

India's Congress Party Is Facing a Fight for Survival

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The main challenge to Narendra Modi in India's election comes from the Indian National Congress and the alliance it leads. But the party is struggling to keep afloat as a national force as it pays the price for embracing neoliberal economic policies.

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As the voting for India's Lok Sabha elections continues, most opinion polls and analysts predict a win for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP claims that it will win more than 400 out of the 543 seats, up from 352 in 2019.

However, the true picture might be more complicated. The [CSDS-Lokniti pre-poll survey](#) on the eve of the elections revealed that "livelihood-related issues are emerging as major concerns in this election," with "dissatisfaction over unemployment and inflation among sections of the society" indicating that "a tough fight is on the cards."

To confront the ruling BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA), India's opposition parties, including the Left, the Indian National Congress (INC), and regional parties, formed the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

The INC, as the largest coalition member, is assumed to be its leading force. A large section of the media has portrayed this election as a frontal clash between INC leader Rahul Gandhi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Fight for Survival

The INC, the grand old party of the Indian bourgeoisie, is battling hard to keep afloat as one of the two national parties whose influence spans almost the entire country. The party is contesting the lowest number of Lok Sabha seats ever, 328, owing mostly to coalition obligations. At least 101 seats that the INC contested in 2019 have been awarded to its INDIA allies this time. In all prior elections, it ran for at least four hundred seats.

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The question is whether the INC, battered by previous losses, can hold its ground against the triumphant BJP. With its national reach, the party remains pivotal in the INDIA bloc, but it faces a severe test in 152 constituencies where it competes directly with the BJP. The seats in contention between the INC and the BJP are in Madhya Pradesh (twenty-nine), Chhattisgarh (eleven), Rajasthan (twenty-five), Karnataka (twenty-eight), Gujarat (twenty-six), Assam (fourteen), Himachal Pradesh (four), Haryana (ten), and Uttarakhand (five).

The INC is now a shadow of its former self, with just a negligible presence in a number of important Indian states, particularly in north India. As its strength dwindled, regional parties played hardball in seat-sharing negotiations, giving it fewer seats to fight.

Victories in states where it is a junior partner will have limited impact on the party's recovery. Its real path to power must begin in states where it is directly competing with the BJP, as well as in a few others such as Kerala and Telangana, where the INC is a strong contender. In the last parliamentary elections, the INC fought the BJP directly for 186 seats and won only fifteen. The latter had almost conquered the Hindi heartland.

The two pan-India marches led by Rahul Gandhi over the last two years were strategically planned with this in mind. The inaugural *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (Unite India March) began in Kanyakumai, Tamil Nadu, at the southern tip of the country in September 2022. It finished in Srinagar, Kashmir, having spanned approximately four thousand kilometers through twelve states in 150 days.

The second, rechristened the *Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra* (Uniting India for Justice March), began in January 2024 in Manipur, in the country's northeast, and ended on March 16, 2024, in Mumbai, Maharashtra, after covering more than 350 parliamentary seats over 6,713 kilometers. These cross-country marches attempted to reestablish the party's connection with the people, revitalize its own organization, and restore Gandhi's credibility as a leader.

Tactics and Strategies

Although the INC is contesting fewer seats than in 2019, it appears to be more prepared and geared up this time. The party made its election manifesto public earlier, having done so just four days before the first phase of elections in 2019, which gave the organization little time to propagate and popularize its electoral pledges. In contrast, the 2024 manifesto, titled *Nyay Patra* (Pledge for Justice), was published on April 5, and the party organized a number of rallies around the country for the first time to release it.

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Over the last eighteen months, the INC has sought organizational restructuring to address some of its shortcomings. The choice of Mallikarjun Kharge, the opposition leader in the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian parliament), as party president was intended to counter the BJP's attacks on the INC as a “dynasty party” reliant on the Gandhi family for leaders. The two marches aimed to directly connect and reenergize the grassroots.

To ensure a united front against the BJP, the party has made concessions and sacrificed seats by forming alliances. It has also attempted to come up with innovative proposals to fight the BJP's campaign, which fuses ultranationalist Hindutva positions with neodevelopmentalist themes.

The INC had pledged to conduct a nationwide socioeconomic and caste census to strengthen affirmative action, resulting in equal representation for all sections of society and the development of policies for their welfare. It hopes that this pledge will enable it to reclaim the support of large sections of society that have switched their preferences to the BJP over the last decade.

Previously, the soft-Hindutva policies of the INC and other opposition parties failed to win over voters. They adopted these policies to avoid being labeled anti-Hindu or becoming identified in the public eye with minority communities. According to this supposedly realist logic, courting religious sensibilities, or even moderate Hindutva, was the best way to oppose the BJP.

However, the strategy failed from the start and collapsed miserably during Madhya Pradesh's legislative elections last year. The historical record of the INC shows that it has always embraced secularism pragmatically rather than making it a principled position.

