



| Brief |

Lengthy Indian Elections Present Cyber and Physical Threats

B-2024-04-18a

Classification: TLP:CLEAR

Criticality: HIGH

Intelligence Requirements: Government, Cybersecurity, Geopolitical

April 18, 2024

Scope Note

ZeroFox Intelligence is derived from a variety of sources, including—but not limited to—curated open-source accesses, vetted social media, proprietary data sources, and direct access to threat actors and groups through covert communication channels. Information relied upon to complete any report cannot always be independently verified. As such, ZeroFox applies rigorous analytic standards and tradecraft in accordance with best practices and includes caveat language and source citations to clearly identify the veracity of our Intelligence reporting and substantiate our assessments and recommendations. All sources used in this particular Intelligence product were **identified prior to 10:00 AM (EDT) on April 18, 2024**; per cyber hygiene best practices, caution is advised when clicking on any third-party links.

Brief

Executive Summary

India will hold a national parliamentary election from April 19 to June 1, with results expected on June 4. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is heavily favored to win a rare third term at the head of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Modi's pursuit of a landslide win against the fragmented opposition has led to accusations that he is intimidating political rivals and critics through the use of tax probes and legal cases. In the cyber realm, the election has been marked by the use of online influence campaigns and generative artificial intelligence (AI) to spur support for certain candidates. Several existing protest movements are unlikely to significantly interfere with the election but could spur heightened security and localized internet disruptions if they escalate during the drawn-out voting period.

High tensions between India and its major neighbors, China and Pakistan, will likely play out through online influence campaigns, election-related hacktivism, and cyber infiltration rather than through direct physical conflict. At the same time, insurgents in both the Jammu and Kashmir territory and India's forested central belt could seek to stage small-scale attacks on electoral infrastructure.

Background

India will hold a national general election from April 19 to June 1, with results expected on June 4. All 543 seats of the lower house of parliament, known as the Lok Sabha, are subject to the vote. Prime Minister Modi is seeking a third consecutive term, which—if

successful—would make him only the third Indian prime minister to remain in office that long. With nearly a billion eligible voters, the election is predicted to be the largest in history.

- Voting will take place in seven stages over more than six weeks, with only certain districts eligible to vote in each stage. The drawn-out election process could see issues related to physical security and election interference remain relevant throughout the voting period.
- Concurrent state legislature elections will be held in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Sikkim. An assortment of other states will hold concurrent by-elections (special elections) to fill empty state legislative seats.¹

Prime Minister Modi is heavily favored to retain the premiership. Recent opinion polls have placed his approval rating near 80 percent,²³ while his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) controls nearly two-thirds of state legislatures.⁴

- As recently as last November, BJP expanded its control to the states of Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, defeating incumbent governments headed by the main opposition Indian National Congress party (INC).⁵
- BJP is particularly popular in the heavily populated and poorer northern states that control a large number of legislative seats. It is less popular in the wealthier and less populous southern states of India, where INC and its allies have enjoyed recent success in state-level elections.
- Prime Minister Modi has stated his goal for the 2024 election is to capture at least 400 seats, up from the 346 currently controlled by BJP and its allies.⁶ This would

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[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2024/3/16/india-announces-election-2024-seven-numbers-to-unpack-worlds-biggest-vote](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/16/india-announces-election-2024-seven-numbers-to-unpack-worlds-biggest-vote)

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[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/india/pm-modi-most-popular-global-leader-with-78-approval-rating-morning-consult-survey/articleshow/107902214.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/pm-modi-most-popular-global-leader-with-78-approval-rating-morning-consult-survey/articleshow/107902214.cms)

³ [hXXps://www.pewresearch\[.\]org/global/2023/08/29/indians-views-of-modi-and-other-national-leaders/](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/08/29/indians-views-of-modi-and-other-national-leaders/)

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[hXXps://www.bloomberg\[.\]com/news/articles/2024-01-31/modi-s-party-expands-control-to-17-indian-states-ahead-of-polls](https://www.bloomberg[.]com/news/articles/2024-01-31/modi-s-party-expands-control-to-17-indian-states-ahead-of-polls)

⁵ [hXXps://www.npr.org/2023/12/04/1216886824/india-ruling-party-wins-elections](https://www.npr.org/2023/12/04/1216886824/india-ruling-party-wins-elections)

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[hXXps://www.livemint\[.\]com/politics/news/lok-sabha-elections-2024-pm-narendra-modi-assam-hope-trust-come-with-guarantee-in-2024-promises-free-ration-for-5-years-11713335955962.html](https://www.livemint[.]com/politics/news/lok-sabha-elections-2024-pm-narendra-modi-assam-hope-trust-come-with-guarantee-in-2024-promises-free-ration-for-5-years-11713335955962.html)

require Modi to win more seats in areas that have traditionally not voted for BJP in southern India.

