

Congress, BJP woo women

432m women voters to decide who will rule India for next 5 years



REUTERS, Mumbai

Mamata hints at post-poll alliance

Blames Congress for the rise of BJP

THE HINDU ONLINE

West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee has hinted at the possibility of a post-poll alliance.

Speaking at a rally in Raiganj, she said: "In every State, alliances have been formed to oust Modi [Prime Minister Narendra Modi]... Once he is voted out of power, all of us can work together to build a new India."

She blamed the BJP for not renaming the State as Bangla. The State Assembly had unanimously decided to rename the State, but it's pending with the Centre.

Mamata also blamed the Congress for the rise of the BJP. "It is because the Congress failed to put up a fight against the BJP, the saffron party grew from strength to strength."

Asserting that the Trinamool Congress would play a "crucial role" in government formation, she said, "the Congress cannot form a government on its own, it will have to seek help from others."

Earlier, opposing the ante against the BJP, Mamata accused Modi of looting people's money in the name of demonetisation and also called him a liar.

The TMC chief also slammed BJP's manifesto and said the party wants to turn genuine citizens into foreigners through the Citizenship Amendment Bill.

"If you vote for them, they will turn you all into refugees in your own country," she said.

India's ruling party promised cheap sanitary pads, workplace creches and quotas to get more women into parliament, seeking to woo female voters ahead of a general election.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) devoted an entire chapter to what it called women's empowerment in its election manifesto, published days before voting starts on Thursday.

About 432 million of India's voters are female and they are a major focus for parties competing for power in the world's largest democracy.

Women's safety is a particular focus, with the main opposition Congress party promising to set up a separate agency to investigate crimes against women, amid concerns that they have been neglected in the past.

But women's rights advocates accused both parties of tokenism, saying they had taken little concrete action while in power.

"The need of the hour is to focus on women as many more women are (now) talking about these issues," Geeta Menon told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"But this is tokenism. What does it



Polling officers carry electronic voting machine (EVM) to a remote village in Assam yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

mean in the real sense," said Menon, secretary of Stree Jagruti Samiti, a charity that promotes domestic workers' rights.

The BJP said it would set up fast-track courts, promising "strict provisions" to ensure speedy prosecutions for rape and other offences against women.

Six years after the rape and murder of a student on a bus in Delhi sparked national outrage, safety remains a key concern among Indian women.

migrant workers, hostels and safer transport services.

Both parties pledged to make it easier for women to access sanitary products - a key issue in a country where many cannot afford them.

The BJP saying it would expand an existing scheme offering pads for just one Indian rupee, while Congress said it would install sanitary pad vending machines at public places, schools and colleges.

The two main parties committed to reserving a third of seats in the national parliament and state assemblies for women.

Women currently hold just 12 percent of seats in the lower and upper houses of parliament combined, compared to a global average of 23 percent, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a global body.

A bill to introduce a quota was passed by the upper house in 2010, but has since stalled despite pledges by successive governments to enact the legislation, and only 668 of the 8,251 candidates in the last election were women.

The BJP is widely expected to retain power after the election, though with a much smaller mandate, hit by concerns over a shortage of jobs and weak farm prices.

VOTE OUT 'POLITICS OF HATE'

Theatre artists, prominent writers urge voters

TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

More than 800 theatre artists from across the country have issued a joint statement urging the citizens to "vote out" the divisive politics of power.

According to a statement released on Artist Unite India, the theatre artists said that the upcoming Lok Sabha elections are the "most critical" in the history of independent India.

"Today, that very idea of India is under threat. Today, song, dance, laughter is under threat. Today, our beloved Constitution is under threat. The institutions that have to nurture argument, debate and dissent have been suffocated. To question, to call out lies, to speak the truth, is branded 'anti-national'. The seeds of hatred have entered our food, prayers and festivals. The ways in which this hatred has seeped into our daily fabric are alarming and it has to

STOP," said the statement.

In the statement, the artists slammed the BJP-led NDA government for throttling dissent and promoting an environment of hate and violence. The statement also made an appeal to the Indian voters asking them to vote out bigotry, hatred and apathy.

Earlier, a group of over 200 prominent writers, including Amitav Ghosh and Nayantara Sahgal, have appealed to the people to vote out "hate politics" and choose a "diverse and equal India."

In an open letter published on the Indian Cultural Forum, writers including Girish Karnad, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Nayantara Sahgal, and Romila Thapar said hate politics was being used to divide the country, create fear and increasingly exclude more number of people from living as "full-fledged citizens".

Better chance of peace talks if BJP wins: Pak PM

Modi blames creation of Pakistan on Congress

REUTERS, Indian Express

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan said he thinks there may be a better chance of peace talks with India if Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wins the general election due to begin there on Thursday.

