



# *Policies & Perspectives*



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## *Congress Sniffs a Chance, but has it Smelled Right?*

Rajesh Singh, Visiting Fellow, VIF

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*The poll season is on. Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections are round the corner. Next year would be Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and a few northeastern States. The year after that will be the Lok Sabha elections. For this year, the Gujarat poll is especially significant because it is Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home State which he had ruled for three consecutive terms as Chief Minister, and which eventually became the springboard for his national role. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is confident of retaining its hold over Gujarat, whereas the Congress is hoping to create an upset. Both have their own reasons for the optimism. In 2018, the Congress will have to contend with a resurgent BJP in Karnataka while the BJP needs to protect its turf in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, given the anti-incumbency factor that could come into play in the latter mentioned two states. That same year will also see whether the BJP can sustain its momentum in the North-East. By and large, the battle in all these States will be between the two main national parties, which is why taken together, they can be termed as a mini general election.*

*The BJP is upbeat after its massive win in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly poll which reinforced its earlier performance in Lok Sabha elections. The victory also wiped out the humiliation it had suffered in the Bihar and Delhi State elections. The icing on the cake will be an emphatic win in Gujarat. While most bipartisan observers are predicting a safe victory for the ruling party there, Indian elections are a complicated affair and predictions are known to have gone shockingly off the mark. At least the Congress is trusting that element of unpredictability to work in its favour. Congress leaders can argue that, if the BJP could return to power in Uttar Pradesh after being in exile for more than 15 years, the Congress too can make a comeback in Gujarat. But it must be remembered that the BJP had prepared the ground in the northern State with a convincing victory in the 2014 election; the Congress did poorly in the 2012 Gujarat election; it was wiped out in the State in 2014. Of course, the Congress can counter-argue that the BJP lost Delhi and Bihar in the Assembly elections despite sweeping them in the Lok Sabha poll.*

*The Congress believes that if it can crack the Gujarat challenge, the success will pave the way for victories in not just the other Assembly polls but also the 2019 Lok Sabha election. There is no certainty that it will, but a reversal of fortune in Gujarat will definitely boost their morale to a huge extent and be a major set-back for the BJP. Both parties realise this and they have been giving all that they have, even before election dates were announced. Both Prime Minister Modi and Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi have visited the State on many occasions in recent weeks, met party workers and addressed public meetings. On balance, however, the Congress has a difficult task ahead in both Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh. While there is no apparent widespread discontent against the BJP in Gujarat, there certainly is one against the Congress regime in the hill State. But the Congress has found reasons to be positive. Some of these are in the form of developments outside its purview and others within. A few of the former kind, even if they are perceptual, are as follows: Unhappiness in the trading community with the 'hasty' implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST);*





public dismay over the 'failure' of demonetisation to unearth black money; the Union Government's 'inability' to generate employment; the slowdown of the economy; the Hardik Patel factor in Gujarat; the farmers' distress nationwide. Within the Congress, there is celebration that Rahul Gandhi's tweets against the Modi Government are getting more retweets than the Prime Minister's tweets! Besides, there is excitement at the possibility of the party vice president being promoted within a matter of weeks — incumbent president Sonia Gandhi said it would "happen soon" — and then reinvigorating the Congress ahead of the many upcoming electoral challenges. The party is also feeling puffed up after snatching the Gurdaspur Lok Sabha seat in Punjab from the BJP in a recent by-election by a record margin.

All of these and similar other developments may not necessarily have anything in common, let alone being a definitive indicator of any loss in stature of the BJP. But the Congress is busy stringing them together to shape up a pattern. Thus, a win for the Congress in Maharashtra's Nanded civic election and a by-poll victory in far north are seen as confirmation that things are 'turning for the better' for the party. The Patidar discontent in Gujarat and community leader Hardik Patel's welcoming words to Rahul Gandhi are interpreted as being sure signs of the influential Patidars having rebelled against the BJP and moved over to the Congress. The party is seeing light at the tunnel's end with Patel's support and the backing of Other Backward Classes (OBC) youth leader Thakor, who has decided to go with the Congress. It is not so important for the Congress at this stage to assess whether these youngsters can effectively dent the BJP's vote bank; what it wants to do is to create an impression, a perception that the BJP is on slippery grounds this time around. Congress leaders believe that if they can manage this perception in their favour, the electorate by and large could be influenced to their side.

A similar perception battle is on elsewhere. The disruption in Banaras Hindu University Campus and the defeats of the BJP's youth wing in Allahabad University and Delhi University student elections (also in Jawaharlal Nehru University and the University of Hyderabad) are viewed as signs of a building revolt of the student community against the BJP across the country (never mind that the BJP's student wing won the Agra University poll). Besides, the BJP had lost the Bawana (Delhi) Assembly by-poll recently, in which the Congress doubled its vote share. The enthusiastic brigade forgets that the BJP had trounced its rivals in the Delhi civic elections only some months ago, had notched up victory in another Assembly by-election in Delhi against the formidable Aam Aadmi Party, and registered wins in local body elections in various parts of the country. As for the Twitter war 'win', the less said about trivia the better. In any case, a furious controversy has erupted regarding the retweets in the Congress vice president's favour, with his detractors alleging social media manipulation.