While Modi and BJP have significant momentum going into the election, an alliance of opposition parties has struggled to maintain unity. The Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), a center-left bloc that includes INC as well as other prominent parties, was formed in June 2023 to present a united front against BJP.⁷

- The alliance has been marred by frequent public disputes between members and has so far failed to unify around a cohesive policy platform. In January 2024, two parties controlling the state governments of Bihar and West Bengal left the alliance, citing disagreements with INC.⁸
- On top of this, INDIA leaders have been hampered by tax investigations and allegations of corruption they claim are manufactured by Prime Minister Modi's government.⁹

Despite the overwhelming likelihood that BJP will win the election, Modi's ambitious target of winning 400 seats has resulted in a tense and often combative campaign season. As with many elections, there is also the potential for the spread of mis- and disinformation via social media and other online platforms.

Cyber

The greatest cyber threat to the Indian elections is very likely posed by influence campaigns rather than by attempts to directly interfere with the election process. In particular, the threat to the upcoming Lok Sabha elections is high. India is home to 820 million internet users; over 54 percent¹⁰ are based in rural regions, which offers fertile

⁷ [hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/news/2023/7/26/india-what-you-need-to-know-about-indias-opposition-alliance](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/26/india-what-you-need-to-know-about-indias-opposition-alliance)

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[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/features/2024/1/29/cracks-in-indias-opposition-alliance-against-pm-modi-ahead-of-elections](https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/1/29/cracks-in-indias-opposition-alliance-against-pm-modi-ahead-of-elections)

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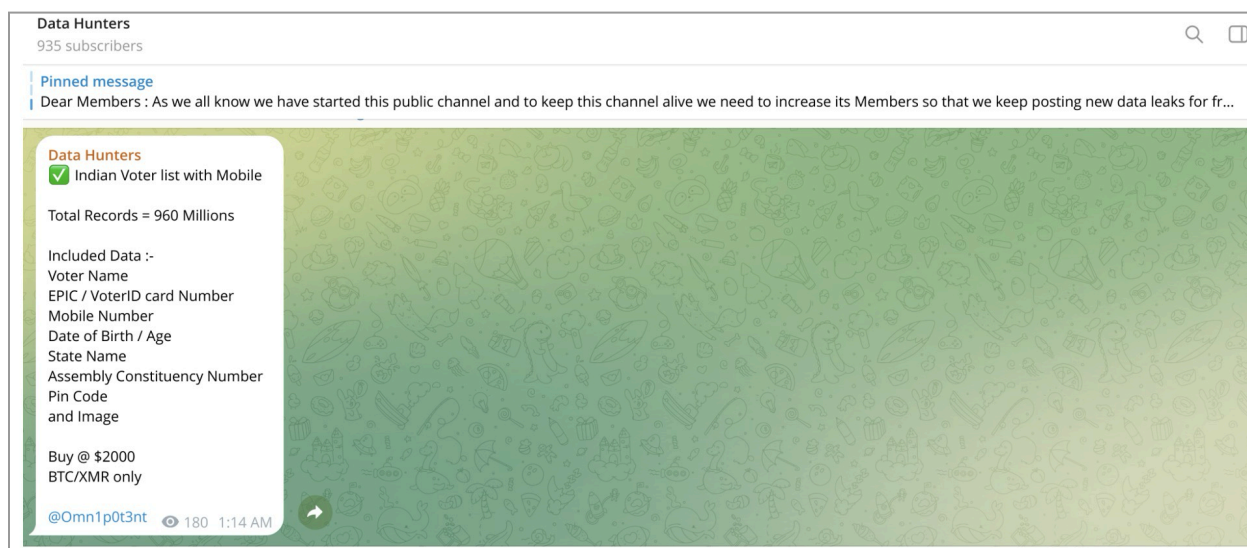
[hXXps://www.france24\[.\]com/en/asia-pacific/20240414-taxman-cometh-india-weakened-opposition-modi-eyes-election-victory-bjp](https://www.france24[.]com/en/asia-pacific/20240414-taxman-cometh-india-weakened-opposition-modi-eyes-election-victory-bjp)

