

# Modi faces shake-up in India election after rival freed from jail

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NEW DELHI

The dramatic release of one of India's top opposition leaders has shaken up the final stretch of the election campaign, giving a much-needed boost to Narendra Modi's rivals in their quest to unseat the prime minister next month.

Arvind Kejriwal, the chief minister of Delhi and head of the Aam Aadmi party, was released on bail this month, seven weeks after he was arrested by India's economic crime agency on allegations that he masterminded a scheme to siphon money from liquor licence grants in the capital.

Kejriwal, who has denied the allegations, immediately returned to the campaign trail, holding back-to-back rallies in poll-bound states such as Haryana, Punjab, and Delhi, which votes today.

The 55 year-old former tax official has railed against Modi, accusing the prime minister of weaponising corruption probes to discredit rivals and deflect attention from how inflation and high unemployment have hurt low-income Indians during his decade in power.

"Did you miss me?" Kejriwal asked a

crowd packed into narrow alleys at a recent stop in a working-class Delhi neighbourhood. "I am a small man with a small party . . . so why did the prime minister put me in jail? It was to stop the work that I am doing."

The marathon election, which began in April and is taking place in phases until June 1, is widely expected to return Modi's Bharatiya Janata party to power for a third term in charge of the world's most populous country. Results will be announced on June 4.

While the BJP remained the favourite, analysts said Kejriwal's release had helped invigorate the multi-party opposition alliance known as INDIA, which includes AAP, the Indian National Congress and dozens of regional parties, as they hope for a shock upset.

Kejriwal's return "has definitely given a boost to the opposition campaign — the question is whether it will change the outcome or not", said Rahul Verma, at the New Delhi-based think-tank the Center for Policy Research.

"It doesn't seem like a cakewalk for the BJP as it did, say, in mid-March," he added. "There is serious anxiety in the bottom half of the social pillar, with

unemployment, price rises and not seeing very bright prospects on the economic front, [from which] the opposition might be benefiting."

Exit and opinion polls are banned during the election, so there is little data to indicate who is in the lead, but turnout through the first five phases of the polls has slightly trailed the 2019 election, with the opposition claiming voters are disaffected with the ruling party.

On the campaign trail, Modi has hailed what he calls a "wave of support" for the BJP, playing up his development record and doubling down on divisive



Aam Aadmi leader Arvind Kejriwal has pointed to the party's record

rhetoric towards India's Muslim minority. He has also dismissed the INDIA alliance as "totally discredited" by corruption allegations. Other senior members of Kejriwal's party have been jailed while another opposition chief minister, Hemant Soren from Jharkhand, was arrested earlier this year on corruption allegations.

Kejriwal, who is out on interim bail until June 2, has called the allegations a sign of desperation by the BJP. The AAP, which was founded as an anti-corruption party in 2012 and controls the state governments of Delhi and Punjab, has also touted its record of building neighbourhood health clinics and revamping the capital's school system.

"Why am I at fault? Because I built good schools and good hospitals for your kids?" Kejriwal told the rally.

His message has resonated with voters such as Mohammad Abid, 52, the owner of a motor-parts shop. "People are fed up of the last 10 years of the Modi government," said Abid. "The whole country wants to see a change."

Others, however, said they have little doubt that Modi would return, whether they want it or not.