

# THE GREAT INDIAN ELECTION BEGINS

543 SEATS

815 MILLION VOTERS

930,000 POLLING STATIONS

NINE-PHASED VOTING

## Rivals trade barbs



### BJP to pit Hindus against Muslims: Rahul Gandhi

AGENCIES

Rahul Gandhi, frontman for India's ruling Congress party, yesterday warned that the country faces religious turmoil if the opposition Hindu nationalist party wins power.

Rahul said majority Hindus would be pitted against minority Muslims if hardliner Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) clinched power -- as widely predicted -- during the marathon six-week ballot starting on Monday.

"Wherever these people (BJP) go they create fights. They'll pit Hindus and Muslims against each other," he told a rally in the town of Sirsa 250 kilometres from New Delhi.

"We walk with everybody, be it Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians. We walk with people from all communities, castes, religions and regions and that is our politics," said Gandhi, the 43-year-old scion of India's famous political dynasty.

"We don't do politics of anger and division," Rahul said, as he implored voters to back Congress, which looks set for a crushing defeat at the polls after a decade in power.

The Congress vice-president Rahul also launched a scathing attack on opposition BJP over its "double-standard" attitude towards corruption.

Rahul, referring to re-induction of tainted former Karnataka chief minister B S Yeddyurappa into BJP, said the opposition leaders rake up the corruption issue in states other than those ruled by themselves.

"They (BJP leaders) go to Karnataka and give big speeches there. They bring (B S) Yeddyurappa, who was the Karnataka chief minister and remained in jail, to stage and then say they are against corruption..." he said while canvassing for party state unit president and candidate from Sirsa Lok Sabha seat Ashok Tanwar.

Voting will begin in the two remote northeastern states of Assam and Tripura for 5 Lok Sabha seats, before spreading across the country of 814 million eligible voters in a staggered process. Results are due on May 16.

### Congress misleading Muslims: Modi

AFP, New Delhi

Hindu hardliner Narendra Modi yesterday accused India's ruling Congress party of failing Muslims as his own party battled claims of fueling religious tensions.

Modi, who is tipped to win power on a promise of reviving the country's battered economy and creating jobs, also urged voters to give him a strong mandate during the marathon six-week ballot which starts on Monday.

"The problems that have plagued you in the past 60 years, I will get rid of all those problems in just 60 months," Modi told thousands of cheering supporters in Uttar Pradesh.

Modi accused Congress president and Rahul's mother Sonia Gandhi of failing to deliver on pledges to improve the lives of Muslims, who at 13 percent of the population are India's largest religious minority.

"Madam Sonia, nearly 700 (communal) riots happened in the country in one year right under your nose. And 250 of those were in UP (Uttar Pradesh) alone," said Modi.

## The complex coalition game

Ahead in polls, BJP still may fail to form the next govt

AGENCIES

Indian politics -- since the split in the Congress Party ranks under Indira Gandhi in the late 1960s -- has become an increasingly regional affair in which the two main national parties -- Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party -- can only win power by striking alliances with local state-based parties.

For Narendra Modi to become prime minister, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that his party leads must cobble together 272 seats in the Lok Sabha parliament.

Recent opinion polls suggest its members -- which include the Punjab-based Sikh party, the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Tamil Nadu-based MDMK and the Bihar-focused Lok Janshakti Party of Dalit leader Ram Vilas Paswan -- may win more than 200 seats.

CNN-IBN poll tracker suggested it could win as many as 246, with the BJP itself winning 218.

If the poll is near accurate, the BJP's NDA would be expected to attract opportunist parties -- there are many -- and independents to its ranks with the prospect of power. In this scenario, Modi would be in an unassailable position to become India's next prime minister.

Many suspect however -- and the Congress leadership desperately hopes -- that recent fissures starting to appear within the BJP's ranks indicate a more troubled campaign than expected and that the NDA may not win nearly so many seats.

