise joint programmes wherever it is possible."

Congress insiders maintained the charter of demands had actually been drawn up at the party's behest and was a result of its informal alliance with non-governmental organisations. Singh said a beginning in this direction was made nearly two years ago when Mohan Prakash, who was then the Congress leader in charge of party affairs in Madhya Pradesh, approached civil society groups to explore the possibility of working together. Several meetings were held and the two also participated in a programme in Shivpuri last year. Deepak Babaria, who replaced Mohan Prakash in his role in Madhya Pradesh, and state Congress chief Kamal Nath are set to take this cooperation forward.

The Gujarat model

The Congress has felt the need to ride on the coattails of civil society groups with its Madhya Pradesh unit, weakened by internal bickering, proving ineffective in pinning down the three-term Bharatiya Janata Party government led by Shivraj Singh Chouhan. For instance, the Congress was

able to tap into the [growing anger among farmers in Mandsaur](#) primarily because of the groundwork done by non-governmental organisations and farm leaders such as Shiv Kumar Sharma Kakaji, who led an agitation last year in which six farmers were killed in police firing.

In Gujarat too, the party had decided to work with young leaders like Hardik Patel, Jignesh Mevani and Alpesh Thakor who were leading successful mass movements against the BJP state government. While Patel was the face of the reservation stir for Patidars, Thakor campaigned for the rights of backward castes and Mevani took up the cause of Scheduled Castes after a video clip showing Dalits in Una being flogged by cow protection vigilantes went viral. The Congress started off by lending support to these movements as it believed their stir would be more effective and credible if it remained apolitical.

The grand old party decided to be more upfront closer to the elections when Rahul Gandhi openly courted the three leaders. While Thakor eventually joined the Congress, Patel and Mevani helped the party indirectly by leading a vigorous campaign against the ruling BJP. Mevani even contested the elections as an independent candidate and won his seat with the support of the Congress.

Given this working relationship between the Congress and Hardik Patel, it is no coincidence that the Patidar leader has [announced plans](#) to embark on a month-long yatra in Madhya Pradesh to highlight the problems of farmers and the youth. Patel has said that he will not seek votes for any party, but that he will ask the electorate to take a close and careful look at the work done by candidates before casting their vote. However, Patel's programme is essentially aimed at shoring up Patidar support for the Congress in the forthcoming elections.

From resistance to support

Congress members did not initially support Rahul Gandhi's decision to work closely with civil society groups as they believed it undermined the efforts of the party cadre. In fact, Congress leaders are said to have constantly criticised Gandhi in private conversations for "running a political party like an NGO". But after Gujarat – where the Congress increased its seat tally to 77 and managed to restrain the BJP to double digits (99) – there is greater willingness to step up their engagement with civil society groups.

Former Congress president Sonia Gandhi had set the ball rolling when she headed the National Advisory Council when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government was in power at the Centre. Membership of the council was drawn largely from civil society groups, whose representatives made vital contributions to drawing up the government's flagship programmes – such as right to information, right to food and the rural employment guarantee scheme – that paid the Congress rich dividends in the 2009 elections when it increased its Lok Sabha tally to 206 seats from 145 in the last polls.

Though civil society groups usually prefer not to align with any political party in order to retain their independent identity, their representatives disclosed that the crackdown on their organisations by the BJP government has pushed them into lending a helping hand to the Congress. As a representative of a Madhya Pradesh-based non-governmental organisation put it, "Ab to pani sir se upar nikal gaya hai." The water is way above our heads now.

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