

# India sets starting date for six weeks of voting

JOHN REED — NEW DELHI

The starting gun for campaigning in the world's largest democracy was fired on Saturday after the Election Commission of India announced an April 19 date for the first phase of voting.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the strong favourite to win the lower house vote and be re-elected to a third five-year term at the head of his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party.

Voting is to take place in staggered fashion over more than six weeks in seven phases across states and territories in the world's most populous country, concluding with a final round on June 1. Votes are set to be counted on June 4.

"It is our promise to deliver a national election in a manner that will add to our global shine and remain a beacon for electoral democracies across the world,"

Rajiv Kumar, India's chief election commissioner, said. Kumar added that in a year in which more than five dozen nations would be voting, India's elections would be a "pole star" in terms of both "quantity and quality".

About 968mn Indians will be quali-

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is expected to be re-elected to a third five-year term in the national poll



fied to vote, including some 19mn first-time voters aged 18 and 19 and about 197mn voters in their 20s.

Modi's BJP has spoken of increasing its majority in the 543-member lower house from the 303 seats it won in the 2019 election to as many as 370, or 400 together with its political allies.

His opposition, led by the Indian National Congress, has joined forces with more than two dozen other left-of-centre and regional parties in a fractious electoral alliance. But Modi's opponents have complained of built-in disadvantages in a country where the BJP has the upper hand in fundraising and strong sway over media and social networks.

Last week, Indians were debating the funding of political parties after the election commission published information on "electoral bonds" on orders of the Supreme Court. India's top court banned the opaque funding mechanism last month.

The data showed the BJP was by far the biggest beneficiary of the scheme and companies operating in heavily regulated sectors such as lotteries, construction and mining were among the biggest donors, lending credence to critics' claims it favoured the ruling party.