

Decoding 2019 Indian General Election

2019년 인도 총선은 (세계에서 가장 큰 민주주의 국가가 올해 총선을 개최하기 때문에) 인도와 해외의 학자, 정책 입안자, 인도 전문가들 사이에서 주요 논점이 되고 있다. 이번 총선은 현 야당인 Bharatiya Janata Party(BJP)가 정권 유지와 현 총리인 나렌드라 모디(Narendra Modi)의 연임 여부를 결정할 것이다. 그렇지 않다면 인도 야당인 Indian National Congress (INC)이 여당이 될 것이다. 이러한 상황에서, 이 글은 야당과 여당들의 상황과 사회 경제적 정책에 초점을 두고 2019년 인도 총선의 새롭게 떠오르는 변화를 조명한다. 이를 위해 BJP의 현 상황을 진단하고, 최근 BJP의 지지 약화 여부를 평가하고자 한다. 다음으로는 이번 총선에서 BJP의 입지를 공고히 하기 위한 나렌드라 모디 정부의 새로운 사회·정치 출현에 대해 설명한다. 이어서 총선을 앞두고 야당인 INC의 상황과 INC의 사회·경제적 정책들에 대해 살펴본다.

The Indian General Election 2019 has become a matter of debate among scholars, policymakers and India watchers in India and abroad as the largest democracy in the world is all set to hold its next general election this year. This election will decide whether the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will remain in power and its leader Narendra Modi will get another term as Prime Minister. Or, India will witness a new government-led by the opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC). Against this backdrop, this piece sheds light on new emerging dynamics in the Indian General Elections 2019 by focusing on the ruling and opposition parties' current situations and their socio-economic policies for this election year. In doing so, it will first deal with the BJP's current situation, in which it will evaluate the question if there is a break in the ruling party dominance recently. Next, we will show the emergence of a new socio-policy of the Narendra Modi's government to consolidate its position for the election. Thereafter, the opposition party, INC' situation and its emerging socio-economic policies ahead of the general election will be examined.

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Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (left) and INC President, Rahul Gandhi (right)
Source: Wikipedia Commons

2018's Electoral Outcomes: A Break in the Ruling Party BJP's Dominance?

When Narendra Modi's BJP registered a landslide victory in 2014 Indian General Election, by winning 282 of the 543 seats, it became the first political party in thirty years to win a clear, single-party majority in the lower

house of the Indian parliament (also called the Lok Sabha). What is more, BJP's allies—members of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—won another 53 seats, an outcome which made BJP's 2014's election victory more impressive. Such electoral outcomes induced many to predict that the Modi will again form the government 2019 as the main opposition party, the INC recorded its worst ever performance with just 44 seats. The ruling BJP's subsequent wins in state elections provided further opportunities to predict that BJP is becoming a hegemonic party (Palshikar, 2018). BJP's performance after the 2014 Indian general election was unprecedented, as the national reach of the ruling party grew while the reach of the congress shrunk. As table shows, the BJP won the majority of state elections in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017. In these elections, BJP and its allies replaced many INC or INC allies' governments by winning crucial states elections. The most impressive win among them came in 2017 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi led his party to a landslide victory in India's largest state, The Uttar Pradesh, which consolidated his power and put him in a strong position to win re-election in 2019.

State	Year	Govt. before Election	Govt. after Election
Haryana	2014	INC	BJP
Maharashtra	2014	INC	BJP
J & K	2014	INC allies	BJP allies
Jharkhand	2014	INC allies	BJP
Delhi	2015	Other	Other
Bihar	2015	Other	Other
Assam	2016	INC	BJP
Kerala	2016	Other	Other
Puducherry	2016	Other	INC
Tamil Nadu	2016	Other	Other
West Bengal	2016	Other	Other
Punjab	2017	BJP allies	INC
Goa	2017	BJP	BJP
Uttarkhand	2017	INC	BJP
Uttar Pradesh	2017	Other	BJP
Manipur	2017	INC	BJP
Himachal Pradesh	2017	INC	BJP
Gujarat	2017	BJP	BJP
Tripura	2018	Other	BJP
Meghalaya	2018	INC allies	BJP allies
Nagaland	2018	Other	BJP allies
Karnataka	2018	INC	INC allies
Mizoram	2018	INC allies	BJP allies
Telangana	2018	Other	Other
Chhattisgarh	2018	BJP	INC
Madhya Pradesh	2018	BJP	INC
Rajasthan	2018	BJP	INC

