

# BJP's game plan for 2024

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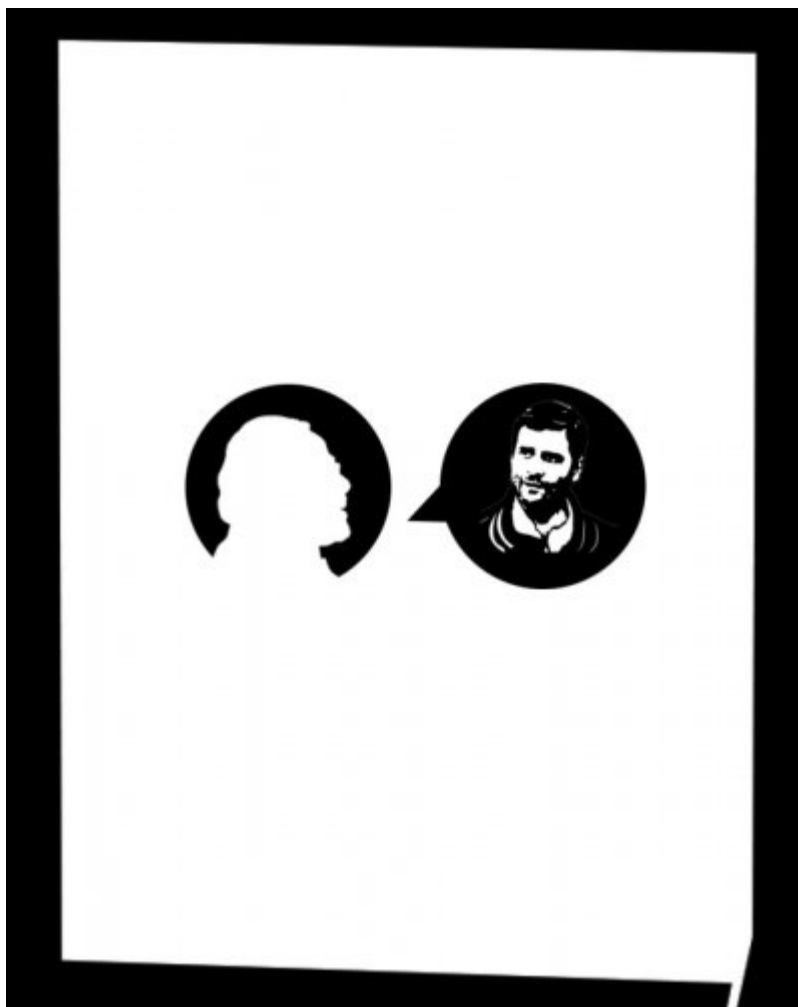
## The disqualification of Rahul Gandhi as MP may be part of a plan to build him up as the sole rival to Modi

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A lot's been said over the past week by political commentators on the possible ramifications of the sentencing of Rahul Gandhi in a defamation case that led to his disqualification as an MP.

Two excellent pieces by Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Christopher Jaffrelot warrant closer look. Mehta argues how the Modi-Shah government – “a regime that is paranoid and full of impunity” is “veering towards a full-blown tyranny” and has “overreached” in attacking the Opposition, harassing civil society, suppressing any form of dissent-protest, and can be seen as “harbingers of a full-blown system of rule where all the interlocking parts add up to the one objective of tyrannical rule: To create pervasive fear”.

Jaffrelot views the current state of political transition in India as part of a ‘new sequence’ that has started. According to him, the “political neutralisation” of Rahul Gandhi became a necessity for the BJP to undertake post the “success of Bharat Jodo Yatra” and his remarks on the state of Indian democracy made abroad.

Yes, the BJP may have “overreached” in its attack on Rahul Gandhi. There is also almost no previous case of any MP being disqualified from the Lok Sabha on ‘defamation’ or ‘slander’ grounds. But there is still an electoral logic behind it all.

First, it appears to be an open challenge thrown by the BJP to Rahul Gandhi in affirming the “class of political leader he really is”. If he claims to really ‘fight’ the BJP on his own, he has to prove to what extent--and cost --he is willing to go from here onwards.

Street-fighter politicians like Mamata Banerjee or Sharad Pawar may not think twice about going to jail at such a provocation while throwing a punch or two back at the BJP, which would only enhance their popularity.

AAP’s Manish Sisodia has been jailed, and his party made a lot of news showing how the BJP was attacking the AAP and its leaders by weaponising central agencies.

Rahul Gandhi has appealed in court against his conviction and has secured bail. But if his legal fight fails, is he prepared to go to jail and take the fight against the BJP from there, perhaps driving his party closer together from within and with others in the Opposition outside?

The pre-independence movement anchored by the Indian National Congress, including Rahul Gandhi’s own family, saw many leaders go to jail, fighting on against the British Raj even from within prison.

The personal popularity of leaders matters more than anything else in Indian politics, particularly at this point when there is no national challenger to Narendra Modi.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra surely helped Rahul Gandhi redefine his ‘personal image’ to the larger masses, positioned him against the BJP, in contrast to his earlier image as a dynast with little or no charisma amongst voters. But the litmus test of his ‘personal popularity’ contest against the likes of Modi is yet to come.

Using the current crisis as an opportunity to stand against a 'tyrannical' BJP, uniting other opposition leaders (like Kejriwal, Mamata, Pawar) to present a synchronised Opposition front, will be Rahul Gandhi's main challenge.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra may have helped the Congress party to appear united, but the Opposition at large remains a set of incoherent, scattered actors against the BJP's electoral machine.

Second, perhaps this is why the BJP may continue to attack Rahul Gandhi in the months ahead, in a bid to promote the Congress alone as its principal rival in 2024. Electoral results from 2014 and 2019, as analysed by Neelanjan Sircar, et al., show how well the BJP 'strikes' against the Congress in any head-to-head electoral battle, particularly since 2014.

The electoral scenario (BJP vs Congress) now is very different from how it was between these two parties in the 1980s or 90s. Congress has failed to factor this into its electoral planning and political strategy. It is still invested in the vision of itself (alone) as the principal national opposition force to the BJP (something that electoral results show not to be the case). The BJP is only too happy to be invested in that vision.

As Sircar's work shows, in terms of Indian states, during national elections, there is a substantial regional variation in support for the BJP (vs Congress) in national elections and state elections.

In 2014, states like Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh saw BJP win 194 out of 213 contested seats -- a strike rate of 91% (vs Congress), and 69% of the total number of seats were won by the BJP. In AP, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, BJP won only 7 out of 101 seats it contested (strike rate of 7%) and won 2% of the total seats in these states.

The degree of power concentration for the BJP across a few electorally significant states is striking and greatly revealing of the structural fault-lines seen between itself and the Congress.

For the Congress, even in states like Andhra, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where the BJP doesn't do well, it would need the support of regional parties to win these big at a national level.

One can agree with Jaffrelot's broader argument that the current targeted attack against Rahul Gandhi presents itself as a 'turning point' in Indian politics -- as a run up to what may happen in the 2024 polls. Counterintuitively, one can say that this attack against Rahul Gandhi and Congress to rhetorically place them as the BJP's national opposition may actually work in favour of the BJP than against it in 2024, unless the Congress can put aside its 'ego' and learn to convene a national (opposition) front against the BJP that gives it an electoral dividend in states where the BJP's electoral hold and power is deep.

That will be Rahul Gandhi's and his party's main challenge going forward.

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