Khan said that if the next Indian government were led by the opposition Congress party, it might be too scared to seek a settlement with Pakistan over disputed Indian-controlled Kashmir, fearing a backlash from the right.

"Perhaps if the BJP - a right-wing party - wins, some kind of settlement in Kashmir could be reached," Khan told a small group

of foreign journalists in an interview.

This was despite the massive alienation that Muslims in Kashmir and Muslims in general were facing in Modi's India, said Khan, who took office last August.

"I never thought I would see what is happening in India right now," said the former international cricket star. "Muslim-ness is being attacked."

Meanwhile, Modi yesterday stepped up his attack on the Congress, saying had its leaders acted wisely, Pakistan would not have been

created. Addressing a poll rally in Maharashtra, Modi also appeared to be treading sensitive ground, by asking first-time voters to dedicate their vote to those who carried out the air strike in Balakot.



SC dismisses petition against Modi film

India's top court yesterday dismissed an appeal to delay the release of a Bollywood biopic about Prime Minister Narendra Modi that the opposition says is propaganda, until after India's mega-election. The Supreme Court threw out the petition from the opposition Congress party, saying the biopic was not even certified yet and the matter should be considered by the election commission (EC). Under Indian election rules now in effect, the publication of any content deemed as campaign material - including advertisements, films and even social media - requires the election commission's prior approval. Congress says the film is flattering of Modi and has slammed the timing of its cinematic release as hundreds of millions of Indians prepare to start voting in a national election this week.

EC not functioning properly: ex-officials

Sixty-six former civil servants have written to President Ram Nath Kovind expressing their concerns over the functioning of the Election Commission of India, and listing alleged violations of the model code of conduct that the ECI failed to deal with effectively. The list includes PM Narendra Modi's address to the nation on the anti-satellite weapon (ASAT), the upcoming Modi biopic and a web series on his life, NaMo TV and alleged incendiary speeches by the PM and other BJP leaders. The group had earlier written to the ECI asking the commission to put on hold upcoming biopics of political personalities and expressed dismay that the PM biopic was being allowed to release.



Sonia to file nomination from Rae Bareilly tomorrow

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi will file her nomination for the Rae Bareilly parliamentary seat in Uttar Pradesh tomorrow. Sonia, who has been representing the seat since 2004, will contest against Dinesh Pratap Singh who recently joined the Bharatiya Janata Party after leaving the Congress. The Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, which have entered into an alliance with each other but kept the Congress out of it, have, however, decided not to put up any candidate against Sonia in Rae Bareilly where voting will be held on May 6 in the fifth phase of the staggered general election. Sonia had won the seat in 2004, 2006 (bypolls), 2009 and 2014.

NEWSIN brief

US 'leader of world terrorism': Rouhani

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday accused the US of being the real "leader of world terrorism", hitting back after Washington blacklisted Iran's Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation. Tehran was quick to retaliate on Monday by declaring US troops "terrorists" following Washington's move, which was welcomed by Iran's regional arch-rivals Israel and Saudi Arabia.



Algeria MPs elect first new president in 20 yrs

AFP, Algiers

Lawmakers named the speaker of the upper house as Algeria's first new president in two decades yesterday, after the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika following mass protests. The election of Abdelkader Bensalah as interim president follows constitutional rules but goes against the demands of demonstrators.

4 killed in attack on US convoy in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Three US troops and a military contractor were killed in a roadside explosion Monday in the deadliest attack on American forces this year. The blast near Bagram Air Base is the latest to hit American forces amid an ongoing, US-led drive to forge a peace deal in Afghanistan, more than 17 years after the Taliban were ousted.

Israelis vote in crucial polls

Ex-military chief mounts strong challenge as Netanyahu seeks record fifth term

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israelis yesterday began voting in an election that could hand right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a record fifth term or see him dethroned by an ex-general who has pledged clean government and social cohesion.

During the campaign leading up to polling day, the rival parties waged a vitriolic online battle, accusing each other of corruption, fostering bigotry and being soft on security.

Netanyahu's closest rival in the campaign was Benny Gantz, a former chief of the armed forces. Gantz's centrist Blue and White party, which includes other former generals, has challenged Netanyahu's hitherto unrivalled national security credentials.

After an election eve visit to the Western Wall, Netanyahu, 69, voted at a polling station in Jerusalem yesterday morning,

No party has ever won an outright majority in the 120-seat parliament

Vote is expected to be close and likely lead to frantic negotiations to form coalition

accompanied by his wife, Sara. "This is truly the essence of democracy and we should be blessed with it," he said, shaking hands with election officials and posing for selfies. "With God's help the State of Israel will prevail. Thank you very much. Go to vote."