¹⁰

[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/city/bengaluru/over-half-of-821mn-internet-users-from-rural-india-survey/articleshow/108057593.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes[.]com/city/bengaluru/over-half-of-821mn-internet-users-from-rural-india-survey/articleshow/108057593.cms)

ground for targeted cyber-based influence campaigns. Additionally, in the first “World Cybercrime Index” published earlier this month, India ranks tenth in the global geography of cybercrime, with a specialization in scams.¹¹

- In March 2024, ZeroFox observed an invite-only Telegram channel called “Data Hunters” allegedly selling an Indian voter list that contained 960 million records with voters’ names, voter ID numbers, dates of birth, and location/constituency details for USD 2,000.
- The alleged sale is likely a scam, with the owners of the channel seeking to profit from the increased interest in Indian voter data ahead of the elections. The advertisement of a complete database conveniently just in time for the elections and the fact that potential buyers were not allowed to use middlemen or negotiators increases the likelihood of the advertisement being fraudulent.



Indian voter database advertised on the Telegram channel “Data Hunters”

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

Supporters of the political parties participating in the election are known to circulate incendiary content online.¹² This has been particularly prevalent amongst BJP’s base, which is known to spread provocative and exaggerated posts online (on social media

¹¹ [hXXps://www.onmanorama\[.\]com/news/india/2024/04/16/india-10th-in-cybercrime-index.html](https://www.onmanorama.com/news/india/2024/04/16/india-10th-in-cybercrime-index.html)

¹²

[hXXps://www.news18\[.\]com/opinion/write-mind-digital-revolution-in-indian-politics-how-bjp-harnessed-social-media-8850636.html](https://www.news18.com/opinion/write-mind-digital-revolution-in-indian-politics-how-bjp-harnessed-social-media-8850636.html)

platforms and WhatsApp). This is very likely to result in disinformation campaigns to support their political aims.

- The political parties involved in the elections have been observed disseminating misleading media content containing controversial information to the general public.
- A report published on the 2023 election in the southern state of Karnataka shed light on how BJP leveraged WhatsApp messaging to propagate its political agenda across the state. The party reportedly used third-party “trolls” to increase BJP’s influence in the traditional opposition state. One such troll, by the name of Astra, had a significant influence over the public through “polarizing WhatsApp posts.”¹³
- Social media platforms have been reportedly observed boosting AI-generated images of Indian politicians, particularly BJP politicians. One example of such AI art is that of Prime Minister Modi in the form of a wise and influential Hindu mythological figure.¹⁴



AI-generated image of PM Modi as Bhishma, a Hindu mythological character

Source: [hXXps://www.instagram\[.\]com/hokagemodisama/](https://www.instagram.com/hokagemodisama/)

¹³ [hXXps://www.washingtonpost\[.\]com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/26/hindu-nationalist-social-media-hate-campaign/)

¹⁴

[hXXps://www.aljazeera\[.\]com/economy/2024/4/12/before-india-election-instagram-boosts-modi-ai-images-that-violate-rules](https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2024/4/12/before-india-election-instagram-boosts-modi-ai-images-that-violate-rules)

Deepfakes will very likely be an active component of electoral and voter influence. Political parties are increasingly utilizing advanced AI tools to create deepfakes, manipulating famous faces and voices to appear authentic. Recent instances of deepfakes featuring deceased leaders offer a cost-effective alternative to traditional campaigning methods such as rallies, which are time-consuming and expensive to organize.