All the same, whether the attempts by the Congress party to create a pattern of 'BJP's failure' in governance both at the Centre and in the States it rules, will convince the voters, remains to be seen. But the principal opposition party must be given credit for at least seeking to energise the narrative, even if it may have got hold of some of the wrong issues. The difficult task, however, has been made even more so with one recent development: The return of the Bofors controversy. Like Banquo's ghost in Shakespeare's Macbeth,





*the Bofors pay-off scandal refuses to go. Many attempts had been made by Congress dispensations in the past to bury the issue, and they seemed to have succeed. But only temporarily. New interviews have surfaced from key players who knew what had happened in the arms sale deal between the then Swedish regime and the Indian Government headed by Rajiv Gandhi. These have turned the spotlight back on the Congress in a most unflattering manner. The Central Bureau of Investigation has already indicated its willingness to re-open the case, and there is no reason why the BJP should not, or will not, seize the opportunity to run the Congress down. In fact, it can do its own stringing of issues — link the Bofors controversy to the 2G Spectrum and the Coal Block allocation scams to demonstrate the 'corrupt' nature of the Congress.*

*Ahead of crucial elections, there is nothing like a scandal to hurt a party. One need not add to this discomfort of the Congress by the revelation by a television news channel of Robert Vadra's air ticket being sponsored by an arms dealer — because Vadra has been under a cloud for so long now for other reasons (the land deals, for instance), that his story is becoming a boring soap serial. Unless the authorities act decisively, the BJP will find to its dismay that the Vadra factor no longer works in its favour. The Bofors resurrection came when the Congress had gleefully gone after BJP president Amit Shah's son's business dealings and sought to find irregularities in them. Rahul Gandhi used the occasion to ridicule the Centre's 'Beti Bachao' campaign for the girl child, and snidely remarked that the ruling party was engaged in protecting the son (Beta Bachao). There were many sniggers and Congress leaders looked in absolute wonder at their 'energised' leader and nearly wept in delight at the transformation which is supposed to have taken place following his recent visit to the United States. But the Bofors case has a particular heft and, if handled properly, it can ruin the Congress's best laid plans for electoral revival. The party cannot get away by spinning the narrative that it's not just an old case which gets dusted without purpose by rivals but that the courts have shut it too. The second is being economical with the truth, while the first argument can fall flat on its face if the Central Bureau of Investigation manages to dig up some dirt.*

*But while the Congress is suddenly upbeat, it must consider some dampeners. The first is that it could be over-estimating Patidar leader Hardik Patel's influence on the voters of Gujarat. The BJP has tall leaders from this community. Besides, not all Patidars have rallied behind Hardik Patel. Additionally, it is possible that those Patidar voters who may sympathise with this leader have a strong opinion against the Congress. Finally, if the Patidar community led by Hardik Patel is seen as flexing its muscle for job reservations, it could anger the other communities enough to cast their lot unitedly in favour of the BJP. The Congress is banking on the Patidar-Muslim-OBC-Scheduled Caste combine to see it through. On paper it looks strong, but why is the party so certain that the OBC and the Scheduled Castes will vote for them en masse? In 2012, the BJP won 116 of the 182 seats, and this could not have happened without the support of the OBC and Scheduled Caste voters. Admittedly, the Congress is seeking to take advantage of certain violent acts that have happened against members of the Scheduled Caste community in the recent months in the State.*

*The Congress will also have to contend with the development schemes of the Modi Government, or at least those that have made a perceptible difference at the grassroots level. The 'Ujjwala' scheme, for*





*instance, was one of the key reasons for the BJP's sterling performance in Uttar Pradesh. The expansion of direct benefit transfer schemes as well as the 'Jan Dhan Yojana' have brought about tangible changes and no amount of propaganda could whitewash them in the State. Similarly, in Gujarat, the last decade has seen visible positive changes in governance. The completion of the Sardar Sarovar project which will benefit millions of people, is a plus point that the Congress will find hard to counter — especially when public perception is that the project had been held up during its tenures at the Centre for decades. The BJP has been relentless in promoting this perception, which has some basis.*

*Nonetheless, the Congress believes that it has finally got the narrative right and is going for the kill. Whether it will kill, or get killed, is the question whose answer we will soon know.*

*(The writer is Visiting Fellow at Vivekananda International Foundation, senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)*



## About VIF

*Vivekananda International Foundation is a non-partisan institute for dialogue and conflict resolution from a nationalist perspective. Some of India's leading experts in the fields of security, military, diplomacy, governance, etc have got together under the institute's aegis to generate ideas and stimulate action for greater national security and prosperity, independently funded.*

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### *Vivekananda International Foundation*

3, San Martin Marg, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi - 110021

Phone No: +91-011-24121764, +91-011-24106698

Fax No: +91-011-43115450

E-mail: [info@vifindia.org](mailto:info@vifindia.org)

[www.vifindia.org](http://www.vifindia.org)

 @vifindia

