

## India Politics & Policy

# Narendra Modi strengthens hold on India as rival turns into ally

Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar jettisons partners and rejoins alliance with BJP



Nitish Kumar, chief minister of the Indian state of Bihar © Reuters

YESTERDAY by: Amy Kazmin in New Delhi

Narendra Modi further consolidated his political hold over India on Thursday as a leading opposition figure unexpectedly jettisoned his old partners to forge a political alliance with the prime minister's ruling Bharatiya Janata party.

The switch by Nitish Kumar, the Bihar chief minister who has a reputation for personal probity and quiet administrative efficiency, is a big coup for the BJP because it neutralises a credible rival to [Mr Modi](#) for the premiership ahead of national elections in 2019.

It is likewise a blow to opposition parties, including the enfeebled Congress party led by the

mother-son duo of Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, which harboured visions of mounting a united challenge to the BJP.

“It sends a strong signal for [2019](#),” said Gilles Verniers, a political scientist. “Whoever nurtures the hope of seeing a gathered opposition coalition against Narendra Modi, Nitish Kumar was the only name that came up as a possible leader for that.”

“His decision to go back with the BJP buries that idea,” Mr Verniers added.

In 2015 Mr Kumar and his Janata Dal United party led a “grand alliance” of weak opposition parties, including Congress, to a [stunning victory](#) over the BJP in state legislative assembly elections in Bihar, India’s third most populous state. Bihar accounts for 40 seats in the country’s 543-seat parliament.

Many opposition politicians saw the “[Bihar model](#)” as something they could attempt to replicate on a national scale.

But on Wednesday night Bihar’s grand alliance collapsed. Mr Kumar [resigned](#) as chief minister after weeks of tension with his coalition partner Lalu Prasad Yadav, whose son Tejashwi was serving as the deputy chief minister. Tejashwi Yadav had been accused of corruption, but he and his father refused Mr Kumar’s demand that he resign.

By Thursday morning Mr Kumar was being sworn in as Bihar’s chief minister once again, this time in a ruling alliance with Mr Modi’s BJP. Mr Gandhi, heir to India’s once politically dominant Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, tersely condemned the events as a “BJP conspiracy”.

But analysts say Mr Kumar’s switch probably reflects his calculation that Mr Modi and the BJP will be virtually unbeatable in the 2019 election, especially given the disarray in Congress under Mr Gandhi’s uninspiring leadership.

“To have a successful opposition coalition, you still need a strong national party at the heart of it and the Congress is not at all in a position of doing that,” said Mr Verniers. The BJP’s success in recent state elections in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, demonstrated that Congress had in fact become a [liability](#) to any party that allied with it, he said.

Ashutosh Varshney, a Brown University professor, agreed that Mr Kumar obviously had “no confidence in the potential viability of a grand opposition alliance even if it can be created”. But he said the Bihar chief minister’s “shock defection” could galvanise other regional parties battling the BJP in their states.

“It’s not clear whether it will kill the opposition alliance or provide it greater urgency,” Mr Varshney said.

Mr Kumar, who previously won accolades for his governance of what had been one of India’s poorest, most [lawless states](#), is not unfamiliar with the BJP. For many years his Janata Dal United party was allied with the BJP, including in several state governments in Bihar.

But Mr Kumar severed his ties with the party in 2013 over his distaste for Mr Modi, then Gujarat’s chief minister, after he was selected to lead the BJP’s 2014 national election campaign.

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