- The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party (AIADMK) recently recreated the voice of Jayalitha, a late Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu state, urging voters to support the AIADMK rather than the ruling state government run by the rival Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party.¹⁵
- DMK supporters responded by recreating the voice and image of deceased Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, a political rival of Jayalitha, to support the DMK government.¹⁶

Another high-risk cyber threat to the upcoming elections is “malinformation”—the propagation of technically true information (or information based on reality) that is devoid of context to create a misleading, malicious narrative; this includes nefarious activity such as leaks of sensitive data. Anti-Indian threat actors as well as political partisans are likely to use data on politicians, public figures, and specific demographic/voter groups (sourced from both publicly available data and information gleaned from recent data breaches) to spread agenda-driven narratives. Such narratives usually attempt to showcase the malinformation disseminator's chosen side in a positive light, generate support for their side by exaggerating the negative aspects of the rival camp, or create a generally negative impression of the country's institutions and electoral process.

¹⁵

[hXXps://www.indiatoday\[.\]in/india/tamil-nadu/story/aiadmk-releases-ai-generated-voice-of-jayalitha-seeking-support-for-eps-2506638-2024-02-24](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/tamil-nadu/story/aiadmk-releases-ai-generated-voice-of-jayalitha-seeking-support-for-eps-2506638-2024-02-24)

¹⁶

[hXXps://www.newsbytesapp\[.\]com/news/politics/deepfake-video-jayalitha-karunanidhi-campaign-for-lok-sabha-polls/story](https://www.newsbytesapp[.]com/news/politics/deepfake-video-jayalitha-karunanidhi-campaign-for-lok-sabha-polls/story)

| Allegations of Democratic Backsliding

Opposition figures and human rights organizations have accused the Modi government of intimidating politicians, journalists, and critical civil society voices through arbitrary law enforcement action and manipulation of the legal system. These efforts are likely aimed at helping BJP win 400 Lok Sabha seats, one of Modi's stated goals.

Since Modi took power in 2014, nearly 150 opposition politicians have been charged with corruption or tax crimes.¹⁷ In 23 of those cases, charges were dropped after the politicians being investigated switched parties to BJP.¹⁸ In the same period, only four BJP politicians faced similar investigations. During recent election campaigning, Modi promised to continue prosecuting "corrupt" politicians if he wins re-election, indicating a likely intent to continue such actions.¹⁹

- In March 2024, INC reported that its funds were frozen by a tax probe and it was unable to finance its electoral campaign.²⁰
- A court in Gujarat, Modi's home state, found INC leader Rahul Gandhi guilty of defamation in March 2023 and sentenced him to two years in prison, the minimum sentence necessary to strip Gandhi of his parliamentary seat. India's Supreme Court later threw out the conviction, claiming the Gujarat court had not provided adequate evidence for why such a sentence was necessary.²¹
- In February 2023, income tax officials raided two BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai shortly after the BBC aired a documentary in the United Kingdom (UK) critical of Modi. Similar raids have targeted sometimes-critical organizations such as Oxfam India, the Independent and Public-Spirited Media Foundation, and the Center for Policy Research, among others.²²

¹⁷

[hXXps://www.reuters\[.\]com/world/india/beyond-modi-indias-opposition-struggles-with-financial-crime-agency-2024-03-22/](https://www.reuters.com/world/india/beyond-modi-indias-opposition-struggles-with-financial-crime-agency-2024-03-22/)

¹⁸

[hXXps://indianexpress\[.\]com/article/express-exclusive/since-2014-25-opposition-leaders-facing-corruption-probe-crossed-over-to-bjp-23-of-them-got-reprieve-9247737/](https://indianexpress.com/article/express-exclusive/since-2014-25-opposition-leaders-facing-corruption-probe-crossed-over-to-bjp-23-of-them-got-reprieve-9247737/)

¹⁹

[hXXps://economictimes.indiatimes\[.\]com/news/politics-and-nation/criticise-me-but-action-against-corruption-will-continue-pm-modi/articleshow/107436937.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/criticise-me-but-action-against-corruption-will-continue-pm-modi/articleshow/107436937.cms)

²⁰

[hXXps://thewire\[.\]in/politics/democracy-frozen-says-congress-calls-action-on-accounts-bid-to-cripple-it-financially](https://thewire[.]in/politics/democracy-frozen-says-congress-calls-action-on-accounts-bid-to-cripple-it-financially)

²¹ [hXXps://indianexpress\[.\]com/article/india/rahul-gandhi-defamation-case-timeline-8876290/](https://indianexpress.com/article/india/rahul-gandhi-defamation-case-timeline-8876290/)

²² [hXXps://time\[.\]com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/](https://time[.]com/6255425/india-raid-bbc-modi-documentary/)

