

# ISAS Insights

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## The Battle for Bihar

*While the politics of caste and personalities do seem to be relevant to the elections to the Legislative Assembly in the eastern Indian State of Bihar, with the multi-phase polls beginning on 12 October 2015, the issue of development and good governance could also prove critical. It is in this context that India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been canvassing widely in Bihar in what could turn out to be the country's most significant poll this year.*

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The stage is set for perhaps India's most important electoral battle of 2015. The eastern State of Bihar goes to the polls in five phases from 12 October to 5 November. Following its convincing win in the 2014 national elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had handily won elections in the states of Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand. However, the rout in the 2015 Delhi Assembly elections, where the BJP managed only 3 seats to the Aam Aadmi Party's 67, halted the BJP juggernaut and took some shine off Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The elections in Bihar will be a crucial test of where the BJP and Mr Modi stand nearly 18 months after they formed the national government. A victory in Bihar for the BJP

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could give the Modi government the confidence to put on track much-needed economic reforms, which seem to have stalled. The Bihar election will also be a test of the state of the opposition which was in disarray in 2014.

Two coalitions are locked in a high stakes battle in Bihar. One is the so-called grand alliance (*mahagatbandhan*) led by the ruling Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)], headed by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. Mr Nitish Kumar had convincingly won the last two state elections in Bihar in 2005 and 2010 in an alliance with the BJP. He, however, snapped ties with the BJP before the 2014 national elections over the nomination of Mr Modi as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. Mr Nitish Kumar has now allied with one-time rival and former Chief Minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), in what some describe as a desperate gamble to stay in power. The Congress, too, is part of the alliance. On the opposite side is the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the BJP, and comprising three other parties: Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RSLP) and Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM). Going by the results in the 2014 national elections, Bihar should have been a cakewalk for the NDA alliance. In 2014, despite Mr Nitish Kumar having left the NDA, the BJP-led alliance, without HAM which had not yet come into existence, won 31 of the 40 parliamentary seats. In contrast, the JD(U) and the RJD, which contested separately, won two and four seats respectively. In addition, the Congress, which was in alliance with the RJD, won two seats. Importantly, however, the combined vote in 2014 of the JD(U), RJD and Congress was 45% compared to the BJP-led alliance's 38%. It is the coming together of the JD(U) and RJD which has changed the electoral math and made the election in Bihar much closer than it might have been.

## **Caste Equations**

If it were merely a matter of numbers, the grand alliance would have had a decisive advantage. But it is rarely so in Indian elections. Indeed, while early surveys did give the grand alliance a lead, more recent ones such as the TimesNow-CVoter survey in late-September predicted a dead heat, with the NDA winning 117 to the grand alliance's 112. The total number of seats in the Bihar Assembly is 243. However, a survey conducted by the Lokniti-CSDS, the most reliable and experienced pollsters in India, found that if elections were held in end-September the NDA would have got 42% of the vote while the grand

alliance would have lagged behind at 38%. Interestingly, the NDA enjoys a healthy lead in urban areas while the lead narrows in rural areas. Though the survey, conducted among 2,079 voters and across 30 constituencies, did not predict the number of seats likely to be won by the opposing coalitions, a 4% difference in vote share could translate into a small but significant lead for the NDA.

Though the process of distribution of tickets for both coalitions was not entirely smooth, both managed to hammer out a consensus. In the NDA alliance, the BJP was allotted 160 candidates, the LJP 40, the RSLP 23 and the HAM 20. For the grand alliance, the JD(U) and the RJD are contesting 101 seats each and the Congress 41.

The reason why the elections are being predicted as a close one is because of how caste loyalties, always a critical factor in Bihar, have stacked up for the two opposing coalitions. The JD(U) and the RJD are both parties that bank heavily on lower caste or Other Backward Classes (OBC) voters, who constitute 51% of the state's population. The Yadavs, who account for 15% of Bihar's population, form Mr Laloo Yadav's core base, while the Kurmis and Koeris, who are roughly 12% of the state's populations, have backed Mr Nitish Kumar in the past. This has been reflected in the distribution of tickets. Nearly 55% of the grand alliance's candidates are OBCs. According to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, the Yadavs and Kurmi-Koeris will back the grand alliance in large numbers. In addition, the grand alliance is strong among the Muslims, who constitute around 17% of Bihar's population. This is consistent with the findings of the 2014 National Election Studies' (NES) post-poll survey which shows that 84% of Muslim voters in Bihar voted for the RJD, JD(U) or the Congress.