Amar Singh, a member of the Rajya Sabha upper house and a former Samajwadi Party leader who is now a Congress ally, said he believes the NDA may be the largest solid group but may not win more than 150 seats.

Senior leaders, including Sushma Swaraj and LK Advani have been unhappy. This has lowered the moral ground of Modi's attack on the Congress. I don't think the NDA will get more than 150 seats and that will be a 100 per cent disaster for Modi," he said.

In this scenario, he said, the non-

Congress, non-BJP parties -- the so-called Third Front of regional parties including the Samajwadi Party, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Janata Dal (United), and the AIADMK which rules in Tamil Nadu -- could form a group with other secular, regional parties to form a winning alliance with the Congress Party's United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

One senior Janata Dal (United) source said although no one would openly discuss this scenario ahead of the election, it would consider an alliance, which included Congress, to stop Narendra Modi becoming prime minister.

"If the BJP and NDA get under 200 seats it will be difficult for them to form a government because it is difficult under Modi for others to ally with them -- all of the possible allies have people of many faiths in their own areas of influence. Modi is anathema to Muslims," he said.

Many of his potential allies, like Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, which rules in West Bengal, Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, and Jayalalithaa's AIADMK, which rules Tamil Nadu, all need Muslim votes, he explained.

His party, whose leader Nitish Kumar is chief minister in Bihar, hopes his Third Front will eventually draw Congress into supporting it as a minor group.

Shaheed Siddiqui, a former MP from Uttar Pradesh and a leading Muslim voice in India said he doubted whether the regional parties necessary to form a Third Front government could overcome their local rivalries.

The coveted PM's post can also be a blockade in that goal, he added.

These bitter local and personal rivalries mean the Congress, even greatly diminished, could still emerge as the only party their fractious allies may agree on to lead in government.

"I don't think any of these individual parties will win more than 40 seats and it will be difficult for them to accept anyone else as leader. Congress will still be the largest of them," he said.



## POLLS AT A GLANCE

Voting to be staged in nine stages beginning on April 7 and ending on May 12

Results are due to be announced on May 16

The new Lok Sabha is expected to be constituted by June 1 with 543 lawmakers chosen from across India. 131 seats are reserved for candidates from the country's scheduled castes and tribes.

Two other lawmakers can be appointed by the president to ensure the representation of India's tiny Anglo-Indian community, taking the total number of lawmakers to 545.

Magic number: A political party needs to secure at least 272 seats to form the government.

## TDP returns to NDA

TNN, Hyderabad

BJP and TDP yesterday formally announced electoral alliance for the upcoming polls in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana amid reports of protests by the cadres of both parties who are opposed to the alliance.

Describing the alliance between TDP and BJP as a "lucky one," TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu expressed confidence that NDA would get over 300 seats (in Lok Sabha elections) this time.

As per the seat-sharing arrangement arrived between BJP and TDP, the BJP will contest in 5 Lok Sabha seats and 15 assembly seats in Seemandhra and 8 Lok Sabha seats and 47 assembly segments in Telangana.

Elections in Telangana are scheduled for April 30.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

Roughly 814.5 million people -- a number larger than the population of Europe -- are registered to vote, an increase of more than 100 million since the last parliamentary election in 2009.

Over 23 million are between 18 to 19 years old.

Voters will cast their ballots in about 930,000 polling stations, an increase of nearly 12 percent since 2009.

For the first time in a general election, voters will have a "None of the Above" option on the ballot papers and electronic voting machines.

Transgender persons can mark their gender as "Others" on the electoral rolls, a category that did not exist in 2009. 28,314 voters have listed their gender in this way.

There are 11,844 non-resident Indians registered to vote in the election this year.

Since introducing photo voter ID cards and electoral rolls in 2009, 98 percent of India's eligible voters have the former, 96 percent have the latter.