The Modi government has also been accused of spying on political rivals and opposition figures. In 2021, the Supreme Court of India ordered an inquiry after reports emerged that the Indian government was using Pegasus spyware (created by the NSO Group in Israel) to spy on communication devices used by rival politicians, journalists, and activists.²³ A 2023 Amnesty International report alleged that such attacks on privacy continue to be attempted on opposition politicians.²⁴

- The government of India has denied such attempts, with a popular BJP leader calling such claims an attempt to weaken India and foment left-wing terrorism.²⁵

| Protests and Internet Disruptions

India has a long history of often disruptive protests. A low-intensity protest movement by farmers unhappy with crop prices has persisted since mid-February and could escalate during the election. If the protests did occur in a region that was holding elections at that time, it could disrupt access to voting; however, recent security enhancements made by the government have limited the most disruptive activities of the protesters.²⁶

- Large groups of farmers have been camped at border crossings between Punjab and Haryana for several months in a standoff with police. Farmers intended to march on New Delhi, where they planned to hold large protests and sit-ins, but were stopped roughly 200 kilometers (124 miles) away by fortified police barricades.
- While these farmers remain encamped, others have sporadically blocked railways in Punjab and other states and have held rallies to further their cause.²⁷ This type

²³

[hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/news/2021/oct/27/indian-supreme-court-orders-inquiry-into-states-use-of-pegasus-spyware](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/oct/27/indian-supreme-court-orders-inquiry-into-states-use-of-pegasus-spyware)

²⁴

[hXXps://www.amnesty\[.\]org/en/latest/news/2023/12/india-damning-new-forensic-investigation-reveals-repeated-use-of-pegasus-spyware-to-target-high-profile-journalists/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/12/india-damning-new-forensic-investigation-reveals-repeated-use-of-pegasus-spyware-to-target-high-profile-journalists/)

²⁵

[hXXps://www.hindustantimes\[.\]com/india-news/international-conspiracy-to-defame-india-assam-cm-on-pegasus-row-101626796355634.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/international-conspiracy-to-defame-india-assam-cm-on-pegasus-row-101626796355634.html)

²⁶ [hXXps://www.hrw\[.\]org/news/2024/02/29/india-protect-farmers-right-peaceful-protest](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/02/29/india-protect-farmers-right-peaceful-protest)

²⁷

[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/india/farmer-leaders-call-for-nationwide-protests-rail-roko-on-march-10/articleshow/108182626.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/farmer-leaders-call-for-nationwide-protests-rail-roko-on-march-10/articleshow/108182626.cms)

of activity could escalate during the election. Threats to protest in New Delhi could spur heightened security that would heavily disrupt transportation within the city. These regions with the most frequent farmer protests will hold their elections on May 25 and June 1.²⁸

Additionally, opposition parties have recently held large protests in New Delhi demanding the release of Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's Chief Minister and cofounder of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a prominent member of the INDIA coalition. Authorities arrested Kejriwal in late March on allegations of corruption, which the AAP and other INDIA members denounced as false.

- A united opposition protest in New Delhi in early April reportedly attracted tens of thousands of participants.²⁹
- A second opposition rally is scheduled for April 21 in Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand state, and could attract similar participation.³⁰ Additional similar protests are highly likely during the election, and organizers may move them based on which districts are voting at any given time.
- BJP supporters have held smaller protests calling for Kejriwal's resignation.³¹

The six-week period of time over which the elections take place raises the possibility that unforeseen issues may arise during the vote that spur new protest movements or strengthen existing ones.

- Poor weather or harvests could exacerbate the ongoing farmers' protests.
- Arrests of additional opposition figures could galvanize political protests.
- Other issues such as wealth inequality, religious tensions, or perceived democratic backsliding could spur new protests if significant developments occur.

