

BJP eyes cutting clout of regional queens

REUTERS, Chennai

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was set to make gains in two big states in the south and east that voted yesterday in the sixth phase of a mammoth general election that could help it build a stable majority in parliament.

A final set of opinion polls predicted a strong showing by the BJP and its allies in Tamil Nadu in the south and West Bengal in the east that could make it less dependent on the two women who rule those states and who have in the past proved to be fickle coalition partners.

The Hindu nationalist-led opposition, led by prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, is riding a wave of public anger across India against the ruling Congress party over a slew of corruption scandals and a slowing economy.

His party is looking to make a dent in the south and east to pull off an outright majority, something that no party has been able to achieve in nearly two decades.

"This election we are expecting a significant contribution from the south," said former BJP president Venkaiah Naidu, adding that the party wanted to lift its southern tally to 50 seats from 19 in the last election in 2009.

A regional party led by Jayaram Jayalalitha, the powerful chief minister of Tamil Nadu, is expected to win the most seats, but not enough to sweep the state.

In West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee's party is expected to win the most seats at stake in the state.

Both Jayalalitha and Mamata are seen as belonging to parties to which Modi could turn in case he falls short of a majority in the national vote.

However, both are likely to extract their pound of flesh. In Mamata's case, her left-leaning policies may run counter to Modi's reformist instincts.

Show the inked finger, enjoy the discounts

TNN, Chennai

Here's another incentive to casting vote in the sixth round of Indian polls -- discounts at local salons and retail outlets. Private enterprises in the city are doing their bit to encourage Chennaites to make their vote count by providing discounts on services and goods. And all you need to avail the offers is to show the voting ink on your finger.

At Lakme salon across the city, a 50% discount is offered on haircuts that can be availed till April 30. "It is a unique initiative to encourage women to vote this election. They can also avail discounts on other services by showing the voting mark," a statement from Lakme said. Naturals Lounge on South Boag Road in T Nagar has offered a 20% discount on all services on the day of election.

If you feel like indulging in a cake after the wait at a polling booth, then head to a Cake World outlet in the city. The bakery is offering a 15% off on cakes. By promoting these offers on social networking sites, private enterprises seem to be focussing on youngsters as well.

At Brass Tacks, a clothing store on CP Ramaswamy Road, voters can try the new spring collection and get 10% discount on bills. Brass Tacks has something in store for online shoppers as well - a 15% discount coupon if you send a photo of the voting mark on your finger. "The discount is a way to encourage customers to take the effort to cast their vote. Everyone should be proud of the mark on their finger," says Anaka Narayanan, designer-director, Brass Tacks. The offers at the shop are valid till May 1.

Marshall Islands sues nuke powers

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

The Marshall Islands is suing the nine countries with nuclear weapons at the international court of justice at The Hague, arguing they have violated their legal obligation to disarm.

In the unprecedented legal action, comprising nine separate cases brought before the ICJ yesterday, the Republic of the Marshall Islands accuses the nuclear weapons states of a "flagrant denial of human justice". It argues it is justified in taking the action because of the harm it suffered as a result of the nuclear arms race.

The Pacific chain of islands, including Bikini Atoll and Eniwetok, was the site of 67 nuclear tests from 1946 to 1958, including the "Bravo shot", a 15-megaton device equivalent to a thousand Hiroshima blasts, detonated in 1954. The Marshallese islanders say they have been suffering serious health and environmental effects ever since.

The island republic is suing the five "established" nuclear weapons states recognised in the 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT) -- the US, Russia (which inherited the Soviet arsenal), China, France and the UK -- as well as the three countries outside the NPT who have declared nuclear arsenals -- India, Pakistan and North Korea, and the one undeclared nuclear weapons state, Israel.

The NPT, which came into force in 1970 is essentially a compact between the non-weapon states, who pledged to not to acquire nuclear weapons, and the weapons states, who in return undertook to disarm under article VI of the treaty.

LOK SABHA ELECTION 2014



Indian women queue to cast their vote at a polling booth in Alwar. Inset, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh holds up his ink-marked finger as he poses alongside his wife for a photograph after casting his ballot at a polling station in Guwahati, the capital of the northeastern state of Assam, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Huge turnout in sixth phase

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

A very high voters' enthusiasm was witnessed in the sixth phase of polling yesterday covering 117 parliamentary constituencies spread across 12 states in India's long drawn-out national elections as the race to the Lok Sabha narrowed the gap on the two-third-way mark with stakes high for frontrunner Narendra Modi-led opposition Bharatiya Janata Party and ruling Congress.