BJP's Performance after the 2014 Indian General Election
 Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Election Commission of India (ECI)

However, the electoral outcomes in 2018 seems like a break in the ruling party BJP's dominance. It was started when BJP was not able to form the government in Karnataka in May, despite the emergence of the single largest party in this South Indian state election, a development which caused the rise of confidence in the anti-BJP coalition in the country. Yet, the most shocking outcome for the ruling party, BJP came when it suffered heavy election defeats in the Hindi Heartland^[1], including Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh that exposed the party's vulnerability less than six months before the country goes to the polls. This has compelled analysts that Narendra Modi's chances of returning to power in 2019 elections are 50-50. As Swaminathan Aiyar (2019), a noted Indian commentator argued "chances of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), that is BJP and allies, winning outright: 10%. Chances of Modi cobbling together a coalition government post-election: 40%." Hence, Modi has a 50-50 chance of returning to the power, he added. "Once thought to be a cakewalk for the BJP, the 2019

election is turning into a contest," argued Milan Vaishnav, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of a recent book on Indian Politics (Vaishnav, 2018).

Yet, it is also believed that despite the ruling party's defeat in the Hindi Heartland, its position is still very strong vis-à-vis its rival. One of the main reasons behind this argument is BJP's growing presence in East Indian states in recent months, where it used to be a marginal player. For example, until recently BJP had negligible presence in West Bengal; however, it has recently emerged as the major party in the state and expected to get more seats in the upcoming general election. Similarly, BJP has replaced the INC as a major opposition party in Orissa, a situation which may in turn help BJP to improve its Lok Sabha tally in upcoming election. In the Northeast Indian states, BJP has emerged as the strongest party in the region by forming governments in several states in this area recently. All this will produce fruitful result for the BJP in the upcoming election. Yet this is not to say that the ruling party is not facing challenges. Indeed, the BJP has to deal with emerging anti-BJP alliance network, such as Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party (SP)'s anti-BJP alliance in Uttar Pradesh, which may harm its prospect to retain the power. Hence, BJP-led government is gearing up to face these challenges by designing a new socio-economic policy to woo the voters, which will be examined in the next section.

The Modi's Government's New Socio-economic Policy

The BJP-led government has adopted a new socio-economic policy. The first major policy move of the Modi government to consolidate its traditional votes came when in January 2019 it introduced a constitutional amendment to give a 10 percent reservation in government jobs and spots in higher educational institutions to member of economically weaker sections of society. It is significant to highlight that India has had a system of reservation, which consists of a series of measures, such as reserving access to seats to government jobs and to enroll in higher educational institutions. So far, this reservation benefits were only available to members of communities listed as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled tribes (STs) and Other Backwards Classes (OBCs) by Indian government. The Modi government created another category, Economically Backward Class (EBCs), which is a category of Indian people having an annual income less than 8 lakhs Indian rupees (or 11,236 USD) and who do not belong to any reserved category such as SC/ST/OBC.

Hence, by creating this category and giving them reservation benefits, the ruling Party BJP is expecting to get votes from this section of society, whose support are crucial for the BJP's re-election in 2019.