²⁸ [hXXps://www.india-briefing\[.\]com/news/india-2024-elections-parliament-seven-phases-31611.html/](https://www.india-briefing.com/news/india-2024-elections-parliament-seven-phases-31611.html/)

²⁹ [hXXps://www.japantimes\[.\]co\[.\]jp/news/2024/04/03/world/politics/modi-opposition-fair-elections/](https://www.japantimes[.]co[.]jp/news/2024/04/03/world/politics/modi-opposition-fair-elections/)

³⁰ [hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/city/ranchi/india-bloc-gears-up-for-mega-rally-to-protest-hemants-arrest/articleshow/109116040.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes[.]com/city/ranchi/india-bloc-gears-up-for-mega-rally-to-protest-hemants-arrest/articleshow/109116040.cms)

³¹ [hXXps://economictimes.indiatimes\[.\]com/news/politics-and-nation/delhi-bjp-leaders-hold-protest-demand-resig-nation-of-arvind-kejriwal/articleshow/109185582.cms](https://economictimes.indiatimes[.]com/news/politics-and-nation/delhi-bjp-leaders-hold-protest-demand-resig-nation-of-arvind-kejriwal/articleshow/109185582.cms)

In the event of significant protest movements developing, the Modi government will likely employ targeted internet disruptions to curb the spread of information related to the protests. The government has also had success persuading social media platforms such as X (formerly, Twitter) to deactivate the accounts of notable protest organizers.³²

- In the past five years, India had the highest number of recorded internet shut-offs of any country in the world.³³
- At the onset of the aforementioned farmers' protests, authorities shut down mobile internet in several districts of Punjab and Haryana for several weeks. This disrupted daily activities for non-protesters, including students attempting to study for exams.³⁴
- The disputed territory of Jammu and Kashmir has received the highest number of shutdowns of any state in recent years.³⁵

Economy

It is unlikely that economic issues will lead to major disruptive protests during the election. India is growing faster than any other major economy and surpassed the UK in 2022 to become the world's fifth-largest by GDP, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimating that it will take the fourth spot by 2027.³⁶ Much of this growth has gone to the already-wealthy Indian elite, leading to what some have described as the worst inequality since the country's independence in 1947.³⁷ Despite this, Prime Minister Modi remains popular with the working class thanks to generous social spending programs and the pursuit of a Hindu nationalist agenda, sometimes at the expense of India's minority religious communities.

³² [hXXps://www.theregister\[.\]com/2024/02/23/x_india_farmers_compulsory_takedown/](https://www.theregister.com/2024/02/23/x_india_farmers_compulsory_takedown/)

³³

[hXXps://www.scmp\[.\]com/week-asia/politics/article/3252997/rising-internet-shutdowns-india-spark-fears-authoritarianism-election](https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3252997/rising-internet-shutdowns-india-spark-fears-authoritarianism-election)

³⁴

[hXXps://indianexpress\[.\]com/article/cities/chandigarh/farmers-protest-mobile-internet-ban-punjab-haryana-9172316/](https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/farmers-protest-mobile-internet-ban-punjab-haryana-9172316/)

³⁵ [hXXps://www.accessnow\[.\]org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/](https://www.accessnow[.]org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-india/)

³⁶ [hXXps://www.weforum\[.\]org/agenda/2022/09/india-uk-fifth-largest-economy-world/](https://www.weforum[.]org/agenda/2022/09/india-uk-fifth-largest-economy-world/)

³⁷ [hXXps://time\[.\]com/6961171/india-british-rule-income-inequality/](https://time[.]com/6961171/india-british-rule-income-inequality/)

- Though Modi's attempts to expand domestic manufacturing have met with mixed results, his continued promises to grow India's manufacturing sector will likely earn him support among working-class voters.
- Despite the growing economy, India's population is outpacing the number of new jobs. Unemployment is a growing problem, with India unable to provide enough jobs for its youthful workforce—despite the growing foreign investment and increase in jobs.
- For now, unemployment is not harming Modi, with his strongest support coming in regions with the least economic development and highest rates of unemployment.³⁸

| International Tensions and Nation-State Activities

India has a history of tension with its two largest neighbors, China and Pakistan. A long-running territorial dispute with Pakistan over control of the Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir territory has sparked several wars since 1947, with India usually gaining the upper hand. During the election period, Chinese and Pakistani-supported threat actors could stage online influence campaigns, election-related hacktivism, and cyber infiltration but are unlikely to pose a physical security threat.