Yesterday's turnout in all the 11 states and 1 Union territory, including Mumbai, was higher than the previous Lok Sabha elections in 2009, in sync with the trend witnessed in the five earlier phases this time. According to Election Commission data, voters' turnout ranging from 60 to 75 per cent had marked all the previous five phases.

While the highest turnout of 83 per cent was recorded in the lone seat of Puducherry followed by West Bengal (82 per cent for six seats) and 73 per cent for all the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu which saw singled-phased polling on Thursday.

Only two states -- Rajasthan (59.2 per cent for five seats) and Maharashtra (55.33 per cent for 19 seats) -- registered below 60% turnout.

Jammu and Kashmir's Anantnag constituency, where PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti is in fray, recorded the lowest turnout of 28 per cent.

An estimated average of 60 per cent of about 180 million voters exercised their franchise to

decide the electoral fate of nearly 2100 candidates including political heavyweights like India's Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid, chief of Samajwadi Party Mulayam Singh Yadav and Indian President Pranab Mukherjee's son Abhijit.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh cast his vote along with his wife Gursharan Kaur and he told the media, "I don't think our country is struck by Modi wave. It is a creation of the media. Congress is not losing ground. We will win with a majority."

After yesterday's polling the voting to 347 of the total of 543 Lok Sabha seats were over, with 216 seats left in the remaining three of the total of nine phases of the elections. Polling for the final phase covering 41 seats will be held on May 12 before votes are counted four days later.

Yesterday's was the second biggest phase of the staggered elections -- after the fourth phase held on April 17 covered 121 seats -- stretching to the country's Jammu and Kashmir state in the north, Assam in the east and Maharashtra in the west besides Tamil Nadu in the southern tip.

The sixth phase also covered 12 of the 80 seats in the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, 10 in Madhya Pradesh and seven in Bihar, apart from a handful in West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh states.

Politically the most important part of yesterday's polling was the 39 parliamentary seats in Tamil Nadu where BJP and a cluster of smaller

regional parties have firmed up a rainbow alliance which is projected by opinion polls as having a realistic chance of bagging six to seven seats.

If BJP and its allies manage to pick up the seats in Tamil Nadu, it will challenge the traditional view that no national party can survive in the state without the help of either DMK or AIADMK.

The 19 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra, including India's financial and entertainment capital Mumbai, are crucial as the state's ruling Congress-Nationalist Congress Party alliance is projected to be struggling in the state which has a total of 48 seats.

Mumbai city has six parliamentary seats all of which had been won by Congress in 2009.

Stakes are high for BJP in the 12 constituencies that went to poll in Uttar Pradesh as the party had been decimated there five years ago. Narendra Modi campaigned hard in the state where opinion polls projected BJP to be making good gains this time.

In the seven seats decided in Bihar, the challenge for BJP will be to retain four of them where there is a sizable Muslim population and the party faces a resurgent Rashtriya Janata Dal headed by Lalu Prasad Yadav.

Voting has been completed in Assam's six seats, Chhattisgarh's seven and Jharkhand's four with yesterday's polling. Of the six seats in West

Criminal cases against 15% of candidates

HINDUSTAN TIMES ONLINE

A large number of candidates trying their luck in the polling slated for the sixth phase yesterday, have sinister records. Nearly 15% face some kind of a criminal case, according to the Association for Democratic Reforms, which went through their disclosures. Nearly 10% face grave charges such as murder, arson and rioting.

Most parties have shown no qualms about fielding candidates with criminal records. In the sixth phase, nearly 32% or 30 out of 94 candidates from the Congress have declared cases against them, followed by 26% or 20 out of 77 from the BJP.

Findings from ADR show a candidate with a criminal case is twice as likely to win an election (23%), compared to a candidate without any charges, whose winning chance was just 12%.



Modi files nomination in Varanasi

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Bharatiya Janata Party leader, frontrunner for the post of prime minister, yesterday joined the race for Lok Sabha, filing his nominations for the parliamentary seat in the Hindu holy town of Varanasi at the district collector's office.

Earlier, thousands of BJP workers and supporters, wearing saffron caps and Modi masks, swarmed the roads of Varanasi as an open truck, draped in BJP flag colours, carrying Modi travelled along the two two kilometre route of the roadshow that began at the campus of Banaras Hindu University.

