



# *Policies & Perspectives*



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

## *Pathetic Plight of India's Opposition Ranks*

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*With the Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi entering into its fourth year in office, various surveys conducted across the country have indicated the following: Modi remains immensely popular among the people; his leadership is considered decisive and firm; his Government is seen as pro-poor but not anti-industry; some of the regime's actions, such as last year's surgical strikes into Pakistan-occupied Kashmir and the de-monetisation decision, have received popular acclaim; the Government is seen as corruption-free; the economy is back on track even if adequate job-creation remains an issue. The surveys have also shown that, if general elections were to be held today or as scheduled in May 2019, the BJP and its allies under Modi's leadership would be re-elected with a thumping majority. In short, after three years in office, the Government has the same high popular appeal as it did when it came to power.*

*If this is not worrying enough for the opposition parties, there is more. Most respondents in the surveys believed that the Opposition had lost touch with the masses; it did not have a strong narrative to take on Prime Minister Modi and his Government; it lacked a strong leadership; it had lost credibility; it had thrown in the towel well before the grand contest was to happen. The more the opposition parties try to forge unity — as in the case of the presidential election — the more they are seen to be admitting to their incapacity of taking on the ruling dispensation on their own individual strength. Indeed, several Opposition leaders have said as much: That they need to come together to challenge Modi's might.*

*But there are many problems in this ambitious project. One of them is that of an acceptable leadership. By convention, the leader of the country's single largest opposition party (the Congress, in this case) should head a coalition, whether informal or formal. This is more so when that party is also the only truly pan-India organisation in the opposition space. The Congress, though, is hardly a dominant player. It has only a few seats more than the regional parties — the AIADMK, the Trinamool Congress or the Biju Janata Dal in the Lok Sabha. In fact, if one keeps aside the internal fights currently on in the AIADMK, the regional outfits are relatively stronger and have popular leaderships. Since 2014, the Congress has been losing ground and its stature to initiate a united Opposition drive has been severely compromised as a result of those setbacks. Besides, Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi, now the de facto leader of the party, has shown little capability of crafting Opposition unity, unlike party chief Sonia Gandhi who rose to the occasion in mid-2000. Not only is his political acumen suspect but also that he is seen as an amateur and a liability by more accomplished leaders in the opposition ranks who tolerate him but have little regard for him. Even within the Congress ranks, there is disquiet over the party's drift as a result of the leadership crisis.*

*The absence of a strong core in the opposition space has, therefore, led to demands from sections terrified by Modi's growing popular appeal, that a regional leader of stature should be projected by a united*



*Opposition as a rival to him, and for the prime ministership. Bihar Chief Minister and Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar is often talked about in this connection. He is experienced in governance and has a clean record. Besides he is sober and mature in his conduct. His public standing is certainly higher than that of Rahul Gandhi. And yet, the Congress will find it difficult to digest that a regional leader, at the expense of Rahul Gandhi, should be projected as the prime ministerial choice. The Congress has already ceded space to regional rivals in States where it once ruled — Odisha and West Bengal being the two most prominent ones. It would be cataclysmic for the party to now also hand over the opposition leadership to a regional satrap. By accepting such an idea, the Congress would be undermining its own leader and reinforcing the impression that Rahul Gandhi is unfit to take on Modi. Besides, it has never happened in the more than century-long history of the national party that it has subordinated itself to a regional leader. It has been happier foisting a regional leadership on the nation and controlling (and toppling) it from the outside — HD Deve Gowda's prime ministership is a case in point. In fact, whenever the Congress was not in power, it sought to govern through proxies, or those it believed were its proxies. There have been occasions when the plan backfired — as it did when Chandrashekar threw away the prime ministership rather than be dictated by the Congress which was supporting his regime from the outside.*

*Nitish Kumar understands the situation, which is why he is playing both ways. He attended the Prime Minister's lunch given in honour of the visiting Mauritius Prime Minister but skipped a lunch hosted by Sonia Gandhi to discuss opposition unity over a presidential candidate. But a month earlier, he had met Sonia Gandhi and pledged his support to a joint candidate of the Opposition. While he remains opposed to Modi on many issues, he also praised the de-monetisation drive and refused to be part of the Opposition clamour against the decision. The Bihar Chief Minister's conduct is also driven by developments in Bihar. There have been reports since long of his discomfort with his ruling partner, the Lalu Prasad-led Rashtriya Janata Dal. Allegations of various scams involving Lalu Prasad's family have surfaced recently, as also the tape of a conversation the RJD chief had with muscleman-politician Mohammad Shahabuddin, who is cooling his heels in prison as a convict and facing many other charges too. Nitish Kumar cannot allow his clean image to be tainted by inaction, and so he is looking for leg space to crack the whip. Interestingly, the Bihar BJP unit, as also the party's central leaders, too have adopted a balancing approach, by criticising him on the one hand and also observing that being an essentially clean politician, he is feeling suffocated in the alliance. It is too early to conclude that the BJP could be his cushion, though the possibility cannot altogether be ruled out. If it happens, opposition unity will be further exposed to ridicule.*