- India accuses Pakistan of training, equipping, and financing the separatist insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir—most recently in December 2023, when Indian officials claimed that insurgents often used Chinese-made weapons originally supplied to the Pakistani military.³⁹
- Tensions between India and Pakistan remain high but are highly unlikely to lead to direct conflict during the election since both sides recommitted to a ceasefire in 2021.⁴⁰

³⁸

[hXXps://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2024-04-07/india-elections-progressive-south-is-rejecting-modi](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2024-04-07/india-elections-progressive-south-is-rejecting-modi)

³⁹

[hXXps://www.livemint.com/news/india/kashmir-jaish-e-mohammed-lashkar-e-taiba-terrorists-using-made-in-china-weapons-to-attack-indian-army-says-report-11703567581554.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/kashmir-jaish-e-mohammed-lashkar-e-taiba-terrorists-using-made-in-china-weapons-to-attack-indian-army-says-report-11703567581554.html)

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[hXXps://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/2021-india-pakistan-ceasefire-origins-prospects-and-lessons-learned](https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/02/2021-india-pakistan-ceasefire-origins-prospects-and-lessons-learned)

- Pakistan could still seek less overt ways of influencing the election, including through online influence campaigns or sponsored cyberattacks.

With its large Hindu population and a Hindu-nationalist government led by BJP, India has also been frequently targeted by religiously motivated hacktivist groups purportedly from Bangladesh, Malaysia, and other Muslim-majority countries. Hacktivism in support of regional rivals poses a medium-low threat to the Indian elections. Hacktivists are more likely to target government websites or databases in data breaches rather than to directly disrupt the election process or interfere with the results.

- In November 2023, pro-Palestine hacking group GARNESIA TEAM posted databases on Indian citizens comprising names, phone numbers, Aadhaar (India's national identity) numbers, and other personal information on its Telegram channel. The purported reason for the leak was India's support for Israel in the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. The databases were originally stolen by another hacker group called IRoX Team.⁴¹
- In November 2023, IRoX Team also leaked a database containing details of Lok Sabha election candidates (including currently serving members of Parliament) from various political parties. The leaked fields include personal details and political/polling data.⁴²
- A day before the G20 Summit in India last year, Pakistani and Indonesian threat actors targeted the government's digital infrastructure. The campaign carried out more than 2,400 cyberattacks, of which 50 percent were distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks. Approximately 370 of these attacks targeted government websites.⁴³
- Since 2022, threat actor group Mysterious Team Bangladesh has been known to target Indian government, financial, and transportation sector organizations with