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For years, there was little to differentiate the economic policies of the INC from those of the BJP. The party's current messaging focuses on people's perceived economic and social suffering. While the core storyline does not criticize neoliberalism, it does highlight the great gains made by a few while the majority struggles with issues such as unemployment, inflation, and social inequalities.

The INC has previously employed a similar approach during its winning campaigns in the state legislative elections of Karnataka and Telangana. Taking this into account, its present focus is on reversing the harm done to all sectors of the polity and the economy. It is emphasizing, particularly, the issues of growth, jobs, and inflation, which it hopes will resonate with a large section of voters.

However, it will not be easy to counter the BJP's campaign on welfare schemes, which is based on Modi's perceived track record as a delivery-oriented leader. The BJP is counting on its success in implementing welfare programs such as free food grains, low-cost petrol cylinders, housing subsidies, and direct benefit transfers.

Neoliberal Burdens

The party expects to boost its representation in the South, where it won twenty-eight seats in 2019. The goal is to win at least twice as much. The more difficult challenge would be to win in the North, where Hindutva and Modi are dominant.

The northern Indian states — particularly Uttar Pradesh, which elects eighty members to the Lok Sabha — have emerged as the most recent laboratory of fascist experiments, with a slow but steady cascading effect in the neighboring states. Reversing the present trend of societal regression would necessitate a series of bold, radical initiatives, and even a short- or medium-term challenge to the BJP's legislative monopoly will require more than electoral promises or lip service to redistributive justice.

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Any attempt to derail the Hindutva juggernaut must involve radical proposals to solve the countless problems that the people of this primarily agrarian and economically impoverished region face. As well as providing jobs, economic security, and opportunities for upward mobility for large numbers of people, it is essential to offer a meaningful resolution to the current agrarian crisis, including the cancelation of peasant debt.

This will be the Achilles's heel for the INC. Having pioneered neoliberal reforms in the country since the 1991 parliamentary elections, the party lacks a vision beyond this much-maligned dogma, which

has failed as a development model in India and globally. The neoliberal economic policies of the INC have been a key factor in paving the way for the rise and consolidation of Hindutva and fascism in Indian politics.

The Hindutva forces led by the BJP have continued and strengthened previous neoliberal economic policies, with unwavering support from Indian and global capital as the best reformers. The Indian success story of “growth” and “prosperity” has taken a hit in the period since 2012, when the BJP channeled widespread dissatisfaction with the outcomes of neoliberal capitalism and the performance of the INC-led Union Progressive Alliance government to its advantage.

Furthermore, because the INC has historically accommodated various tendencies from the right to the left, it has implemented neoliberal reforms in office by means of administrative mechanisms that bypass the party structures in order to avoid dissent from trade unions, social organizations, and others.

The trio of then prime minister Manmohan Singh, finance minister P. Chidambaram, and deputy chairman of the Planning Commission Montek Singh Ahluwalia spearheaded the reforms. Singh and Ahluwalia were former World Bank administrators who diligently implemented the plans of the bank and the International Monetary Fund. None of the three had any involvement in the party’s organizational matters and were mostly insulated from it.

Manmohan Singh eventually emerged as one of the most prominent INC figures outside of the Gandhi family. These practices weakened the organization and hollowed out its structures. The INC is currently hindered by the lack of a real organization, particularly when contending against a strict cadre-based party such as the BJP and its parent organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

The Power of Money

As big money increasingly dominates Indian elections, the BJP outperforms all other political parties in fundraising, including the INC. Data released by the State Bank of India on electoral bonds showed that the BJP was by far the largest recipient of corporate donations from April 2019 to January this year.

The BJP received slightly less than 48 percent of all election bonds cashed by parties up to March 2023, totaling around \$726 million. The Trinamool Congress was the second-largest beneficiary, receiving \$193 million (12.6 percent). The INC, India’s primary opposition party, received approximately \$170 million (11 percent).

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To make matters more difficult, the Income Tax Department has recently frozen the INC's accounts to starve it of funds for the election campaign. It imposed such a heavy penalty on the principal opposition party at the behest of Modi's government so as to deny it a level playing field.

In the midst of a general economic and social crisis, the INC needs to return to standard social democracy in order to gain back public support, particularly among huge segments of the working class. But can the party forsake neoliberalism and pursue a redistributive economic policy? This would risk antagonizing both the Indian bourgeoisie and global capital. The INC also needs to take a strong stand for democratic rights and reforms, which includes the democratization of its own organization.

Herein lies the key to reviving the INC's fortunes in any meaningful terms. Otherwise, the party must be content with a slight rise in seats due to popular dissatisfaction with Modi's rule. Under these conditions, it will be exceedingly fortunate to win as many as one hundred seats.

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- Jacobin. 05.15.2024:
<https://jacobin.com/2024/05/indian-national-congress-2024-elections-neoliberalism>
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