*If the absence of a credible leader has hobbled the opposition camp, the lack of real issues has robbed it of its voice. It is not to argue, much less to emphatically state, that the Modi Government's report card scores 100 out of 100 in every subject. There are areas where lacunae exist, and there are sectors where performance hasn't quite matched promise. But the overall narrative has been powerful enough to box out the negatives. Interestingly, while surveys have brought out the people's dissatisfaction with the Government on certain issues, they have also reported that the public still has faith in Prime Minister Modi's ability to course-correct. This leaves little room for the Opposition to exploit the shortcomings. Left with nothing to*



*beat the NDA Government with, various opposition parties have latched on to non-issues in the hope that these can be magnified enough to make them sound important. Sadly for the Government's rivals, the strategy has not worked. In fact, it has further strengthened the Government's image. The assault on the credibility of electronic voting machines is one such example. By accusing authorities of rigging the EVMs across States to favour the BJP, parties such as the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party have begun to be seen as whiners along with being losers.*

*The two parties' decision to boycott the election Commission of India's challenge to demonstrate in its presence and with real machines, their rigging experiment, has send a message to the people that the losers have no substance to back their contention. It's no coincidence that the whiners are the losers here: The Congress, AAP, Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Not surprisingly, sane voices within these outfits have taken offence at this strategy. Punjab Chief Minister and Congress leader, Captain Amarinder Singh, has pooh-pooed the charge; and AAP leader and Minister Kapil Mishra was shown the door after he ridiculed his party's allegation of EVM tampering — which he followed up by leveling serious accusations against the AAP leadership of financial irregularities.*

*The other non-issue the Opposition has been raising is familiar: Spread of intolerance and communalism under the Modi rule. It's strange that even three years later, the rivals are refusing to understand that the subject has lost resonance with the people. It's not that the public is not bothered about communalism but that it simply does not see anything on the ground that can be considered as the Modi Government's concerted attempt to create a communal divide among the people. True, there have been isolated incidents of communal tension and some violence even, but they were localised and certainly neither instigated nor commended by the NDA regime. There hasn't been appeasement of the minority community, yes, but there hasn't been discrimination against the minorities either in the extension of social welfare benefits etc. It is being argued that the BJP's recent victories, especially in Uttar Pradesh, were due to majority polarisation. That may be so to an extent, but how does polarisation per se become communal? For decades, minority polarisation, first in favour of the Congress and later in the interests of regional parties such as the SP, the BSP and the Trinamool Congress, was interpreted as being a perfectly secular phenomenon where the minorities grouped up to protect their interests and promote the nation's secular spirit. Besides, the BJP can hardly be blamed if the minorities (primarily the Muslims, given their electoral strength) have decided to split their votes across different 'secular' parties. The maximum number of communal riots in the country have happened in the Congress regimes, be it in Gujarat or Maharashtra. Yet, the opposition parties never tire of rekindling the memories of the 2002 communal violence in Narendra Modi's tenure in Gujarat. All of this has stopped working.*

*With the Modi Government completing three years, opposition parties have seized upon a fresh issue — one which they think will give them some traction. They have accused the Prime Minister and his regime of seeking to suppress their voice by letting loose Government agencies upon them. Thus, senior Congress leader and former Union Cabinet Minister P Chidambaram claims the action by income tax and enforcement directorate agencies against dubious financial dealings of his son (much of which happened*



*during his time as the country's Finance Minister) are meant to silence him from criticising the Government in a column he writes for a national daily. Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister and Congress leader Virbhadra Singh, who too is facing a probe into alleged financial irregularities, has also slammed the Modi regime for political vendetta. The top leadership of the Congress, including Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, are battling it out in the courts over the National Herald case. Needless to add, the Congress believes the Prime Minister is determined to hound them. Taken together, the impression the Congress seeks to give is that the Modi Government is acting out of political pettiness and is using Government probe agencies to harass its leaders. In sending across this message, the party hopes to win public sympathy and, more importantly, deflect attention from its failings. This tactic is unlikely to work, because the general public perception is that the law is equal for all and the accused must face it and prove their innocence before the courts. Besides, the allegations have been levelled not in the nature of AAP's shoot-and-scoot kind — they are backed by documentary material painstakingly collected, collated and collaborated by the investigating authorities that prima facie make out a case. This is not hounding of the kind Indira Gandhi went through during the Janata Party regime, with a vindictive Minister for Home Affairs, Charan Singh, leading the way — which can be exploited to win back the trust of the people.*

*It is true that a robust Opposition is an essential element in a democracy. The opposition space is as sacred as the ruling bench, but the responsibility for this lies with the opposition parties. The ruling party cannot be blamed for the ills that plague the opposition ranks. The failure of the Opposition to put the ruling BJP on the mat is symbolic of the former's loss of appetite for a political fight. Constant sniping at the Government, often on matters that the ruling class has public support, is bad politics. Given the situation, it appears that the opposition parties are waiting for a colossal blunder by the Government to happen, after which they can swing into action. As the days pass by and their wish remains unfulfilled, they get increasingly frustrated. Instead of preparing for the electoral challenges ahead — various States vote for a new Assembly in the coming months — they are occupied with mud-slinging and flogging dead horses.*

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## About VIF

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