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# OPPOSITION

The Opposition may have scored brownie points in the recent bypolls, but the forthcoming state elections will present the true test

Face Saver

## Bypoll Results a Lifeline for the Opposition After the May Shocker

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The immortal line from Harold Wilson — ‘A week is a long time in politics’ — is something seasoned politicians worship as the eternal truth. The power of that insightful definition of politics once again played out last week, when puzzling signals from 18 Assembly bypolls cast a blemish on what earlier promised to be a 100-day bash for the Narendra Modi government.

The Opposition sprung a surprise by wresting many seats from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the bypolls in Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, adding a new twist to the life and times of the Opposition politics after it was virtually washed away by the Modi tsunami in May. Within 100 days after the BJP-LJP pact swept 37 of the 40 Bihar Lok Sabha seats, the saffron party lost six, including many sitting seats, out of 10 Assembly bypoll seats to a newly-formed RJD-JD(U)-Congress-NCP experimental alliance. Can Bihar, once again, play anchor to yet another realignment in Opposition politics? “I thank the people of Bihar for making the alliance win. Indian voters have rectified the mistakes made in LS elections”, was Lulu’s reaction to the results.

The glow of the BJP’s LS poll punch in Karnataka faded when the party lost two out of three Assembly seats to Congress just as the saffron party lost one sitting seat to the Congress in MP and was held up to a 1-1 draw in Punjab. What do these bypoll results show?

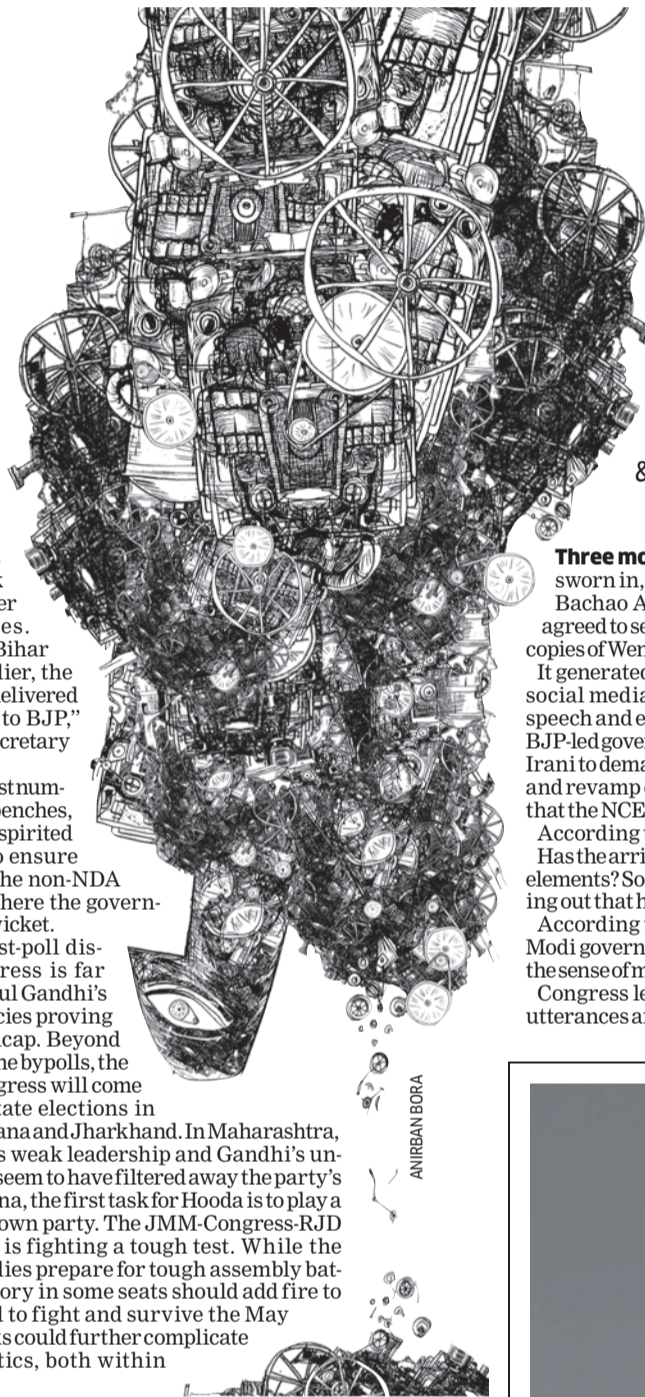
Has the Modi factor lost glow after it failed to deliver, especially on the inflation front, after the hype it created with promises? Or, are the voters, having taken out their anger on the Congress-led UPA in the LS polls, now less hostile to the Opposition? Or, is just that politics will be played out differently in state politics? These results have, the Opposition says, added to the significance of the next round of bypolls in 33 Assembly and three LS seats next month in some states, including UP, Rajasthan, Gujarat and West Bengal.

The Opposition thinks it has secured a lifeline after the

May death-knell. “The feel-good of the NDA is over. The by-poll results show the fight-back of Congress and other Opposition parties. Had the alliance in Bihar shaped up a bit earlier, the results would have delivered much bigger blows to BJP,” said AICC general secretary Shakheel Ahmed.

