



Tamil Nadu could shape next govt

REUTERS, Tiruvannamalai

The politics of forming India's next government could come down to how many seats a 1960s matinee siren can wrest from a rival named Stalin in Tamil Nadu.

At stake are 39 parliamentary seats in Tamil Nadu, a state known for its ancient Hindu temples, its modern auto industry - and a history of electoral landslides.

With pollsters predicting that no party will win a majority in the 543-seat parliament, the caucus returned by India's sixth-largest state could hold the key to forming a government after the five-week general election that starts tomorrow.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa Jayaram - or 'Jaya' to her fans - is riding a wave of popularity that could take her AIADMK party's seat count to 27, according to one survey, potentially casting her in a new role as national powerbroker.

And, although the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is poised to emerge as the largest parliamentary party the Hindu nationalist opposition party has no base in Tamil Nadu.

Even with its allies, the BJP could fall some 40-50 seats short of the 272 needed for a majority in the national parliament, according to surveys. That is where regional players like Jayalalithaa come into the equation.

A weaker BJP result would strengthen Jaya's hand, as she eyes the alternative of a coalition made up of regional parties, often referred to as a 'Third Front'.

LOK SABHA POLLS 2014

1 DAY TO GO

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Surveys predict BJP triumph

CNN-IBN POLL TRACKER

BJP-led NDA
234-246

Congress-led UPA
111-123

BJP 206-218

Congress 94-106

TMC (Mamata) 23-29

BSP (Mayawati) 10-16

ADMK (Jayalalitha) 15-21

SP (Mulayam) 11-17

AAP 4-8

NOTE: India's pollsters have a poor track record. In the last two general elections - 2004 and 2009 - the polls were dead wrong. In 2004, most polls had forecasted that the incumbent BJP government would return to power with an even greater majority. Opinion and exit polls ranged between 240 and 280 seats for the incumbent. As it turned out, the incumbent received 180 seats. Congress formed the government. In 2009, most surveys predicted a poor show by the incumbent Congress government. As it turned out, the opposition NDA alliance received 159 and the incumbent UPA 262 seats.



BJP eying post polls deal with Mamata?

TNN, New Delhi

With estimates pointing to momentum for Narendra Modi but not fully settling the question whether he'll be able to propel the NDA to a majority, political circles are abuzz with speculation about an understanding between BJP and Mamata Banerjee's TMC.

Political sources said there was a strong possibility that Mamata will agree to extend outside support to a Modi-led government in exchange for a generous financial package aimed primarily at easing West Bengal's debt burden. "For her, 2016 is the big election (to the state assembly). She needs a blockbuster package to help revive Bengal's economy. Congress strung her along for years; it didn't deliver," said a TMC leader.

TMC's internal estimates place its Lok Sabha tally at 25 to 30, which could give it the single largest block of seats after the BJP and Congress.

But sources emphasized that there was no question of TMC formally joining the government. "She's not in any hurry to install ministers in Delhi. More importantly, she has to keep Modi at arm's length distance because of the 25% Muslim vote in Bengal. It's a constituency she has assiduously courted; she cannot afford to lose its support by signing a formal agreement," said a political operative in the know.

BJP is also said to be keen on a deal with Mayawati, although it is not clear whether any talks have taken place. Estimates give Bahujan Samaj Party 15-20 seats, representing another sizeable block.

India's parliamentary elections get underway tomorrow. The latest round of opinion polls, released by different Indian news channels in the first four days of March, indicate that the Bharatiya Janata Party will emerge as the single largest party through the voting. One can read the message loud and clear: the shadow of a polarisation along religious lines appears to have crept into the scenario.

Two events on March 4 have given a religio-political dimension to the electoral battle: first, an open declaration of support for the Congress by the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, Syed Ahmed Bukhari, just three days after his meeting with Sonia Gandhi and, second, the airing of a sting operation by a web portal to the effect that the December 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was carried out allegedly at the behest of the Hindu right wing.

These events, coupled with the relentless attacks on the BJP and its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi by Congress President Sonia Gandhi, Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee and Bahujan Samaj Party chief Mayawati and other politicians across the ideological spectrum over the 2002 riots in Gujarat state, have once again brought the communalism versus secularism debate to the centre of the electoral discourse.

RaGaflam, NaMo tablets!

TIMES OF INDIA

As election fever grips the country, Namo and Ragaflam tablets, named after BJP's Narendra Modi and Congress's Rahul Gandhi, are crowding pharmacy shelves. Neither Modi nor Rahul may have all the answers to what ails the nation, but generic drugs named after them are certainly getting people's votes.

While Namo tablets are a composition of nimuslide and paracetamol that treat fever and headache, Ragaflam with its mix of dicyclanac and paracetamol gives quick relief from pain. A pharmaceutical executive said 20 lakh Namo and Raga tablets have been distributed in the last few weeks and there is a growing demand for these from drugstores.