To curb "the abuse of money power" during the elections, "flying squads" and static surveillance teams will guard against the distribution of cash or other bribes to voters. Committees will also keep their eyes peeled for illegal election advertisements and politically funded stories planted in the media.

"Basic Minimum Facilities" for polling stations include drinking water, shed, toilet, ramp for disabled voters.

Booth officers will do door to door surveys to prepare a list of voters found absent at their home in an effort to prevent impersonation. Dead voters and those who have moved from their homes will be added to a list to check against the rolls to ensure no foul play on voting day.

## France must face 'difficult truth'

Rwanda accuses Paris of direct role in 1994 massacre

AGENCIES

Rwanda on Sunday called on France to face up to the "difficult truth" of its role in the 1994 genocide, amid a diplomatic spat ahead of commemorations marking the 20th anniversary of the killings.

"For our two countries to really start getting along, we will have to face the truth, the truth is difficult, the truth of being close to anybody who is associated with genocide understandably is a very difficult truth to accept," Foreign Minister Louise Mushikiwabo said.

She said it was "impossible for our two countries to move forward if the condition is that Rwanda has to forget its history in order to get along with France."

The French government announced that it was pulling out of today's commemorations after Rwandan President Paul Kagame again accused France, an ally of the Hutu nationalist government prior to the 1994 killings.

A total 800,000 minority Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed in the four-month killing spree triggered by the assassination of Rwanda's Hutu president Juvénal Habyarimana.

Paris has repeatedly denied the accusations and insisted that French forces had striven to protect civilians.

The French foreign minister at the time of the 1994 massacres, Alain Juppé, said Kagame's comments were a "falsification of history".

Kagame notably said that France had not "done enough to save lives" by mounting Operation Turquoise in the west of the country, and had not only been complicit but "an actor" in the massacre of Tutsis.

Juppé said it was "intolerable that we are being designated as the main culprits." He urged the French president, François Hollande, and the government to "defend without ambiguity the honour of France, and of its army and diplomats".

## 100 INFLUENTIAL ASIANS' LIST Sonia, Modi, Rahul placed among top 5

PTI, London

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi have been named among top 5 in the list of 100 influential Asians topped by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Xi, also head of the ruling Communist Party of China, heads the list of the 100 Most Influential Asian People of 2014 published by Asian Awards Ltd 2014.

Modi is fourth in the list followed by Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Chinese premier Le Keqiang is third.

Others in the top 10 are Sir Li Ka Shing, Hong Kong-based business tycoon (7), UN chief Ban Ki Moon (8), Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (9) and South Korea President Park Geun-Hye (10).

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is 22nd in the list.

Indian President Pranab Mukherjee is placed at 19th position. Pakistan's former Army chief Ashfaq Kayani is 18th in the list.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa is 34th in the list while West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee is 42nd influential person.

## 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF RWANDA GENOCIDE



People pray inside an Evangelical restoration church in Kigali yesterday, on the eve of the start of a national mourning period marking the 20th anniversary of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

PHOTO: AFP

## DISPUTES WITH NEIGHBOURS Hagel warns China over Crimea-style action

AFP, Tokyo

Pentagon chief Chuck Hagel yesterday warned China against unilateral action to resolve territorial disputes with its neighbours, drawing a parallel with Russia's incursion in Ukraine as he announced two more warships would be sent to Japan.

Seeking to reassure Washington's longtime ally Japan, Hagel's remarks and promise of more missile defence ships came as Tokyo faces a tense row with Beijing over islands in the East China Sea.

"All nations deserve respect, no matter how large or how small," Hagel said during a visit to Tokyo.

"I think we're seeing some clear evidence of a lack of respect, and coercion and intimidation with ... what the Russians have done in Ukraine," he told a news conference with his Japanese counterpart, Itsunori Onodera.

Countries had to speak up and reject such a blatant violation of international law, said Hagel, referring to Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean peninsula.

