



Battle For Gujarat

Congress has a lot to lose by putting up a tame fight in the state

It's Gandhinagar versus New Delhi. Virtually launching his assembly poll campaign Tuesday, chief minister Narendra Modi indicated the battle for Gujarat is no local contest. Brandishing the development card and claiming "the nation wants what Gujarat has", he signalled that his sights are set higher: a third successive term in the state which could propel his national touchdown. Tellingly he attacked the prime minister, dwelling on national issues like corruption and India's economy. That's another sign that his target is the Centre rather than the state Congress.

Evidently, the Congress won't bite the bait. Asked if Rahul Gandhi will campaign extensively, spokesperson Manish Tewari suggested that state elections are fought on local issues and the party's Gujarat unit is up to the task. Denting Modi's claims on development seems the Congress's priority. Much of that will involve telling voters that Modi inherited power in an intrinsically prosperous and entrepreneurial state, besides questioning how



broad-based and graft-free his model of "vikas" has been. The Congress will also hope to exploit factionalism within the state BJP, including its split with Keshubhai Patel whose newly floated outfit may prove nettlesome for Modi in Saurashtra.

But will the strategy of pitching Gujarat as a mere "local" match work? It's unlikely. The Congress has hardly nurtured local units and leaderships in states. Hence its over-reliance on the Nehru-Gandhis as campaigners. To now say that its Gujarat unit can take on Modi

without the galvanising support of poll mascots is lame. It creates the perception of a fight ceded, besides suggesting that Rahul – who led from the front in Bihar and UP – is being shielded. If Congress first family members are seen as avoiding risky poll terrain, their proclaimed commitment to promoting the party's interests and energising its organisational grass-roots will seem hollow.

The Congress can't afford to have its Gujarat campaign reflect the timidity and lack of decisiveness it's been exhibiting at the Centre. Its panicky resort to populism at the national level – consider quota-based promotions – also seems visible in Gujarat where it has promised sops like free rural plots and laptops for students. In a state like Gujarat, the discourse should instead be about empowerment via boosted healthcare and education and promotion of trade and industry. Nor should the party revert to soft Hindutva of the past, say, by playing down the issue of the 2002 riot cases. Clearly, the Congress has much to lose image-wise by mounting a tame fight in Gujarat. The BJP won't miss the chance to project that as a portent for 2014.