

Critics of Modi migrate online

Mainstream media stays deferential

REUTERS, New Delhi

There's scarcely any critical evaluation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on India's mainstream television channels and most newspapers as the world's most populous nation heads toward a general election.

India's once-in-five-years election usually draws fiery debate and mudslinging across its sprawling media. But this year, criticism of Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is mostly online, some of which has gone viral in recent weeks.

YouTuber Dhruv Rathee has accused Modi of behaving like a dictator in a video that has over 27 million views, citing what he called silencing of critics, the use of federal investigation agencies to browbeat the opposition.

Neha Singh Rathore, who produces popular music videos in the Bhojpuri language of eastern India, asks "What is happening in our country" in one of her songs, with stanzas on cronyism, shady electoral funding and the lack of action on unemployment, inflation and alleged violence against minorities.

From copters to ads, BJP snaps up bulk of polls props

REUTERS, New Delhi

Campaigning is gathering pace in India's general elections, the world's largest with nearly a billion eligible voters, as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) races ahead of its opponents in cornering resources, from helicopters to online advertisements.

In the months to the run-up, the BJP has snared the largest share of reservations for domestic private helicopters to fly its leaders to all corners of the far-flung nation, an industry official said.

"The largest party has more campaigning to do because of the share of their election touring," said Rajesh Bali, MD of the Business Aircraft Operators Association.

Demand for helicopters, the preferred vehicle of canvassing politicians, has risen about a third from the last elections in 2019, Bali told Reuters, with BJP making up more than 60% of polls activity, followed by the opposition Congress.

Ukraine attacks Russian airfield in occupied Crimea

Four missile launchers, 3 radar stations 'critically damaged'

REUTERS

A Ukrainian attack on a military airfield in Russian-occupied Crimea on Wednesday seriously damaged four missile launchers, three radar stations and other equipment, Ukraine's military spy agency said yesterday.

Four launchers for S-400 surface-to-air missiles and an air defense control point stationed at an air base in Dzhankoi were among equipment "destroyed or critically damaged", the agency said on Telegram.

It added that the number of aircraft damaged or destroyed as a result of the attack was being clarified. Telegram channels reported powerful blasts in Dzhankoi on Wednesday. There was no official comment from Russia.

The Ukrainian agency did not provide any data regarding the means used for the strike which it described as "successful". President Volodymyr Zelensky earlier thanked military involved in the operation "for precision".

Russian troops have recently stepped up ballistic missile attacks on Ukraine from Crimea, which Moscow seized and has occupied since 2014.

Meanwhile, Russia said yesterday that fresh US aid for Ukraine will not change the dynamics on the battlefield, as Washington gears up for a crucial weekend vote on long stalled military funding for Kyiv.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson said Wednesday he would advance a \$61 billion package of funding for Ukraine, stalled since last year amid political infighting in the Republican Party.

INDIA'S LOK SABHA ELECTION

What are the key issues?

REUTERS, New Delhi

Nearly 1 billion Indians will be eligible to vote in the world's biggest election starting today. Opinion polls predict an easy win for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which would give him a record-equaling third straight term.

Here are some of the key issues in the elections to 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, that will be held in seven phases between today and June 1, with vote counting on June 4.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

India's economy is expected to have grown by about 8 percent in the last fiscal year ended March 31, the fastest among major countries. In the past decade under Modi, Indian economy has jumped five places to fifth position in the world and he has "guaranteed" to lift it to third position should he win the election.

WELFARE POLICIES

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the government has been giving free food rations to 814 million of India's 1.42 billion people. Some critics have said the fact that the government feels the need to support nearly 60 percent of India's population with free cereal is a sign of uneven economic growth in the country. Modi and his BJP have also tried to win over women voters by focusing on their welfare, including through cash handouts and domestic benefits such as piped water, 24/7 electricity and cooking gas connections.

HINDU REAWAKENING

Modi in January led the consecration of a grand temple to Hindu God-king Ram on a site believed to be his birthplace, fulfilling a 35-year-old promise of the Hindu-nationalist BJP. A Hindu mob in 1992 pulled down a 16th-century mosque on the site, which many Hindus believe was built over a demolished temple under the Mughal ruler Babur.



Polling officials carry election materials after disembarking from a boat as they head to a remote polling station ahead of the first phase of India's general election in the Majuli district in Assam, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Modi has also implemented a citizenship law that has been criticized as discriminating against Muslims, granting nationality to Hindus, Parsis, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and Christians who fled to India due to religious persecution from Muslim-majority Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan before December 31, 2014.

CORRUPTION

A government agency that investigates suspected money laundering has summoned, questioned, raided or arrested nearly 150 opposition politicians in the past decade. In the same period, it has investigated only about half a dozen ruling party politicians.

The main opposition Congress, meanwhile, is battling tax demands, which it has called an attempt to cripple it before the vote.

UNEMPLOYMENT

Modi first came to power in 2014 partly on the promise of creating tens of millions of jobs for the country's youth but has largely failed to deliver. The unemployment rate rose to 8 percent in February, according to the privately held Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy.

FARMERS

The BJP had promised to double farm income by 2022 in its manifesto for the last election, but there is no sign of that.

GLOBAL STATURE

The BJP often highlights India's rising global stature, backed by its economy, as a key achievement of Modi, especially after hosting the G20 summit last year and successfully evacuating its citizens stuck in Ukraine after Russia's attack.

Why does voting last six weeks in India's general election?

REUTERS, New Delhi

India is set to begin the world's largest general elections today, held in terrain sweeping from the icy Himalayas to humid jungles, with nearly a billion people eligible to choose 543 members of the lower house of parliament. But more than six weeks will elapse from the time the first vote is cast on April 19 until it is counted.

Here is why the exercise takes so long.