Modi's chief challengers in Varanasi constituency election is Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal, who filed his nomination on Wednesday, and Ajai Rai of Congress.

Modi is also contesting for Vadodara parliamentary seat in his home state of Gujarat where he is chief minister.

While filing his nomination, Kejriwal had attacked both Modi and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for spending huge amounts for their campaign and declared himself as a "fakir" with just Rs 500 in his pocket. But a mandatory affidavit filed by Kejriwal along with nomination papers presents an altogether different picture. According to it, he and his wife Sunita, a government employee, own properties worth nearly two crore.

Maoist rebels kill 5 cops in Jharkhand

AFP, Patna

Maoist rebels killed five police officers yesterday as they were returning from polling duty in an insurgency-hit region of eastern India, an official said.

The attack took place in Jharkhand, one of 12 states where voters went to the polls in India's multi-phased general elections.

"We can confirm that five of our brave men have died in the attack," head of Jharkhand police Rajeev Kumar told AFP.

Over 12 people were also injured in the attack, which may have been triggered by a powerful landmine planted by the rebels, Kumar said.

The Maoist rebels have called for a boycott of the elections that began on April 7. Results will be out on May 16, four days after polling ends.

Earlier this month, the insurgents killed 14 people in two poll-related blasts in the central state of Chhattisgarh, underscoring the security challenges facing election organisers in India.

Separatist and Maoist insurgencies occupy large swathes of India's northeast, northwest and central regions. The Maoists, described by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as the most serious internal security threat, have been fighting since 1967 for a communist society by toppling what they call India's "semi-colonial, semi-feudal" form of rule.



The Bachchan family



Gulzar with his daughter



Sachin Tendulkar and his wife

BOLLYWOOD VOTES



Aamir Khan and his son



Shahrukh Khan



Preity Zinta



Sonam Kapoor

South Asia faces below-average rain

AFP, Pune

India and its South Asian neighbours are expected to see below-average to average rains this year if the El Nino weather pattern gains strength during the four-month monsoon season, a forum of weather experts said on Wednesday.

Poor monsoons could dent crop output in India - the world's No.2 rice and sugar producer, while less rains in soybean areas could make the country, already the world's top importer of cooking oils, more dependent on overseas purchases.

"There is a strong consensus about the possibility of evolution of an El Nino event during the summer monsoon season," said DS Pai, the lead forecaster of the Indian weather office, when releasing the consensus forecast of the South Asian Climate Outlook Forum - a group of global weather experts affiliated to the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO).

Rains could be below average in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and some parts of Pakistan, while an average monsoon is

expected in Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan, Pai said.

A strong El Nino, marked by a warming of the sea surface on the Pacific Ocean, can cause severe drought in Australia, Southeast Asia and India, while drenching other parts of the world such as the US Midwest and Brazil in rains.

But it is a little early to assess the likely strength of El Nino, the WMO weather forum experts said.

"El Nino is still in its neutral phase, not fully established, as it is yet to reach its threshold limit," said Rupa Kumar Kolli, head of the climate applications and service division of the WMO.

A string of global agencies, including the Climate Prediction Centre, have forecast a high chance of El Nino arriving during the Northern Hemisphere summer this year.

The WMO assessed earlier this month that an El Nino could develop around the middle of the year. This forecast followed predictions by other national forecasters, including weather bureaus in the United States, Japan and Australia, that an El Nino event was likely within months.



WWI MASS KILLING Armenia fumes after Turkey condolences

AFP, Yerevan

Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan yesterday accused Turkey of an "utter denial" in failing to recognise World War I mass killings of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as a genocide, after Ankara for the first time offered condolences for the tragedy.

"The Armenian Genocide... is alive as far as the successor of the Ottoman Turkey continues its policy of utter denial," Sargsyan said in a statement marking the 99th anniversary of the massacres.

"The denial of a crime constitutes the direct continuation of that very crime," he added. "Only recognition and condemnation can prevent the repetition of such crimes in the future."

In an unprecedented move by a Turkish leader, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday offered condolences over the massacres, calling them "our shared pain."

Armenians say up to 1.5 million people were killed during World War I as the Ottoman Empire was falling apart, a claim supported by several other countries. Turkey argues 300,000 to 500,000 Armenians and at least as many Turks died in civil strife when Armenians rose up against