

[IN FOCUS: GOA]

BJP finds itself on slippery terrain this time

Party struggles to fill post-Parrikar leadership void as allies are not of much help; battle is with traditional rival Congress

PRAKASH KAMAT
PANAJI

With hardly four days to go for election to the two Lok Sabha seats in Goa, the ruling BJP in Goa is struggling to retain the seats it won with big margins in 2014.

Byelection to three Assembly seats are also being held on April 23 in the State.

The biggest setback to the BJP is the leadership void in the government and the organisation following the death of Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar on March 17.

Though other parties and Independents are in the fray in both the Lok Sabha constituencies, the battle is between the traditional rivals, the BJP and the Congress.

As for the Assembly byelection, the ruling BJP is putting up a tough fight as the stability of the coalition government headed by Pramod Sawant is at stake.

Two of the byelections have been necessitated as the Congress MLAs resigned last October to join the BJP, and the third one, in Mapusa, is because of the death of BJP MLA and former Deputy Chief Mi-

nister Francis D'Souza.

The BJP is heading a weak coalition with 14 MLAs of its own in a truncated House of 36, dependent on the three-member regional outfit, Goa Forward Party (GFP), and three Independents.

The government was formed after the 2017 Assembly election with the allies setting the condition before the Governor that they were committed only to Mr. Parrikar.

CM's position shaky

The coalition remains under Mr. Sawant without its ally, Maharashtra Gomantak Party (MGP), leaving his position shaky.

The general impression is that the government is carrying on because of the inherent fear among the allies that the Modi-Shah combine would get the Assembly dissolved if they make common cause with the Congress.

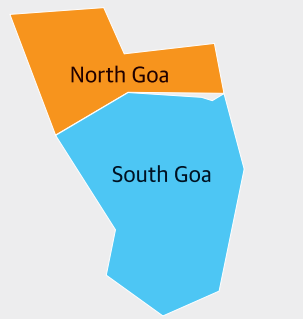
This, perhaps, explains Mr. Sawant's campaign statement, "Bring back PM Modi to continue the BJP government in the State."

The Congress and the MGP have made the BJP's poaching

Even-stevens

While the Bharatiya Janata Party won both seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, an aggregation of the results in the 2017 Assembly elections onto Lok Sabha seats shows that the party would have split its spoils (one seat each) with the Congress.

The BJP won 32.5%, the Congress 28.4% and the Maharashtra Gomantak Party garnered 11.3% of the votes in 2017.



of their MLAs and misuse of government machinery a major plank in the byelection. The MGP has backed two of the Congress's Lok Sabha candidates.

MGP vows revenge

After two of the three MLAs of the MGP recently left the party and joined the BJP and its senior leader Sudin Dhavlikar was sacked as Deputy Chief Minister, the MGP is set to teach the BJP a lesson, says its president Dipak Dhavalikar.

The oldest regional outfit, which projects a relatively softer, mass-based Hindutva,

ruled Goa for 16 years post-liberation and had a major contribution in the BJP winning the South Goa seat in 2014, particularly in Hindu-dominated areas.

Apart from his overwhelming presence which galvanised the party's rank and file during the election, Mr. Parrikar had, over the years, made inroads into the Catholic-dominated Salcete in South Goa, whose eight Assembly segments mostly tilted the scales in favour of the Congress.

He was known to exploit the dissent in the faction-ridden Congress to divide the votes in

Catholic-dominated areas to the BJP's advantage.

Congress North Goa candidate and GPCC president Girish Chodankar told *The Hindu*, "One of the biggest factors in this election is the absence of Mr. Parrikar, who used to play vindictive politics as a result of which, many Congress MLAs, leaders and workers used to fear coming out openly for the party's campaign. The present Chief Minister, of course, is now trying to copy him."

Roadblocks everywhere

While the disparate allies, the three-member GFP and three Independents, have hardly been of much help to the BJP in this election, the loss of the MGP could be a decisive blow.

The going has not been easy for the BJP in the Assembly byelection either. In the Shiroda Assembly constituency, the MGP's Dhavalikar is pitted against the BJP's Subhash Shirdokar.

In Mapusa, the MGP has backed the Congress and in Mandrem, a strong independent against the BJP.

The resentment within the

party, especially among some senior leaders such as former Chief Minister Laxmikant Parsekar, who do not approve of the BJP's "poaching" of MLAs from other parties is also affecting the party's electoral prospects.

2014 scene

In 2014, apart from the Modi wave, Narendra Sawaikar, MP, faced a weak Congress candidate as a fallout of internal dissensions. Whereas this time, there is the fear factor among the minorities about the Modi regime returning, which is helping the Congress. Besides, Mr. Sawaikar is facing a formidable opponent, Francisco Sardinha, who has been a three-time South Goa MP and Chief Minister, and has intermittently been occupying various positions of power since 1981.

Under the leadership of Girish Chodankar, the Congress in Goa is for the first time facing a major election with unity.