And in a veiled reference to China and its territorial arguments with Asian neighbours, Hagel said smaller countries had the same sovereign rights as larger states.

"You cannot go around and redefine boundaries, violate territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations by force, coercion and intimidation -- whether it's in small islands in the Pacific, or large nations in Europe," Hagel said.

"So I want to talk to our Chinese friends about this," said the defence secretary, who departs for Tokyo today.

His comments underscored a tougher line by the US government on China's approach to territorial claims in the South China Sea and the East China Sea, after some Southeast Asian countries accused Beijing of intimidatory tactics.

In Tokyo, Hagel unveiled plans to send two more Aegis missile defence warships to Japan by 2017, citing "Pyongyang's pattern of provocative and destabilising actions."

## Thai Red Shirts vow 'final fight' to defend PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's pro-government "Red Shirt" supporters rallied for a second day yesterday, vowing to protect Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, who is facing a slew of legal challenges that could see her toppled within weeks.

Tens of thousands of Red Shirts descended on a wide road in a Bangkok suburb in a colourful and boisterous show of support for the crisis-mired premier, who has faced months of anti-government demonstrations in the Thai capital.

Drawn mostly from the poor but populous north and northeast, the Red Shirts say they will not accept the removal of another democratically elected government by a Bangkok-based royalist establishment backed by the judiciary and the military.

"This will be the final fight," Red Shirt chairman Jatuporn Prompan told the rally, which is due to end today.

"It is better to die than to be slaves," he said.

## AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL POLLS Candidates raise fraud concerns

AFP, Kabul

Leading candidates in Afghanistan's presidential election yesterday voiced concern that voting was tainted by fraud, a day after millions defied Taliban threats and turned out to choose a successor to President Hamid Karzai.

World leaders praised the courage of Afghan voters, who cast their ballots in force despite bad weather and the violent campaign of intimidation, and urged patience in the long vote count.

Ahead of the poll there were fears that a repeat of the massive fraud that blighted Karzai's re-election in 2009 would undermine the winner's legitimacy at a testing time for the war-torn country.

There were reports of polling stations in numerous parts of the country running out of voting papers, leaving some people unable to take part, as well as claims of ballot-stuffing.

But in a promising sign for the stability of the process, two of the frontrunners to succeed Karzai, who is stepping down after serving a maximum two terms, said they would abide by the decisions of the Election Complaints Commission (ECC).

Zalmay Rassoul, who was regarded before the vote as Karzai's preferred choice, told a press conference that he had made complaints to the ECC, but refused to give details.

He said he was confident the ECC would address the concerns properly but warned: "Any president elected with fraud will not be accepted by Afghanistan."

## Devyani issue not closed yet, India tells US

PTI, New Delhi

Ignoring the US viewpoint, India has refused to consider the Devyani Khobragade episode as "closed", saying there are "residual" issues which need to be addressed.

Foreign secretary Sujatha Singh said India has made its expectations clear to the US on the issue and hoped that it will be resolved.

"There are residual issues," she told PTI in an interview when asked whether the Devyani episode was a closed chapter as was being treated by the US. However, she refused to elaborate further on what steps were needed from the US to satisfy India.

Singh said the US interlocutors were conveyed India's expectations on the issue and expressed unhappiness over the filing of second indictment against Devyani on charges of visa fraud. "We would have preferred that it (second indictment) did not happen," she said.

A 1999-batch IFS officer, Devyani was arrested in New York on December 12 last and was strip-searched, triggering a row between the two countries with India retaliating by downgrading privileges of certain category of US diplomats among other steps.

She was released on a \$250,000 bond and was later granted full diplomatic immunity following which she flew back to India on January 10.

Since she has been transferred to the ministry of external affairs in New Delhi. Though, the first indictment against her was rejected by a US court, prosecutors last month re-indicted her on visa fraud charges and accused the diplomat of "illegally" underpaying and "exploiting" her domestic maid.