The second major policy is for farmers and poor workers, which are believed to be not very happy with the Modi government in recent years. Analysts argue that the recent defeats in the state assembly elections for the BJP is a result of farmers' dissatisfaction with the current Modi government. Hence, the Modi government in its recent policies has tried not only to pacify them, but also win their heart to regain the political ground it lost in the recently held assembly elections where farmer distress was the key voting issue. In this regard, the BJP-led government has launched a number of initiatives for the farmers' welfare this year. For example, Indian Finance Minister Piyush Goyal announced during Interim Budget 2019 that the government will provide assured income support for small and marginal farmers under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PMKS) scheme. According to the provision, 6,000 Indian rupees (around 85 USD) per year will be given to farmers in three instalments. The scheme applies to farmers with less than 2 hectares of landholding. This benefit will be transferred directly to farmers' bank accounts to ensure that only deserving farmers get the benefit. A second big announcement by the Modi government in this regard is for a "mega" pension program for India's informal sector workers with income below 15,000 Indian rupee. The vast majority of the country's workers are employed in small enterprises, often with little job security and no social security benefits.

The ruling party BJP's third major policy is for the Indian middle class, whose support was the major reason behind Modi's landslide victory in 2014 General Election. After the setback in the recent state assembly election, the Modi government has shifted its strategy to consolidate its position among the middle class India. Accordingly, after offering big sops to farmers and the poor, as we saw above, the Modi government impressed the middle class by offering a huge tax relief recently. For example, it has proposed that individuals with income up to 5 lakh Indian rupee 'will not have to pay any income tax'. According to the Budget speech by the Finance Minister Piyush Goyal on February 1, 2019, "Individual taxpayers having taxable annual income up to 5 lakh Indian rupee will get full tax rebate and therefore will not be required to pay any income tax." In addition to this, Individuals with gross income up to 6.5 lakh Indian rupee will not need to pay any tax if they make investments in provident funds and prescribed equities that are

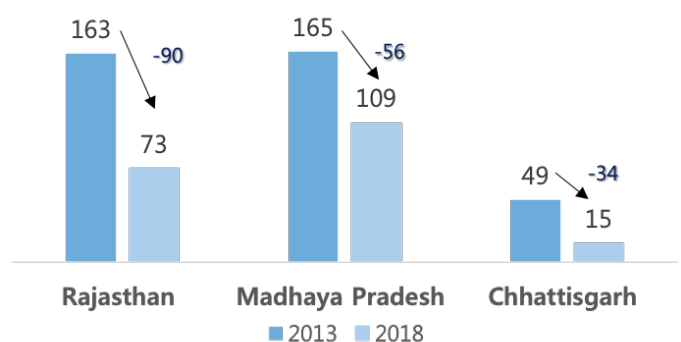
tax-saving schemes, the finance minister said. It is expected that around 30 million Indian middle class taxpayers will get tax exemption due to this measure. In sum, the Modi Administration is trying to woo the voters with the introduction of a number of policies for youths, farmers, poor workers and middle class people.

A Resurgent INC?

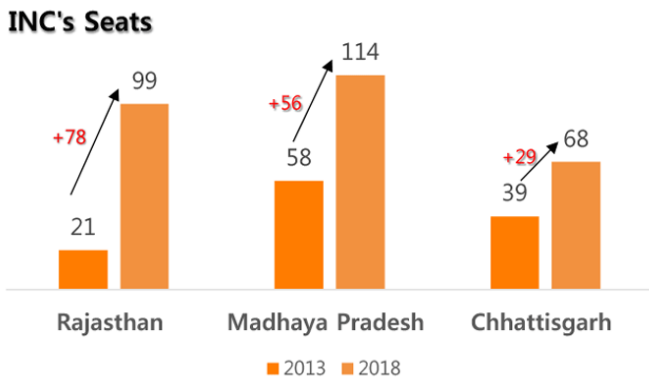
India's opposition party, INC is also gearing up to take on its main rival, BJP in upcoming general election.