It is not the first time that Bukhari has backed the Congress ahead of elections. He had in the past also supported the Samajwadi Party led by Mulayam Singh Yadav and the BSP. Meanwhile, what Cobrapost has said through its sting operation is also nothing new. But Sonia Gandhi's meeting with Imam Bukhari just four days ago and the timing of the sting operation by Cobrapost have helped rekindle the secularism versus communalism debate in the last few days of a campaign that had so far been dominated by polemics on economic development, economic growth model and how inclusive such a model has been.

The BJP and its standard bearer Narendra Modi have since the beginning of the election campaign sought to keep the focus on the economy and development. Special emphasis has been placed on showing up the development of Gujarat under Modi's stewardship for nearly a decade and a half. The party has also highlighted a series of scams that have hit the Congress-led UPA government in a bid to avoid the discomfort zones of the communalism-secularism discussion.

It is precisely for this reason that the BJP had on March 4 made public what it called a "charge sheet" accusing Congress and the

coalition led by it of ruining the country's economy and failing to fight inflation and corruption.

Congress, for its part, has been battling charges of corruption in view of a slew of scams and mismanaging the economy.

Whether or not the debate on secular and communal politics defines political discourse for long, the key question before India once again is how Muslims in India, who make up about 15 per cent of the country's 814 million electorate, will vote.

Sonia Gandhi's meeting with Bukhari, in the view of political observers, underscores the Congress' anxiety about the results of an election in which the SP and the BSP, Congress' traditional rivals for Muslim votes in India's politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, remain in form. The Congress is also disturbed about the impact of the fledgling Aap Aadmi Party headed by Arvind Kejriwal. It is particularly apprehensive after its defeat in the legislative elections in four states last year—Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Delhi—amidst a perception that Muslim voters had started gravitating back towards the SP, BSP and AAP.

However, Bukhari's actual clout among Muslim voters remains debatable. There is no certainty that his support for Congress will have the effect of a large shift of their votes to the Congress.

US lawmakers press India on minorities

AFP, Washington

Several US lawmakers voiced concern Friday for the future of religious minorities in India in a hearing critics denounced as an attempt to influence upcoming elections.

With polls starting Monday in the world's largest democracy, several activists testifying before the US Congress' human rights commission expressed fear for the treatment of Muslims and Christians if Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi becomes the next prime minister, as surveys predict.

Representative Joe Pitts, a Republican and conservative Christian, said India had a "climate of impunity" for perpetrators of violence against minorities and criticized laws against religious conversion.

"Clearly all of Indian society is being affected by an indisputable rise in religious intolerance at the very least and religious violence at the very worst," Pitts said.

Representative Keith Ellison, a left-leaning Democrat who is Muslim, said that he supported strong US relations with India and did not believe that the US record was faultless.

But he voiced alarm over what he said was continued polarization in the western state of Gujarat, which is led by Modi, since 2002 riots in which more than 1,000 people -- mostly Muslims -- were hacked, burned or shot to death.

Critics say Modi turned a blind eye or worse to attacks on Muslims, although he denies wrongdoing and investigations have cleared him of personal responsibility.

Representative Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat who is the first Hindu elected to the US Congress, criticized the timing of the hearing and said it could be used either to foment sectarian strife or to provide campaign ammunition for Modi's opponents.

"I feel that the goal of this hearing ultimately is to influence the outcome of this election, which is something that I don't feel is appropriate for us here in the United States Congress to do," Gabbard said.

India is majority Hindu but secular and has historically been a safe haven for religious groups including Tibetan Buddhists, Jews and Zoroastrians.

The Indian government often expresses indignation at perceived foreign interference in its domestic affairs, although the Indian embassy did not return a message Friday seeking comment.

The United States has been seeking a warmer relationship with India and has generally avoided criticism on sensitive religious issues, but in 2005 it denied a visa to Modi on human rights grounds.

In February, however, US ambassador to India Nancy Powell met Modi, a sign the US stance was softening towards the controversial politician. President Barack Obama's administration did not send a representative to Friday's hearing, which was sparsely attended.



Did Hitler marry a Jew?

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Eva Braun, Adolf Hitler's long-term lover who married the Nazi leader hours before their joint suicide in his Berlin bunker, may have had Jewish ancestry, ground-breaking DNA testing has found.


DNA analysis of hair samples from a hairbrush claimed to belong to Braun suggests that the fascist dictator responsible for the murder of millions of Jews may have unwittingly married a woman of semitic descent, in one of his final acts as the Third Reich crumbled.

The revelation appears in a Channel 4 documentary, Dead Famous DNA, broadcast next week, in which leading scientists attempt to extract DNA from relics and analyse their genome to solve mysteries associated with them.


Forensic scientists sequenced the hypervariable region of the mitochondrial DNA from a sample of hairs extracted from a monogrammed hairbrush found at the end of the Second World War in Braun's apartment at Hitler's Alpine residence, the Berghof in Bavaria, by an American army intelligence officer.

They found a specific sequence within the mitochondrial DNA, a small genome within the mitochondria of the cell that is passed down the maternal line from mother to daughter unchanged over the generations, which is associated with Ashkenazi Jews.