Mr. Chodankar is facing four-time BJP MP and Union AYUSH Minister Sripad Naik in the Lok Sabha election.

37 dead persons voted in Arunachal: Congress

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
GUWAHATI

The BJP "brought back to life" 37 people for casting votes at the polling stations in Pating and Checki villages on April 12, says Tai Nikio, Congress candidate for the Nyapin Assembly seat in Kurung Kumey district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Also, the EVMs in the Nyobia circle of the district could have been tampered with as six booths did not have CCTV cameras, he said on Sunday.

Elections were held to 57 of the 60 Assembly seats in the State. Three candidates won uncontested.

"We have lodged complaints at the office of the Chief Electoral Officer on the dead voters, besides filing an FIR on blatant violation of election procedures," Mr. Tai said, demanding re-polling.

"Our polling agents were barred from entering some

Our polling agents were barred from entering some polling stations. A few were also kidnapped and tortured

TAI NIKIO
Congress candidate

polling stations. A few were also kidnapped and tortured. Bamang Jarjo, a polling agent, was threatened with dire consequences," he said.

The State's election officials said the complaints were being looked into.

State Minister Bamang Felix and Nyapin's BJP candidate had earlier accused Congress supporters of attacking his convoy during campaigning on April 1. This was after State Congress Committee president Takam Sanjoy said the BJP had indulged in booth capturing, kidnapping and assault of party workers.

Wheels of vote



Pedal power: People take part in a 'cycle ride for democracy' to create awareness of voting in Bhopal on Sunday. A.M. FARUQUI

'Religion has taken over all aspects of life'

T.V. Chandran blames the Sangh for this and bringing down the level of politics

S.R. PRAVEEN

In a memorable sequence in T.V. Chandran's 1995 film *Ormakal Undayirikkanam*, a young boy walks into a barber shop, where a murder has just happened, and rubs away a writing on the wall which warns customers against having political discussions. He leaves just the word "politics" untouched. It could very well be seen as the director himself making a statement about his cinema, which has worn its politics on its sleeve, at a time when mainstream Malayalam cinema was celebrating apolitical narratives.

That film, as well as the 1997 film *Mankamma* and his recent work *Pengalila*, was set against the background of the *Vimochana Samaram* (liberation struggle) of 1959, when the Congress and religious and caste organisations got together to launch a protest movement to bring down the first elected Communist government of Kerala for implementing educational and land reforms. Many have drawn parallels to that period with now as the Left government at present is facing a similar opposition from religious forces post-Sabarimala verdict. Yet, Chandran views it differently.

"The context is a little different. In the past five years, the Sangh Parivar has injected religion into everything and brought down the level of politics. It has

become the norm now that even the other parties have been influenced by religion to some extent. You couldn't imagine an AKG or EMS inside a temple, but now even some Left ministers can be

LIGHTS, CAMERA ELECTION

seen in temples. Religion has taken over every aspect of life, and issues like Sabarimala have relegated every other important issue into the background," he says.

He has explored the politics of Sangh Parivar, with a trilogy of films related to the Gujarat riots - *Kathavasheshan*, *Vilapangalkappuram* and *Bhoomiyude Avakasikal*.

"In *Kathavasheshan*, the woman who is searching for the cause of her fiancé's suicide, finds out in the end that he committed that act "for the shame of being alive as an Indian after the Gujarat riots". These words were supposed to appear on screen. But the censors only allowed "for

the shame of being alive". Now, it actually fits as we don't need to mention Gujarat specifically, for what began there has spread across the country," he says.

Censorship is, in fact, one of his major concerns as a film-maker, ahead of the election, with him wishing for a regime free of all kinds of censoring of content.

"Successive governments have misused the censors for their own means, but in the past five years, it has hung as a Damocles' sword over us. It is not just the certification board, but one has to also satisfy all kinds of religious fringe elements. If this has to change, the reign of the Sangh has to end in India. If

they continue, the situation will only worsen, with us being forced to either stop all cultural activity or change its character to the form of an underground resistance movement," Chandran says.

From his early days, he has been part of such a resistance, most notably during the Emergency days when he acted as the protagonist in P.A. Backer's *Kabani Nadi Chuvamappol* (1975). He feels that even if an Emergency were to be declared in the present days, there might not be strong protests as back then, as conformism rules the roost.

"Even much of our new generation cinema reflects this conformism, where life is all happy and beautiful. There is no critique of anything. The idea is to conform," he says.

Yet, he pins his hope this election on the first-time voters, to see whether they will get caught and travel with this tide or whether they stand on their own. Would he make a film set in the past five years? "Like many others, I cannot announce in advance what my next film would be, as I don't have much of a financial backing."



ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

Battle of the 'queens' for Gauhati seat

Oja and Sharma are the top contenders

RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI

The two top contenders for the Gauhati parliamentary constituency are women, and both are "queens" in their own right.

The BJP overlooked three-time MP Bijoya Chakravarty to field Queen Oja here. Her Congress rival is Bobbeeta Sharma, who was crowned the first Miss Northeast pageant in 1988.

