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The largest election on Earth

Adam Roberts DELHI

India's vote will produce more fragmentation

It will be big, noisy and inconclusive. India's general election, probably in May, will involve an electorate of 800m, with potentially 150m first-timers. The campaigning will run for eight weeks, amid an electric atmosphere, and feature rallies, parades, bunting and gaudy posters, screaming television shows, and politicians doling out goodies and bribes. The cost: billions of rupees. Prepare for a shortage of banknotes.

The Congress party will not win—pundits debate mostly how far it can fall—but will claim one achievement. The prime minister, Manmohan Singh, will somehow have managed to complete a second five-year term. With the government knocked by scandal, a slowing economy (GDP growth has sunk below 5%) and disloyal coalition allies, the general election could easily have come much earlier.

Last time, in 2009, Mr Singh was an asset. Now, especially in cities, voters see him as weak and indecisive. He may campaign beside Sonia Gandhi. But it is her son, Rahul Gandhi, who will be projected as leader, though the younger fellow's chances look slight.

Rural voters, still the majority, should prove more loyal. The poor like Congress's big push on welfare, with subsidised rations of wheat and rice for 800m people, and new payments to bank accounts. A land law gives small farmers more rights, though it appals investors. And a deal to split a big southern state, Andhra Pradesh, could cheer voters in Telangana, a part of it.

Congress still has its strengths, not least its skill in building coalitions after elections. It remains India's only truly national party. Where voters are spooked by religious clashes, or come to resent a local strongman, Congress is the default beneficiary. It will probably muster a modest but not dreadful haul, perhaps 110-120 of the 543 seats being contested.

But the main running will come from the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Its frontman is Gujarat's chief minister, Narendra Modi, whom surveys regularly show to be India's most popular politician. Controversial and ambitious, he projects himself as the strong

leader many crave. The country's press and booming social media are fascinated. If India had an American-style presidential system, he would be a likely winner.

Mr Modi's 12-year rule of Gujarat, a prosperous state much loved by business, suggests he could get an uncertain India moving again by shaking civil servants, taking decisions, tackling corruption and working on rotten infrastructure. He talks more of creating wealth than of redistributing it. Investors, Hindu nationalists and India's diaspora strongly favour him.

Others are less sure. He has failed to explain his

2014 IN BRIEF

Asia overtakes North America to become the continent with the most millionaires



Modi operandi

part in the 2002 Gujarati riots, when over 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were massacred. Many see him as a Hindu chauvinist; others point to the limited progress of the Gujarati poor, women and minorities under his rule. His skills in coalition-building are unproven. In 2013 a notable BJP ally, Nitish Kumar of Bihar, walked away from him in protest.

One fear is Hindu-Muslim tension during the campaign

Mr Modi would need a thumping win, with nearly 200 seats, to attract enough allies to make him prime minister. But southern, eastern and north-eastern voters are unconvinced.

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Nothing to loos but your chains

Adam Roberts DELHI

Needed: a toilet revolution

Of the many splendid galleries and historical sites in Delhi, India's capital, none quite compares to the eccentric brilliance of the International Toilet Museum. In 2014 it marks 20 years since its official opening. In November it will play host to a global conference on toilets and sanitation. It is worth a tour.

Ideally your guide should be Bindeshwar Pathak, a genial 70-year-old toilet enthusiast, who describes himself as "a missionary of sanitation" and heads Sulabh International, a large NGO that also runs the site. Assorted contraptions on display could make your head spin: solar-powered

Even as India trumpets planned space missions, it fails to build toilets

solid-waste incinerators; waterless flushers; cooking stoves powered by biogas; human-sized statues made of plastic-coated excreta.

Most striking of the lot, however, is a photograph of a Harappan water closet. A modern-looking toilet, with piped water, it was found in the nearby Indus Valley. The civilisation that built it existed 4,500 years ago.

Every Indian policymaker should get a copy of the picture:

the world's first toilet. For even as the country trumpets planned space missions, it fails to build good loos today. By 2015 India had pledged, as a Millennium Development Goal, to get half its people proper sanitation. Short of a miracle in the coming year, it will fail. "We are trying



Better than bog standard

to go to Mars, yet we have no money for public health," complains Mr Pathak.

It sounds unkind to say it, but India has an immense problem with bad hygiene. The 2011 census noted that 4,861 towns and cities lack even a partial sewerage network (forget about villages). Half of Indians are obliged to defecate in the open. As a result, polluted water spreads illnesses such as encephalitis and diarrhoea. Around 150,000 children will die from diarrhoea in India in 2014. Wretched sanitation is a big reason why so many Indians, despite sufficient calories, are stunted and wasted from malnutrition.

Official schemes to support lavatories do some good. If you plan to build one, a subsidy of around 9,900 rupees (\$160) exists. But corruption and inefficiency mean the money is hard to get. Worse, there is little prospect of proper town planning and city-wide sewerage, let alone enough treatment plants. So India's sacred rivers will become an even bigger threat to public health.

NGOs can help. In 2014 the Gates Foundation will unveil a range of "waterless toilets" for India's cities. Rising aspirations of Indian consumers may speed up progress too. The press occasionally runs stories of women refusing to wed unless their fiancés first provide a toilet in their home. Politicians scent an opportunity: Narendra Modi (see previous story) has suggested that toilets may be more important than temples. It is a problem India should get on and flush out much faster. ■

2014 IN BRIEF

Liverpool Football Club opens its first academy in India, in the city of Pune



► In populous north India the main battleground will be Uttar Pradesh (UP). There the BJP needs huge gains on the 15% of votes it drew in state elections in 2012.

Mr Modi himself hopes to stand in a constituency in Lucknow, the state capital. One fear is Hindu-Muslim tension during the campaign. In 2013 an upsurge in communal violence left dozens dead in the state. Such clashes in theory benefit the BJP by getting Hindu voters into its fold, but Muslim voters turn to rivals.

Fragmentation bombs

The state matters, first, because it is huge: with 207m people, it is more populous than Brazil. (Note to India's next prime minister: it's time to split up UP.) In addition, its politics reflect a big national trend, one that hinders both Congress and the BJP: regional parties are getting mightier.

Mani Shankar Aiyar, a veteran Congress leader, sees

pain ahead for both big parties, in Uttar Pradesh and the country as a whole. "Neither will cover themselves in glory," he says. Instead he expects dominance by Jayaram Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu, Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal, Mr Kumar in Bihar, and Mayawati and Mulayam Singh in Uttar Pradesh. Why is this a problem? None has wider appeal. "Each is unbeatable in one area, but go a few yards and they can't get a seat."

That is a recipe for fragmented politics and "third front" coalitions of smaller parties. In the 1990s minority governments with keen reformers in their midst helped open up the economy. But such governments typically survive for only a year or two. Mr Gandhi may welcome a spell in opposition when he can sweep oldies from Congress's high ranks. Equally, Mr Modi could get a tighter grip on the BJP. Beyond that, a coalition government means preparing sooner rather than later for the next electoral circus. ■