

Elections in India's poorest state a test for Modi's party

Bihar to vote as leader faces growing domestic criticism, tariffs pressure

BY SUPRIYA KUMAR

NEW DELHI — Millions of people in the eastern Indian state of Bihar will begin voting Thursday in the country's largest state election of the year, a closely watched political test for Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The vote falls at a tense time for Modi, 75, and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Economic pressures have intensified, with 50 percent U.S. tariffs threatening to destabilize India's economy and deepen existing inequalities. The prime minister's once-warm relationship with President Donald Trump began to sour after India's military confrontation with Pakistan in the spring, and sank to new lows after the White House lashed out at India for purchasing Russian oil. Opposition leaders have sought to cast Modi, now in his third term, as a weakened

leader, both at home and abroad.

"There's no doubt that right now it's a period of particular fragility for the prime minister," said Gilles Verniers, a political analyst and researcher at the Center for International Studies at Sciences Po university in Paris. The electorate is concerned about the country's widening wealth gap, Verniers said, particularly in rural areas, which are still blighted by high rates of poverty and unemployment.

Those issues will be front and center in Bihar, India's poorest state, where more than a third of households live on a little over \$2 a day, according to a 2023 state survey. Despite recent gains, infrastructure remains a critical weakness; schools and hospitals are underfunded. Each year, hundreds of thousands of Biharis, increasingly unable to sustain themselves in farming, leave their homes to work low-wage jobs in other parts of India.

The state is also marked by deep-rooted caste divisions that have long shaped its politics. The 2023 survey found nearly two-thirds of residents, or 63 percent, belong to what the government

calls "backward classes" due to their historic marginalization. Dalits, who occupy the lowest rung of Hinduism's hierarchical social system, make up 19 percent of the population; upper castes account for just 15 percent.

The BJP, widely seen by analysts as drawing much of its support from India's upper castes, has struggled to gain an independent foothold in Bihar, relying instead on regional alliances — particularly with the Janata Dal (United), which it partnered with to form a coalition government after the state's last election in 2020.

Voting begins Thursday across half of Bihar's 243 constituencies, with the rest set to vote Tuesday. Results are expected by Nov. 16.

Despite the BJP's decade-long dominance in national politics, the party has often faced stiffer resistance at the state level, failing to form the government in 11 of the 31 state and union territory elections held between 2020 and 2024. In eight others, it has formed a government with allied parties.

But the party has proved resili-ent. After suffering a setback in

national elections last year, the BJP went on to win several key state contests. Political analysts, however, noticed a shift, with state campaigns relying less on the image of Modi as a global statesman.

"What the 2024 national election showed is that there is a fair amount of anti-incumbency that is starting to accrue," said Neelanjan Sircar, a political scientist and associate professor at Ahmedabad University. Now, he said, "Modi is playing less of a role in state elections than he did pre-2024, and we see that even in Bihar."

The campaign has centered largely on local concerns. Competing welfare pledges dominate the race, with both sides promising cash transfers to women, a now-decisive voting bloc. Jobs, too, remain a top issue, particularly among younger voters struggling to find steady work.

The BJP-led alliance has sought to remind Biharis of the corruption and lawlessness that marked the opposition's decade in power. It has also returned to a familiar playbook — seeking to unite Hindu voters by portraying India's

minority Muslims as illegal immigrants from neighboring Nepal and Bangladesh.

Speaking in September in Purnea, in eastern Bihar, a region with a significant Muslim population, Modi warned of what he called a "demographic crisis."

"People in Bihar, Bengal, Assam and many other states are deeply worried about the safety of their sisters and daughters," he said. "This is Modi's guarantee. Action will be taken against infiltrators."

Analysts question whether such messaging will resonate in a state where caste, not religion, has historically shaped political and social divides — and where economic stagnation is top of mind for most voters.

"As Modi was coming to power, the economic narrative was equally strong," Sircar said. As that message has become less potent for the BJP, he said, "all you have left is the dog whistle."

Citing the threat of "illegal infiltration," India's Electoral Commission ordered a sweeping and controversial revision of Bihar's voter rolls in the summer. Officials were tasked with verifying the citizenship of 80 million vot-

ers and uploading proof within a month — a process marked by chaos and confusion.

Critics warned that the new documentation requirements risked disenfranchising millions of poor voters who lacked formal papers and who have, traditionally, supported the opposition. The updated voter list, released Sept. 30, had 6.5 million fewer names.

If the BJP is able to form a government, Sircar said, "even by a comfortable margin, there will be concerns that the election wasn't exactly fair, whether or not it actually was."

Despite disaffection with the ruling party, analysts say the BJP-JD(U) alliance still holds structural advantages, while the opposition Rashtriya Janata Dal-Congress front remains fragmented and ideologically adrift.

From welfare schemes to redistribution, the opposition has failed to distinguish its message from that of the BJP, Verniers said, and "they also share an unwillingness to delve into structural reforms." Many voters, he predicted, may reason that "if it's all the same, [they] might as well choose the bigger, more powerful party."