

## 2024 is no longer a 'done deal' for BJP. Bihar coup has changed India's political landscape

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Thinking of India's electoral map as three strips shows BJP only has 'dominance' over one. With no NDA left now, except in name, 2024 will be a challenge.

The history of India is essentially a history of Bihar", announced 'comrade' Daleep Singh, my Gandhian-Socialist colleague, as soon as he heard about Nitish Kumar's decision to dump Bharatiya Janata Party and join hands with Rashtriya Janata Dal to form a new government. Enjoying his kite flying, he continued: "Ever since the days of Buddha, every major upheaval in this country has started in Bihar. Today, Nitish has begun an upheaval that would result in the end of the Modi government." I did not wish to quarrel with him. Hope is a scarce commodity in the secular camp these days. Besides, the gadfly that he is, comrade sahib does not expect you to believe in his grand theorisation. He wants to provoke you into thinking. He had succeeded.

Indeed, the political coup in Bihar has changed the national political landscape. Just when 2024 was perceived and presented as a "done deal", just when the Opposition's shoulders were drooping after the presidential and vice-presidential elections, Bihar has thrown the game wide open. Just as it showed the way in the 1970s with the Bihar movement, setting the stage for a new phase in India's history culminating in the electoral revolution of 1977; just as Bihar inaugurated and led the Mandal era in Indian politics in the 1990s; Bihar appears to be showing the way once again. The slogan of the Bihar movement, "Andhakar me ek prakash—Jayaprakash, Jayaprakash", now carries a new meaning with Bihar emerging as the silver lining in the dark clouds that engulf the Republic of India on the eve of its diamond jubilee.

Am I making too much of one party switching sides in one state? Allow me to lapse back into my psephological self and do some elementary arithmetic.

### 2024 was always going to be difficult for BJP

Let us think of India's electoral map as three strips. The first—the coastal belt—runs from West Bengal to Kerala. Add a few states like Punjab and Kashmir and you have a region where BJP is not the dominant political force. This region has 190 Lok Sabha seats. Last time the BJP won only 36 seats here (42, if you include its allies). Of these, 18 came from Bengal, where the BJP would struggle to retain even 5 after the post-assembly election meltdown. Allowing for marginal gains in Telangana to be offset by some losses in Odisha, the BJP could have ended up with around 25 seats in this region. It would need to pick up about 250 seats out of the remaining 353. Quite a task, you would agree.

Much of the BJP's seats come from the regions it dominates—the north-west, comprising the Hindi heartland; minus Bihar and Jharkhand; plus Gujarat. The BJP has swept this region, characterised by a straight fight between BJP and its major rival (mostly Congress, except in Uttar Pradesh) both in 2014 and 2019, winning 182 (including 3 for small partners) out of the total 203 seats last time. Let us make a generous assumption here that the BJP continues to dominate this region, that BJP suffers only marginal losses here due to a small swing in states like Haryana, Himachal, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Even a partial revival of the Congress would upset this assumption. Even so, let us assume that BJP still wins 150 seats here.

Now it needs another 100 seats from the remaining 150 in the remaining 'middle belt' comprising Karnataka, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Bihar (add Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Manipur) where the BJP faces a divided opposition. In 2019, the BJP won 130 seats here, 88 on its own. This is where the BJP allies made a big difference: Shiv Sena won 18 seats while the Janata Dal (United) and Lok Janshakti Party secured 16 and 6 respectively. It is already clear that this region is going to be the BJP's Achilles heel this time. With Karnataka slipping away, a repeat of 25 out of 28 looks highly improbable in the state. This could be halved if the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular) come to an understanding (Deve Gowda's rushing to welcome Nitish Kumar's switch could be a straw in the wind). The fall of Uddhav Thackeray government in Maharashtra has, inadvertently, cemented the Maha Vikas Aghadi as an electoral coalition in 2024. If so, there is no way the BJP-Shinde duo can repeat the BJP-Shiv Sena tally of 41 out of 48 seats in 2019. If we assume that the BJP does nearly as well in Assam and hill states as it did last time, we are still looking at a loss of at least 10 seats for the BJP, and about 25 if you count the allies as well.

### **Bihar makes all the difference**

We have now accounted for 503 seats in the Lok Sabha. If we go by this realistic guesstimate, the BJP cannot possibly win more than 235 of these, even with its present dominance.

This is why Bihar matters. The BJP would need to pick up all the 40 seats in Bihar—37 out of 40 to be precise—to touch the majority mark in this scenario. It achieved this feat last time, thanks to its alliance with Nitish Kumar and the late Ram Vilas Paswan. The National Democratic Alliance bagged all but one seat in Bihar: 17 for BJP, 16 for JD(U) and 6 for the LJP. A repeat was going to be hard. But Nitish Kumar's switch has made it impossible. Far from a sweep for the BJP, you cannot rule out a reverse sweep for the RJD-JD(U) led combine that is likely to include the Left and the Congress.

Let us understand the electoral arithmetic of Bihar a little more closely. If the Nitish-Tejaswi Yadav alliance holds till the Lok Sabha elections, we are likely to witness a Mahagathbandhan (RJD+JDU+Congress+Left) vs. NDA (BJP+LJP) contest. A look at the last few elections, especially the assembly election of 2015 that serves as closest parallel, gives us a fair sense of the electoral strength of each party. The BJP has

emerged as the largest vote catcher: its own vote share is around 20 per cent in assembly and 25 per cent in the parliamentary elections. The vote share for the RJD was 23 per cent in the last assembly elections but falls a few points in the parliamentary elections. The JD(U) claims about 15 per cent in either election. Other parties have a small range of vote share: about 7-9 per cent for Congress, about 4-5 per cent for the Left, mainly the Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) and about 6 per cent for the LJP.

So, on a rough calculation, the Mahagathbandhan would be placed around 45 per cent vote share, compared to well below 35 per cent for the NDA (assuming that the BJP would go back to LJP and rope in a few smaller parties). If we look at the social composition of these two coalitions, it could become the agda vs. pichhda (forward vs. backward) electoral contest that can have only one outcome in Bihar: a landslide in favour of the camp of the ‘backwards’. That would turn the tables completely on the BJP. If its opponents were fighting for survival in the last Lok Sabha elections, the BJP could struggle to win a handful of seats in the upcoming one.

### **BJP faces an uphill task now**

Come back to the sum total of the middle belt with its 150 seats. Assuming that the BJP and its allies may not go beyond 5-10 seats in Bihar, the overall tally for the BJP in this region may fall from 88 to just 65 (or, more dramatically, from 130 to 75, for the BJP plus allies).

Now let us look at the national picture. If these back-of-the-envelope calculations make any sense, it is hard to see how the BJP’s national tally might cross 240, way off the 272 mark. This is the difference that a loss of at least 30 seats in Bihar would make.

Can the NDA allies make up the deficit? Well, there is no NDA left now, except in name. With Akalis gone, AIADMK split, Shiv Sena high jacked and now the JD(U) exit, there is nothing left in the NDA except some tiny parties in the Northeast or some splinters of its ex-allies. These may at best contribute 10-15 seats, not enough to take it to the magic number. The BJP’s policy of devouring its allies may have finally come home to roost.

Now comrade sahib was smiling with an I-told-you-so writ large on his toothless grin. I hastened to clarify: “I am not offering a poll forecast 21 months before the elections. That would be foolish. This elementary math tells us how a shift in Bihar can tip the national balance. Don’t go by the BJP’s bluster, 2024 is still heavily titled against the BJP. The BJP needs nothing short of another Balakot to retain its majority. Unless, of course, the Opposition gives it a walkover.”