



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Can Indian farmers' protests derail PM Modi's hopes of winning a third term?



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi can comfortably wrap up his campaign during the next month or so and calmly expect a smooth victory for his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and his third term as prime minister.

Previous polling has continually demonstrated their unachievable ratings and a substantial difference from their competition. However, PM Modi and his party are far from calm ahead of the elections in April and May.

The government's conflict with numerous organised farmers has been ongoing for **over a month**, with no solution on the horizon. Even though the protesting farmers are not a political competitor to Modi and his ruling National Democratic Alliance, their pressure will have political consequences. It is only uncertain whether the consequences will be visible at the elections or after.

Heavy police forces prevented thousands of farmers from entering New Delhi last week, where they planned to demonstrate and demand higher prices for agricultural products.

Since then, there has been no conflict between the government and farmers. However, tensions over the unresolved disagreement build as elections near, creating concerns among Modi's BJP of unexpected developments harming its electoral performance.

A replay of the 2021 protest

The protests started in the middle of February, with a clear desire to be associated with similar large protests that lasted almost a year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As in the past, farmers, primarily from the northern provinces where agriculture dominates, continue to demand guaranteed prices for everything they produce, not only wheat and rice, as is the case today. They feel that the government played a trick on them then, as their situation has only worsened.

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The government has been conducting talks with the protesters since February. However, the farmers did not accept Delhi's proposal to guarantee minimum prices for some products for 5 years.

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Modi's rating is not dropping

Polls have long predicted the Prime Minister's party will win by a landslide. These figures have not declined since the farmers have been on strike, which the BJP might consider as a sign that the farmers' storm will not dampen optimism ahead of the elections.

Last January, **polls showed** Modi's centre-right coalition could count on about 335 of 543 directly elected seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house). That is about the current level of strength for the ruling NDA, which has approximately 350 seats.

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According to one of them, the NDA alliance could hope for a result between 358 and even 398 seats in the parliament, while according to the other, Modi's BJP could have between 333 and 363 seats.

In any case, this level is unattainable for the divided opposition lists, and the trend should

continue in the next month or 2 as long as the campaign lasts.

The largest electorate in India

However, the ruling party and its establishment fear the unresolved conflict with the farmers, given that they are the largest voting group in the country.

More than 45% of India's population relies on agriculture for survival, and even though it is a politically diverse group, its social needs make it a political element that the government must consider.

In addition to their numbers, farmers also belong to a socially disadvantaged group, given that the average income of an agricultural household is only about \$150 per month, below the national average.

The rule of Narendra Modi in the previous 2 terms favoured the industrial sector as the engine of development of the Indian economy, particularly by stimulating high technologies.

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While such an approach resulted in consistent growth (more than 7%) and propelled India to the forefront of the global economy, agriculture remained on the side-lines.

Food production remained state-regulated, from seed acquisition and delivery to sales. However, the economic position of producers has not improved in the highly controlled and bureaucratized economy.

At the same time, disruptions in the global food market, particularly energy, made production more expensive.

Also, for the past 3 years, India has been hit by severe and unexpected monsoons at a critical

time for harvesting and protracted periods of drought, all of which have harmed agricultural producers' economic strength.

Political pragmatism of protest

The Delhi government is particularly concerned about the farmers' protests, which have the ability to exert significant pressure. They were ignited immediately before the elections at the most inconvenient time for the government, which speaks of the very pragmatic strategy of the demonstrators.

Farmers acted similarly during previous protests in 2020-2021, with actions planned ahead of state elections in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, forcing Modi's government to make concessions and withdraw laws that farmers had opposed.

Farmers expect this situation to repeat itself today and for the government, under pressure from the impending general election, to be more accommodating to their requests.



Modi's government must compromise to survive in this race against time, as it cannot ignore that it is confronting the largest demographic group

Last week, the government demonstrated its resolve to act on farmers' demands by preventing their arrival in New Delhi using police forces, arrests, and a blockage approximately 200 kilometres from the city.

However, it also risked the expansion of protests because repression of farmers and their social demands could incite farmers and

spread disturbances throughout the country.

The authorities would undoubtedly oppose the radicalisation of protests in the run-up to the elections, particularly any further conflicts between police and demonstrators.

Modi's government must compromise to survive in this race against time, as it cannot ignore that it is confronting the largest demographic group.

Even if there are no concessions till the elections and the predicted third consecutive term, the next Narendra Modi government must prioritise addressing farmers' demands.