This is the published version

Sarwal, Amit 2014, A view to lead India : who are the candidates?, The conversation, pp. 1-1

Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30065352

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2014, Conversation Media Group, published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives license.
India will go to the polls from April 5 to May 12 to choose between three party leaders for its next prime minister. The first is a seasoned politician and three-time chief minister, the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP, or Indian People’s Party) Narendra Modi. The second is a youth icon without experience in governance, Indian National Congress’ Rahul Gandhi. Finally, there is a former bureaucrat and utopian visionary who resigned from the post of chief minister, Arvind Kejriwal.

The main party players

The battle to form government is between party alliances: the United Progressive Alliance led by Congress, the National Democratic Alliance led by BJP, the Third Front led by the Communist parties, and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Although no party is expected to win an outright majority, political pundits are of the opinion that Congress, under Sonia Gandhi, is fast moving towards its worst defeat since 1947. The victory of the BJP with Modi as its prime ministerial candidate is clearly on the horizon.
Manmohan Singh

The outgoing prime minister, Manmohan Singh, once the celebrated architect of economic reforms and liberalisation, has today become a figure of ridicule. This is due to his perceived failure as an administrator and his silence over rampant scams and the corruption of his colleagues.

Singh purportedly sees himself as something of a Shakespearean tragic hero. He believes “history will be kinder to him than the contemporary media” despite the fact Indian people see him as “underachieving” for most of his 10-year rule.

The middle class holds the view that under his rule the poor remained poor and dependent on reckless government subsidies, while the rich have become even richer.

Rahul Gandhi

Singh has already made it clear that he is not running for prime minister for a third time. He has put his confidence in Rahul Gandhi, with his “outstanding credentials”, as Congress' prime ministerial candidate.

Gandhi, the fourth-generation member of the politically influential Nehru-Gandhi family, is currently vice-president of the Congress party and the next most important leader in the Congress after his mother Sonia.
Gandhi fought his last election from his family stronghold, Amethi in Uttar Pradesh, and has emerged as a shahzada (“prince”): a symbol of antiquated dynastic politics.

### Narendra Modi

Narendra Modi is the BJPs leader and the favourite to be India’s next prime minister. AAP

Click to enlarge

Narendra Modi, the three-time chief minister of “vibrant” Gujarat state and a former RSS pracharak (preacher), is still considered by many secularists a threat to India’s 180 million Muslims. That is because of his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots, for which he has been absolved by the Supreme Court panel.

The UK, the EU and the US have all boycotted Modi. Washington declared him persona non grata in 2005. However, in early 2014, after conceding Modi had high chances of winning the 16th Lok Sabha elections, the US reached out to Modi and started a process of bridge building.

The 2014 elections are being framed as a direct contest between Modi and Gandhi. Stories, short films and print ads about these two leaders are appearing in the national and regional dailies.

### Arvind Kejriwal

Amid the uproar over the two established players, a new entrant has emerged as a knight in a shining armour to rescue India’s “common man” from the old-school politicians and their parties. This new, highly educated and respected civil society-backed opponent, Arvind Kejriwal, and his AAP have made the 2014 elections interesting.
Kejriwal, who defeated Congress’ three-time chief minister Sheila Dikshit in the Delhi legislative elections last year, hopes to break the vicious Congress-BJP cycle. He promises to clean up the inefficient bureaucracy and offers an anti-corruption platform to the common people of India.

Kejriwal, one of the architects of the “Occupy” movement in India, is a naïve politician but a shrewd administrator who with the support of Congress ended up as Delhi’s seventh chief minister. Although he resigned in February 2014, he did “start something extraordinary in India”.

Politicians and intellectuals, who dismissed the AAP as another motley bunch of eccentrics fighting for the impossible, have now joined it in large numbers to bring in change.

Who’s the favourite?

The world is keenly watching the 2014 Indian elections. Also observing the elections are 295,362 people of Indian origin in Australia.

Indian diaspora community newspapers and magazines in Australia have started covering the elections and opinions seem to be echoing the voice of the subcontinent. Indians at home and in Australia are ready for change, development and the BJP.

Modi, despite the many faux pas on Indian history in his speeches, has the backing of big businesses and overseas investors. He has been successful in selling his vision or “idea of India”. His campaign is full of promises like empowering the poor, ensuring security for women, fast-paced urbanisation, developing bullet trains, improved health infrastructure and developing better international relations.

Irrespective of who wins, the choice in both India and among Indian-Australians largely matches the opinion polls. As the charismatic and self-assured darling of the corporate world, Modi is a clear favourite, followed closely by the anarchist “common man” Kejriwal. Gandhi, carrying the burden of incumbency and dynastic politics, does not appear to be in the picture.