It is significant to mention that after losing a number of state elections in 2015, 2016, 2017, the INC seemed to lose its confidence to win the 2019 general election. However, after the winning of the Hindi heartland states in 2018, the INC has gained the much-needed momentum ahead of this year's general election. Rahul Gandhi-led INC thrashed the BJP in its strongholds by winning 68 of 90 seats in Chhattisgarh, 114 of 230 seats in Madhya Pradesh and 99 of the 200 seats in Rajasthan. In doing so, INC for the first time formed the government in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh after spending 15 years in opposition. The INC's government formation in Rajasthan was also impressive given that it was unable to win even a single Lok Sabha (the Lower House of India's bicameral parliament) seat in Rajasthan in the last general election. INC's Hindi heartland win was also significant considering the fact that these three Hindi heartland states account for 65 seats in the Lok Sabha, and the BJP has won 62 of these 65 seats in the 2014 general election, a huge setback for the INC. Hence, the outcomes of the 2018 state elections have restored the balance of power in the Indian electoral politics, and it has given a much-needed momentum for the INC ahead of the 2019 elections.

BJP's Seats



Election Results of Hindi Heartland States in 2018
Source: Author's calculations based on data from ECI
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 Source: Author's calculations based on data from ECI
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What is more, the entry of Priyanka Gandhi, daughter of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and sister of INC president Rahul Gandhi, has further strengthened The INC's position. It is significant to mention Priyanka Gandhi formally entered politics this year and was made general secretary of the party just like her brother and father Rajiv Gandhi when they were entered politics. Many believe that Priyanka has solid charisma as she has long galvanized INC workers and draws crowds who are curious about her. Hence, her active presence in electoral politics will draw votes for INC in upcoming elections.

Yet, for the INC, the road to the general election will not be easy. This is because, INC is in a very weak position in many crucial states or even its presence in many crucial states has declined drastically. For example, INC's presence is declining in many crucial East Indian states, where it used to be the powerful party (Bisht, 2019). In West Bengal, which accounts for the third highest Lok Sabha seats (42 seats), INC vote shares has drastically declined over the years and for the first time, it fights for the survival of in state politics as BJP's aggressive posture making Bengal politics the BJP vs the Trinamool Congress (TMC), a contest which marginalizing INC's presence in the state. INC also faces existential dilemma in other states where it used to be the leading party. For example, the party's presence in Orissa, India's eastern state, has dramatically declined, and it is no more even the main opposition party in the state. Similarly, in four years' time, the INC stands completely wiped out from the Northeast India, where it was ruling 5 out of 7 states in this region until 2014. What is most crucial, while INC faces existential dilemma in West Bengal, Orissa, and Northeast Indian states, BJP for the first time made inroads in all these states at the expense of INC's declining presence. In addition to this, the INC has also negligible presence in two crucial eastern Indian states Uttar Pradesh and Bihar,

which accounts for 120 Lok Sabha seats. Hence, INC has a long way to go before it poses a formidable challenge to the dominant BJP.

Accordingly, with the recent announcement of socio-economic promises, INC wants to make a comeback in its traditional strongholds, which will be examined in the next section.

A New Socio-economic Policy of INC for Election

Like BJP, the INC has announced its socio-economic policy to woo the voters in the 2019 General Election. One of the most crucial announcements in this regards came when INC president Rahul Gandhi unveiled what has become his party's signature campaign priority: a Universal Basic Income (UBI) for poor families across the country. "It's going to be historic. INC has decided to provide a guaranteed minimum income to the poor in all states. The poor will get a minimum income directly in their bank accounts. This scheme will be the first of its kind in the world as no other country has come up with such a decision so far," Rahul Gandhi said at a farmers' rally in January this year. INC has also started to explore the way to implement its president this mega poll promise if voted to power in May. For example, senior INC leader and former finance minister P Chidambaram supported Mr. Gandhi's idea while arguing that "the poor of India have the first charge on the resources of the country. INC will find the resources to implement the promise of Rahul Gandhi."