In contrast, the BJP which is traditionally seen as an upper-caste party has over 40% upper-caste candidates contesting the election. The CSDS-Lokniti survey finds strong support for the NDA among the higher castes: Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs. But what has really tilted the balance in favour of the NDA is its support among the Scheduled Castes (SCs) or Dalits. Though factors like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat in mid-September questioning reservations or quotas for lower castes have had the BJP leaders worried, such issues might not end up doing too much damage to the party. The CSDS-Lokniti survey finds the NDA likely to get 55% of the Dalit vote compared to 32% for the Grand Alliance. This is largely due to the BJP's partners in the NDA – the LJP, RSLP and HAM -- who all have significant support among the Dalits. According to the CSDS-Lokniti

survey, the NDA also has considerable support among the lower end of the OBCs, or the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). Indeed, findings from the 2014 NES post-poll survey show that the EBC vote in Bihar swung heavily in favour of the BJP during the national elections.

There are several other political parties in the fray in Bihar, including the Samjawadi Party, Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party, the Hyderabad-based Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) and a break-away faction of the RJD called the Jan Adhikar Morcha. Except for the MIM, which could pull some Muslim votes, the rest are unlikely to play a major role.

### **The Personality Factor**

Most surveys, including CSDS-Lokniti's, show that Mr Nitish Kumar is still a very popular leader in Bihar. According to the CSDS-Lokniti survey, the choice of 27% of respondents for chief minister was Mr Nitish Kumar, with BJP's Sushil Modi a distant second at 14%. The respondents rated Mr Nitish Kumar highly on issues like building roads, power supply and law and order. But worryingly for him, the survey also shows that his tie-up with Mr Laloo Yadav might have come with considerable drawbacks. For one, Mr Laloo Yadav's association with misgovernance, what critics refer to as a 'jungle raj' (lawless governance), is likely to hurt Mr Nitish Kumar. Second, the Yadavs and the Kurmis who form the core support base of Mr Laloo Yadav and Mr Nitish Kumar respectively don't trust each other, which could affect the electoral outcome.

While the grand alliance has projected Mr Nitish Kumar as the chief ministerial candidate, the NDA has not made any announcement about its chief ministerial candidate. This has allowed the BJP, as in elections in other states in 2014-15, to prominently feature Mr Narendra Modi as the face of its campaign. Indeed, leaders in the BJP have ascribed the party's electoral victories in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand to the Prime Minister. While this ploy boomeranged in the Delhi Assembly elections in 2015, the BJP has little option but to go with this strategy in Bihar due to the absence of a state-wide popular leader. The good news for the BJP, however, is that the CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that Mr Modi still enjoys considerable popularity in Bihar for his performance as Prime Minister. There is

also evidence that voters in Bihar, as in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand, prefer to have the same party in government at the state and federal levels.

## **Conclusion**

It is accepted that caste plays an important role in the elections in Bihar. But as in the rest of India, development (*vikas*) issues have increasingly begun to play an equally critical role in elections. The CSDS-Lokniti survey affirms that over half their respondents said it was only development that mattered for their vote. They listed development, *bijli-sadak-paani* (electricity-roads-water) and jobs as primary concerns. As in the 2014 national elections, while the BJP has been careful in getting its caste equations right in terms of candidate-selection and choice of allies, Mr Modi has, in his public rallies, emphasised development. At a rally in Munger, he presented a choice to the Bihar voters between “vikas raj” (governance through development) and “jungle raj”. That has been the tenor of most of his speeches in Bihar. In the ultimate analysis, however, the BJP’s smart choice of allies, Mr Modi’s declining but relatively high popularity, and the awkward alliance between the JD(U) and the RJD might have given an edge to the NDA.

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