Reduced to the lowest numbers, the Congress benches, in LS and RS, put up spirited and crafty fights to ensure they rally most of the non-NDA parties on issues where the government is on a tricky wicket.

Yet, the larger post-poll disarray in the Congress is far from over, with Rahul Gandhi’s leadership deficiencies proving to be a major handicap. Beyond surprise results in the bypolls, the real test for the Congress will come in the upcoming state elections in Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand. In Maharashtra, Prithviraj Chavan’s weak leadership and Gandhi’s unending faith in him seem to have filtered away the party’s prospects. In Haryana, the first task for Hooda is to play a unifier’s role in his own party. The JMM-Congress-RJD pact in Jharkhand is fighting a tough test. While the Congress and its allies prepare for tough assembly battles, a surprise victory in some seats should add fire to the Opposition zeal to fight and survive the May debacle. But setbacks could further complicate the Congress’ politics, both within and outside.



Socio Watch

## Rightwing Fringe Elements Feel Empowered Under Modi Sarkar

Social experts and political rivals say they now seem to have got a ‘free hand’, & Modi’s silence hasn’t helped clear the air

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Three months before the Narendra Modi government was sworn in, Dinanath Batra, president of RSS-backed Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti, won a battle when Penguin India agreed to settle a civil suit filed by him by recalling and pulping copies of Wendy Doniger’s ‘The Hindus: An Alternative History’. It generated a countrywide debate and many angry voices on social media perceived it as a serious attack on free thought, speech and expression. Batra was unfazed. On June 3, with the BJP-led government firmly in place, he met HRD minister Smriti Irani to demand setting up of a National Education Commission and revamp of the National Curriculum Framework to ensure that the NCERT “does not continue with its flawed curriculum”.

According to Batra, the HRD minister agreed to both. Has the arrival of Modi Sarkar emboldened the right wing fringe elements? Social experts and political rivals say they have, pointing out that hardliners are increasingly hogging the limelight.

According to sociologist Shiv Visvanathan, the advent of the Modi government has emboldened fringe elements. “They have the sense of majoritarianism and have turned bully boys,” he said. Congress leader Kapil Sibal insists that increasing headline utterances and incidents are not unrelated stray events but part

of the BJP strategy to polarise voters. “It is their agenda. In the last one or two years of its term, the NDA will talk about bringing uniform civil code and do other things for Hindus,” he told ET.

In Goa, BJP minister Sudin Dhavalikar triggered a controversy last month when he demanded a ban on bikinis, mini-skirts and pubs in Goa because they were “against Indian culture”.

Another minister, Deepak Dhavalikar, goaded everyone in the Goa assembly to support Modi to establish a ‘Hindu Rashtira’. The PM’s silence hasn’t helped clear the air, which may have prompted foreign media to call him “an over-sharing politician, now a silent prime minister.”

He didn’t react when Shiv Sena members of Parliament tried to force-feed a fasting Muslim employee of Maharashtra Sadan in the Capital to protest the poor quality of food. Sibal alleged that Modi was keeping quiet “because he wants these things to go on”.

To be fair, the PM expressed concern about incidents of communalism and violence in his maiden Independence Day speech. A Congress leader said that was not enough. “How does mere lip service help? Modi has to rein in these elements. The enquiry report into the Saharanpur riots has accused local BJP MP Raghav Lakhnani of inciting rioters. What is he going to do about it?” the person said.

RSS spokesperson Manmohan Vaidya denied that there was any misplaced feeling of empowerment and entitlement. “It is not because of the BJP government. Such feelings and utterances had been there earlier too,” he told ET.

Sociologist Dipankar Gupta agreed that these fringe elements were always active. “It is true that they may have become more emboldened now, but it is too soon to see a correlation between Modi government and the incidents,” he said.

Columnist Ved Pratap Vaidik — who was recently in news for his meeting with Hafiz Saeed, main accused in the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack and leader of the blacklisted Jamaat-ud-Dawa — said the behaviour of right wing fringe elements was not in consonance with the government’s responsibility. “Modi must control them because his image is suffering,” he said.

Vaidik said some recent controversies were highly political in nature. A senior BJP leader admitted that when minister of state in the PMO Jitendra Singh talked about a debate on Article 370 (that provides special status to Jammu and Kashmir) and agriculture minister Radha Mohan Singh advocated an open debate on the uniform civil code, they were part of an orchestrated design.

“These were thought balloons, floated to gauge public mood on the issues, and also to set off a debate amid the public,” the person said.

IN ACTION MODE



BRICS Bank

PM Narendra Modi and other BRICS leaders agree to set up a BRICS Bank. It will be headquartered in Shanghai, but India will head it first



Lifeline to Aadhaar

UPA’s unique identity scheme’s fate looked sealed under the new government. But the PM backed it and set a target of 100 crore enrollments

WHO HE MET



@BRICS SUMMIT

Chief co-ordinator in Brazilian foreign affairs ministry 15/7/14

Meets members of the BRICS Business Council 17/7/14

South African president on the margins of the summit

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