The INC's this mega poll promise came against the backdrop of the Narendra Modi government's push for several pro-poor schemes. However, analysts see many challenges in the implementation of this INC's socio-economic policy which is long on promise and short on specifics. For example, implementing any large-scale income support program calls for essential ingredient such as fiscal resources. But, India's fiscal account are underwater as has already exceeded its fiscal deficit target. This means the government would have very limited fiscal space to boost spending in an election year, according to the International Monetary Fund's chief economist Gita Gopinath (Vaishnav, 2019). It is also significant to note that the concern about India's high fiscal deficit might be the reason behind the Modi Government's disinclination to implement this type of mega welfare program even after his government's 2017 flagship economic survey mooted the idea

of a UBI. In addition to this, economists also argued INC President Rahul Gandhi's promise of a UBI, which is similar in nature to former INC's leader and then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's 'garibi hatao (Remove Poverty)' slogan, is unimplementable. Because, India neither had the kind of fiscal space, nor the kind of complete data needed to implement the scheme.

Yet, INC socio-economic policy in this election year is likely to revolve around the pro-poor welfare schemes. It is evident in the fact that INC, soon after wresting power in the three Hindi heartland states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, announced loan waivers for farmers. In Chhattisgarh, INC government announced that "short-term agriculture loans to the tune of over 6,000 crore Indian rupee of over 17 lakh farmers drawn from banks will be completely waived. In Madhya Pradesh also, the farm loan of more than 34 lakh farmers, up to 2 lakh Indian rupee, were waived off by the new INC government. After Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, INC government in Rajasthan also followed suit by waiving farm loans of up to 2 lakh Indian rupee. INC's this pro-poor loans waivers policy is likely to become part of INC's national campaign strategy for 2019 General Election, despite the concern about its adverse impact on economy growth. As noted economists, including the former Reserve Bank of India (RBI) governor Raghuram Rajan, stressed on in a recent report that "the need to do away with farm loan waivers citing "enormous" problems for state finances and investment" at a time when the INC implemented loan waiver policy (Bloomberg, 2019). However, INC is planning to implement this loan waiver policy across India. As INC leader Rahul Gandhi recently pledged to cancel farmers' loans if his party came to power after the 2019 general election.

Is BJP's Having Upper Hand vis-à-vis INC?

In the final analysis, we can say new dynamics are emerging in the Indian General Election in 2019. The ruling BJP, which came into the power after a landslide history win in the 2014 General Election and consolidated its power after winning several crucial state elections subsequently, is in a troublesome situation after losing its traditional strongholds in the Hindi heartland states. Yet, the recent expansion of BJP's influence from North India to East India has provided the ruling party an upper edge vis-à-vis its rival. The Narendra Modi's government has also tried to consolidate support from its voter base by

introducing several socio-economic schemes for youths, farmers, poor workers and middle class. Above all, the recent announcement of BJP's alliances with regional parties in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu has provided new momentum for the party ahead of the election.

On the other hand, there is no denying the fact that INC, under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, has made a remarkable comeback through the winning of crucial states elections in the Hindi Heartland last year. Priyanka Gandhi's entry has also further strengthened INC's position for the general election. Yet, INC has a long way to go. Because, its presence in many crucial states, especially East India, has dramatically declined recently and faces an existential crisis, where it used to be the powerful party. With the recent announcement of mega pro-poor welfare socio-economic promise, such as UBI and farm loan waiver schemes, INC wants to make a comeback in its traditional strongholds. However, in comparison with the BJP, INC's pan-India presence has not very influential. Hence, BJP is having an upper hand vis-à-vis INC. Yet, we must concede that it is hard to predict the electoral outcome of India given its political diversity. Today, we can say that the race has begun for ruling the world's largest democracy and the Indian General Election in 2019 will decide India's future course of action on domestic and global affairs.

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1 The Hindi Heartland is a linguistic region encompassing parts of northern, central, eastern and western India where Hindi language is spoken as a first language.

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* 본 기고문은 전문가 개인의 의견으로 서울대아시아연구소의 의견과 다를수 있습니다