Casting his vote in Rosh Ha'ayin near Tel Aviv, Gantz, 59, said: "This is a day of hope, a day of unity. I look into everyone's eyes and know that we can connect."



A combination picture shows Benny Gantz (left), leader of Blue and White party, voting at a polling station in Rosh Ha'ayin and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voting at a polling station in Jerusalem during Israel's parliamentary election yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

person he believes has the best chance of forming a government.

Polling stations opened at 7:00 am across the country and will close at 10:00 pm.

But the victor may not be decided immediately. No party

has ever won an outright majority in the 120-seat parliament, meaning days or even weeks of coalition negotiations lie ahead, with opinion polls having shown Netanyahu best placed to do so.

One factor may be the turnout

of voters from Israel's 21 percent Arab minority. Many were angered by Israel's nation-state law, passed in 2018, which declared that only Jews have the right of self-determination in the country. Netanyahu supported the legislation.

Voting in a predominantly Arab neighbourhood in the northern Israeli city of Haifa, Arab legislator Ayman Odeh, who heads the Hadash party, said that engagement was key to bringing about political changes that would benefit the Arab community.

"We have to vote ... we need to come in droves by train, bus, car and any other way to vote and make a crucial contribution to topple the right-wing government, and especially Benjamin Netanyahu," he said.

"It is very important that Arabs vote for the party that represents their values 100 percent, not 80 or 40 percent like other parties," he said.

May seeks Brexit delay from Merkel, Macron

AFP, Berlin

British Prime Minister Theresa May held talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday in a last-gasp bid to keep her country from crashing out of the European Union at the end of the week.

May will also meet French President Emmanuel Macron in Paris, seeking support from the bloc's powerbrokers for her request to delay Brexit for a second time.

She is hoping EU leaders will agree at an emergency summit today to postpone Brexit from April 12 to June 30, to give her more time to get her divorce deal through parliament.

British MPs have rejected the text, and May's government is now in talks with the opposition Labour Party to try to find a way through the deadlock.

But these discussions are moving slowly, and EU negotiator Michel Barnier said May must explain in Brussels what another postponement would achieve. "The length of the extension



must be linked to the purpose -- what it's for -- and that depends on what Mrs May will say to European leaders tomorrow," he told reporters after a meeting of EU ministers in Luxembourg.

"No deal will never be the EU's

decision, it will always be the responsibility of the United Kingdom to tell us what it wants," he said.

EU ministers have expressed frustration at the turmoil in London, where MPs still cannot decide how to leave the EU almost three years after the referendum vote for Brexit.

"We are in a very, very frustrating situation here," said Germany's Europe minister Michael Roth as he arrived in Luxembourg.

UN chief urges halt to Libya fighting

AFP, Tripoli

UN chief Antonio Guterres on Monday appealed for an immediate halt to fighting in Libya, after strongman Khalifa Haftar's forces claimed an airstrike on Tripoli's only functioning airport.

Thousands have fled violence in the capital city, according to the United Nations, since Haftar launched a surprise assault last week which has left dozens dead.

Secretary-General Guterres "urges the immediate halt of all military operations in order to de-escalate the situation and prevent an all-out conflict," said a UN statement late Monday.

He "strongly condemns the military escalation and ongoing fighting in and around Tripoli, including the aerial attack today by a Libyan National Army (LNA) aircraft against Mitiga airport."

The oil-rich northern African country has been rocked by violent power struggles between an array of armed groups since the Nato-

backed overthrow of dictator Moamer Gaddafi in 2011.

The UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) controls the capital, but its authority is not recognized by a parallel administration in the east of the country, backed by Haftar.

The strongman has defied international calls to halt his advance on Tripoli, including from the UN Security Council and the United States.

"I make a very strong appeal to Libyan leaders and in particular to Haftar to stop all military activities... and to return to the negotiation table", the EU's foreign policy chief

Federica Mogherini said after talks with EU foreign ministers.

The GNA said French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with its leader Fayez al-Sarraj of his "total opposition to the offensive against the capital and the endangering of civilian lives".

The French presidency confirmed the call took place, without releasing details of the discussion.



US president has refused to publicly take a stand against the country's de facto ruler.

Trump has instead emphasised that Riyadh is a major arms importer for the United States and an important regional ally against Iran.

A statement by the State Department listed the 16 individuals and said that they had been designated under the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act.

The section in question "provides that, in cases where the Secretary of State has credible information that officials of foreign governments have been involved in significant corruption or gross violations of human rights, those individuals and their immediate family members are ineligible for entry into the United States.