"That crown was by fluke. I did not know it was a beauty contest. I had represented Assam in the Autumn Festival of Meghalaya government had organised that year," Ms. Sharma says.

"I would rather be the *praja* [subject] of the people, the real kings and queens in a healthy democracy."

Ms. Oja, who became the Mayor of Guwahati for two years in 1996, has a similar view. "This Queen too wants to be the servant of the people, not a queen," she says.

The two "queens" have a few things in common. Their political journey began in 1985 with Ms. Sharma joining the Congress and Ms. Oja joining the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) after taking part in the anti-foreigner Assam Agitation as an All Assam Students' Union activist.



Bobbeta Sharma, left, and Queen Oja.

Ms. Sharma, a postgraduate who taught history for some time in a Guwahati college, has better educational qualifications than Ms. Oja. The latter claimed to have cleared Class 12, but in a "corrected" affidavit said she did not.

"Let alone the Lok Sabha election, she is not qualified to contest the panchayat election if one adheres to a 2018 law brought by the Sarbananda Sonowal government that says the minimum qualification of a candidate must be Class 12 or equivalent," former Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi says.

The BJP, though, is not worried as they feel Ms. Oja has the ability to ensure the development of the constituency.

The Congress hopes Ms. Sharma's popularity as a film and television personality, and the changes she brought about as Chairperson of the Assam State Film Finance and Development Corporation during 2005-06 would stand her in good stead.

POLL POURRI

Mamata flays EC observer



KOLKATA Within 24 hours of Election Commission's special observer Ajay Nayak's comment that the law and order situation has deteriorated in the State, Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee said in Nadia on Sunday that he was working "to help the BJP." Mr. Nayak said on Saturday that the situation in Bengal could be compared to that of Bihar a decade ago. "People have elected this government in a democratic way. However, the BJP is sending its people here to administer ... the Central government is trying to run a parallel government," she said.

Lalwani replaces Mahajan

INDORE The BJP on Sunday announced Shankar Lalwani as its candidate for the Indore Lok Sabha seat, a party stronghold held since 1989 by senior leader and Lok Sabha Speaker Sumitra Mahajan. Ms. Mahajan, who turned 76 in April, had announced on April 5 that she would not contest the election, apparently in keeping with the BJP's reported diktat that leaders above the age of 75 opt out of electoral politics. Mr. Lalwani is from the Sindhi community and is making his Lok Sabha poll debut. He is pitted against the Congress' Pankaj Sanghvi. PTI



'SP-BSP will ally with Cong'

KAIMGANJ

Emphasising the inevitability of a post-election alliance between the Congress and the SP-BSP-RLD combine, senior Congress leader Salman Khurshid says the Uttar Pradesh alliance would

have no choice but to forge a tie-up with his party after the election results. Mr. Khurshid, former chief of the Congress State unit, said the party was "well placed" in the State as people are getting disenchanted with the alternatives, both regional and national. PTI

Take my son to task: Nath

DHANORA

Tear my son's clothes if he does not deliver, says Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Kamal Nath as he campaigns for his son Nakul in Chhindwara. "Nakul is not here today but he will serve you. I have given him the responsibility. Take him to task and tear his clothes if he does not deliver," the 72-year-old Congress leader told the locals. He was speaking at an election rally on Saturday in Dhanora village which comes under the Amarwada assembly seat, about 65 km from Chhindwara district headquarters. "We will start a new journey and create history," he told the locals. PTI



Polling put off in Odisha seat

BHUBANESWAR

Election to the Patkura Assembly constituency in Odisha's Kendrapara district has been adjourned following the death of Biju Janata Dal candidate Bed Prakash Agarwala. The Chief Electoral Officer had informed the Election Commission that the Returning Officer had adjourned the election schedule in accordance with the relevant clause in the Representation of the People Act, 1951. The election was scheduled for April 29. There were 10 candidates in the fray.

Adityanath takes a jibe at Rahul

LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday accused Congress president Rahul Gandhi of fooling the country with his "fake name", and said he was known as "Raul Vinci" in Britain and Italy. The accusation follows a complaint filed by Independent candidate Dhruv Lal in the Amethi Lok Sabha constituency about alleged discrepancies in the Congress leader's election affidavit, including non-disclosure of a company registered in the U.K. in the name of "Raul Vinci". The Congress's Amethi unit chief Yogendra Misra said the objections would be countered on Monday. No central leader or spokesperson has reacted to the charge. PTI



'One Note, One Vote' campaign

HATKANANGALE

In the Hatkanangale constituency in Maharashtra, Raju Shetti, MP and farmer leader, collects cash from voters under his 'One Note, One Vote' campaign. He asks voters, who are

predominantly farmers, to give him their vote and also any one currency note of the denomination of their choice to help him represent them in Parliament. According to Shetti's aide, all the funds collected under the campaign are accounted for and its details are submitted to the Election Commission. PTI