A haplogroup is a particular sequence of mitochondrial DNA which is passed down the maternal line and according to traditional Jewish law, Judaism is passed down through matrilineal descent.



1. Afghan women queue outside a school to vote in presidential elections in the northwestern city of Heart, yesterday.



2. President Hamid Karzai casts his vote at a local polling station in Kabul.



3. An Afghan woman shows her inked finger after casting her ballot voting yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWSINbrief

Thai 'Red Shirts' rally to support PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of Thai pro-government "Red Shirts" massed in a show of support for Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra yesterday, warning that they would resist attempts to oust her through the courts. More than 3,000 police and troops have been mobilised for the rally on the western outskirts of Bangkok, following months of political violence in which 24 people were killed and hundreds wounded.

Adarsh Scam: CBI to charge Devyani

TNN, New Delhi

Controversies just don't seem to die around Devyani Khobragade. In fresh trouble for the Indian diplomat, the Central Bureau of Investigation has decided to file a chargesheet against her and her father, Uttam Khobragade, in the Adarsh Housing scam. Sources said the chargesheet against the two would be filed in the next couple of weeks after the agency found "documentary evidence" to prove that Devyani obtained a flat in Adarsh Housing society on the basis of a false affidavit.

Death penalty for text message!

AFP, Lahore

A court in eastern Pakistan has sentenced a Christian couple to death for sending a blasphemous text message insulting the Prophet Mohammad, their lawyer said yesterday. Pakistan has extremely strict laws against defaming Islam, including the death penalty for insulting the Prophet Muhammad, and rights campaigners say they are often used to settle personal disputes.

9-month-old killer?

THE DAILY MAIL ONLINE

A nine-month-old boy appeared in court accused of planning a murder in Pakistan, it has been reported.

Baby Muhammad Mosa Khan has also been charged with threatening police and interfering in state affairs. He is facing charges along with other family members following a raid by police to catch suspected gas thieves in Lahore. He was granted bail and the case was adjourned until April 12.

A police report alleged the suspects tried to murder officers by throwing stones at them during the raid. The report lodged a complaint against Muhammad Yassen's whole family, which included his nine-month-old grandson, The Express Tribune reported.

Sub-Inspector Kashif Ahmed has now reportedly been suspended for registering the case against the child. The judge was unable to dismiss the case against the child because it was outside of his jurisdiction, The News International has reported.

Punjab's Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif meanwhile has now intervened and ordered a report from the police's Inspector General.

He also reportedly demanded 'stern action' against the officials responsible for bringing the case, according to The Nation.

HUNT FOR MH370 BLACK BOX

China ship detects 'pulse signal'

AFP, Beijing

A Chinese ship involved in the Indian Ocean search for flight MH370 detected a "pulse signal" at a frequency used by aircraft black boxes yesterday, but Australia warned there was no evidence yet that it was linked to the missing plane.

China's Xinhua news agency said the signal picked up by a black box detector on the vessel Haixun 01 had a frequency of 37.5kHz -- identical to the emergency beacon signal emitted by flight recorders.

Chinese television reporters aboard the ship said crews had briefly detected a similar signal on Friday, but said it was yet to be established whether the sonic pings were from MH370's black box, whose roughly 30-day locator signal is due to expire soon.

The Malaysia Airlines Boeing 777 vanished March 8 en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, triggering an unprecedented international search across huge expanses of first the South China Sea and now the Indian Ocean.

Australia authorities leading the multinational search in seas far off the country's west coast advised caution over the development. Australian authorities were seeking more information from the Chinese side and were considering deploying air assets to the detection area, he added.

Malaysian authorities also said they were seeking to verify the report before commenting.

Afghans vote in key polls defying Taliban

AFP, Kabul

Afghans voted in large numbers yesterday to choose a successor to President Hamid Karzai in the country's first democratic transfer of power as US-led forces end their 13-year war.

Despite Taliban threats, voting was largely peaceful with long queues in cities across the country as voters cast their ballots at around 6,000 centres under tight security.

The Taliban had rejected the election as a foreign plot and urged their fighters to target polling staff, voters and security forces, but there were no major attacks reported during the day.

A fatal blast was reported in Logar province, south of Kabul, where one person was killed and two wounded according to Mohammad Agha district chief Abdul Hameed Hamid.

The turnout for the election could exceed seven million, the head of the Independent Election Commission said -- more than half of eligible voters.

Ahmad Yusuf Nuristani said that an estimated 3.5 million people had voted by midday, five hours after polls opened, 64 percent of them men and 36 percent women.

This figure may have increased to more than seven million by 5:00pm when the voting closed, he told a news conference.

The country's third presidential election brings an end to 13 years of rule by Karzai, who has held power since the Taliban were ousted in 2001.

As well as the first round of the presidential election, voters also cast ballots for provincial councils.

The front-runners to succeed Karzai are former foreign minister Zalmay Rassoul, Abdullah Abdullah -- runner up in the 2009 election -- and former World Bank academic Ashraf Ghani.

There is no clear favourite and if no candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote in the first round -- preliminary results for which will be announced on April 24 -- a run-off is scheduled for late May.



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