NUMBER OF DAYS

The election cycle sprawls over 44 days, long even by India's standards, as the 2019 vote lasted 39 days.

This year's elections will be India's second longest after the first exercise following independence in 1947 from colonial ruler Britain, which ran for four months from Oct 25, 1951 to Feb 21, 1952.

There are seven voting days this year, with today's first phase seeing people cast ballots for 102 constituencies nationwide. The last polling date is June 1, covering 57 seats. All votes will be counted together on June 4.

VOTER NUMBERS

The size of the country and its electorate is the chief reason why the general election takes so long. India's eligible voters, at 968.6 million, number more than twice the European Union's population of 448 million.

The figure has grown 8 percent since the 2019 elections.

With an estimated population of more

than 1.4 billion, India overtook China last year as the world's most populous country.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD

Some of India's 28 states and eight federally governed territories complete voting in just one phase, but in larger states, some



Shivaraj N, a sub-inspector in Tamil Nadu police waits to receive his declaration form, from a polling officer as he arrives to cast his vote a day ahead of the first phase of the election, in Tiruvannamalai, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

constituencies vote on different dates.

For example, the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, with a population of more than 230 million and 80 members of parliament, more than any other state, will vote in parts in every phase.

The Election Commission manages this massive exercise by carving out smaller voting

boroughs, limiting each polling station to no more than 1,500 registered voters. That requires the watchdog to set up 1.048 million polling stations this year, in locations such as government buildings and schools that are the closest to the majority of voters. They are sited in terrain ranging from icy Himalayan heights in the north to dense central Indian jungles and remote deserts in the western state of Rajasthan.

SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS

Incidents of violence and vote-rigging have marred India's election history, but there are drastically fewer instances today.

Nevertheless, to ensure the elections are free, fair and held without fear, more than 300,000 federal security personnel back up the police forces controlled by state governments.

The intervals between voting allows these personnel time to move around the country, usually by rail.

They guard election officials taking voting machines to polling stations and then keep the devices secure until counting day to maintain the integrity of the elections.

Scores of polling officers have been flown to remote areas in the rugged Himalayas and the central Indian constituency of Gadchiroli-Chimur, beset by Maoist violence, to which 850 polling staff are being sent.

Besides the insurgents, officers must keep a lookout for a wild elephant roaming the Gadchiroli area after killing two farmers, although trackers are trying to keep it from further mayhem.

Main parties and candidates in the election fray

REUTERS

BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP)

The BJP, the world's largest political outfit with nearly 180 million members, was born out of the Jan Sangh party, an offshoot of a men-only Hindu nationalist organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). After struggling on the political margins early after it was formed in 1980, the BJP delivered its first prime minister 16 years later in an unstable government that lasted 13 days.

The party formed a government with a majority of its own for the first time in 2014 under Modi. It's been formidably in power since.

Narendra Modi:

Modi, 73, was born and raised in a small town in the western state of Gujarat. He joined the BJP's ideological parent, the RSS, in his 20s and the Jan Sangh nearly a decade and a half later.

He's risen through the ranks over years and was Gujarat's chief minister for more than three terms before leading the BJP into a decisive victory in the 2014 general election. A decade in power, Modi remains enduringly popular as he seeks a record-equaling third straight term.

Modi is seeking to be re-elected from Varanasi, a city of religious significance to Hindus in the populous northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS

The Congress is India's oldest political party and governed India for more than two-thirds of the years since independence in 1947 but has struggled after Modi swept to power.

Congress gave the its first and only woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi, and introduced comprehensive economic reforms in 1991 making way for the evolution of an open market economy.

But it crashed out of power in 2014 against the Modi onslaught and a series of corruption allegations.

Modi's fiercest opponent and Congress's star

campaigner, Rahul Gandhi has never been a minister in a federal or state government, has not led his party to a general election victory, and quit as party chief after a miserable performance at the last parliamentary polls in 2019.

Yet he remains at the centre of India's opposition politics and Modi's main target.

AAM AADMI PARTY (AAP)

The Aam Aadmi or Common Person's Party emerged from a strong anti-corruption movement in 2011 that swelled amid protests led by Anna Hazare - a self-styled crusader backed by close aide Arvind Kejriwal.

Kejriwal formed the AAP in 2012 and formed a local government in the national capital Delhi in 2015, staging an unexpected political upset for established parties like the BJP and Congress.

However, AAP's prospects are clouded by pre-election arrests of most of its high-profile leaders, including Kejriwal, in an alleged graft case.

ALL INDIA TRINAMOOL CONGRESS (TMC)

India's fourth-largest party by seats in parliament, the Trinamool Congress holds power in West Bengal in the east, another state the BJP has struggled to crack. The party came into being nearly 25 years ago after it splintered from the Congress.

Founder of the party Mamata Banerjee has been the state head for nearly 13 years and is now a reluctant Congress ally in fighting the BJP in the 2024 polls. Her party has joined the 26-member opposition bloc but failed to clinch an agreement over who will fight from which seat in the state.



Palestinian women react as they sit on the rubble of a residential building housing their apartments, following an Israeli raid in Nuseirat, in the central Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Taiwan's next leader among Time 'Most Influential'

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's incoming president Lai Ching-te has made Time Magazine's list of the "100 Most Influential People of 2024", which the island hailed yesterday as a recognition of its "democratic achievements".

Vice President Lai, who won the January presidential election to succeed Tsai Ing-wen, will take office on May 20 at a time of growing tensions between Taiwan and China.

Lai said in a post on X that he was "honoured" to be named the world's 100 most influential people this year by Time.

"This recognition isn't mine alone; it reflects the resilience and unity of the people of Taiwan... I will work relentlessly to promote peace and prosperity."

Beijing claims the self-ruled island as part of its territory.