⁴¹ ZeroFox Internal Collections

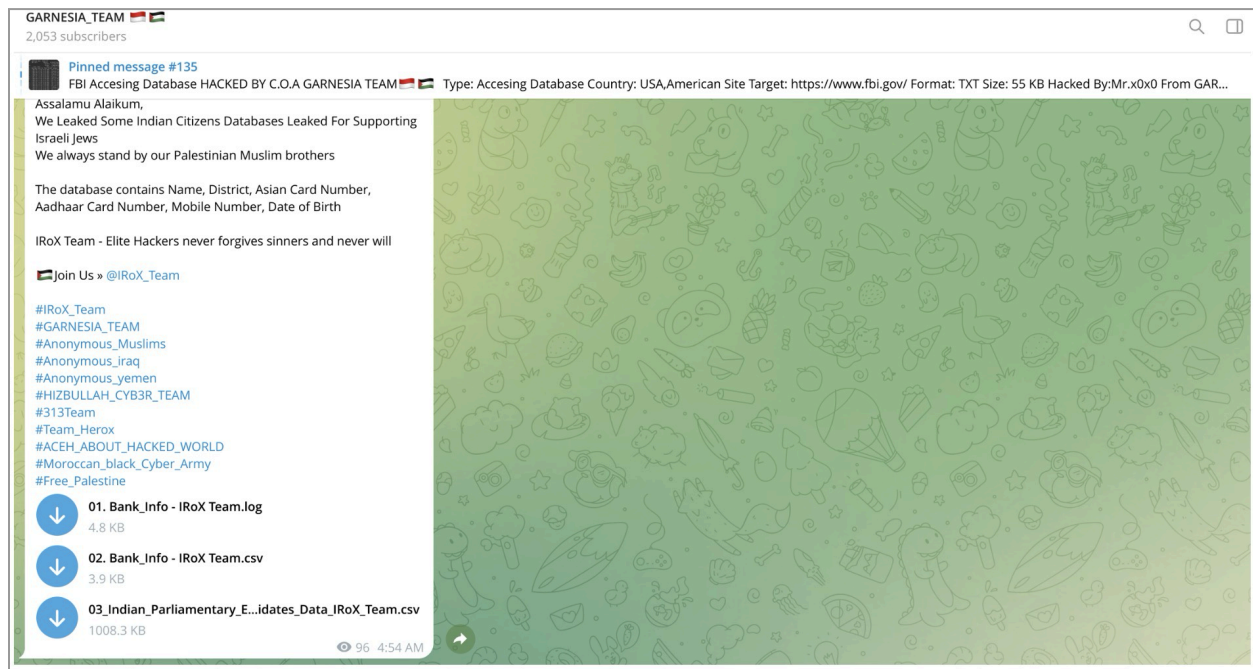
⁴² ZeroFox Internal Collections

⁴³

[hXXps://www.indiatoday\[.\]in/india/story/behind-cyberattacks-pakistan-based-groups-indian-government-websites-before-g20-2433530-2023-09-09](https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/behind-cyberattacks-pakistan-based-groups-indian-government-websites-before-g20-2433530-2023-09-09)

DDoS attacks. The group is said to have political and religious motives driving their attacks.⁴⁴

- Additionally, a lack of cybersecurity measures can also pave the way for hacktivists to attack unprotected systems. For instance, in April 2019, medical records of 12.5 million pregnant women were exposed when an Indian government healthcare agency database was found online without a password.⁴⁵



GARNESIA TEAM leaking datasets originally stolen by IRoX Team

Source: ZeroFox Intelligence

India has a similarly long-running dispute with China over the Ladakh territory and the state of Arunachal Pradesh. The neighbors fought a brief territorial war in 1962, which

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[hXXps://timesofindia.indiatimes\[.\]com/gadgets-news/bangladeshi-hacker-group-targeting-these-sectors-in-india-claims-report/articleshow/102505016.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/gadgets-news/bangladeshi-hacker-group-targeting-these-sectors-in-india-claims-report/articleshow/102505016.cms)

⁴⁵

[hXXps://www.indiatoday\[.\]in/technology/news/story/indian-health-agency-left-medical-records-of-million-of-pregnant-women-exposed-online-1492158-2019-04-02](https://www.indiatoday[.]in/technology/news/story/indian-health-agency-left-medical-records-of-million-of-pregnant-women-exposed-online-1492158-2019-04-02)

ended with a Chinese victory. Since then, periodic unarmed clashes between border patrols have led to at least two dozen deaths.⁴⁶

- Leading up to the election, Indian officials escalated rhetoric with China over control of Arunachal Pradesh. This rhetoric was likely meant to boost the Modi government's image as a strong protector of India's territory rather than to provoke conflict with China. Prime Minister Modi has since taken steps to dial down tensions.⁴⁷
- As with Pakistan, China has a known history of influence operations and cyber activity within India that it could deploy during the election.

Rival nation-state actors are likely to leverage AI to propagate false information. China in particular is increasingly using AI-generated content to influence high-profile elections, though its immediate impact is limited. However, China's experimentation with memes, videos, and audio could become more effective over time. These efforts are part of a broader strategy involving cyber and influence operations targeting the United States, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea.

- A Chinese threat group called Storm-1376 has notably increased its use of AI-generated news anchors and memes to target specific political figures, such as those of Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party.⁴⁸ This approach aims to manipulate public opinion and sway election outcomes in favor of China's interests.
- India could be a likely target for similar AI-generated content manipulation tactics because of several factors. Like Taiwan, India is a democratic country with an extensive political landscape and high-profile elections. Additionally, India has a significant online presence, with a large population actively engaged in social media platforms. These similarities make India susceptible to the same tactics that China has employed in Taiwan, such as using AI-generated content to manipulate public opinion and influence election outcomes.

⁴⁶

[hXXps://www.crisisgroup\[.\]org/asia/south-asia/india-china/334-thin-ice-himalayas-handling-india-china-border-dispute](https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india-china/334-thin-ice-himalayas-handling-india-china-border-dispute)

⁴⁷

[hXXps://www.newsweek\[.\]com/2024/04/19/exclusive-interview-narendra-modi-unstoppable-rise-india-1888678.html](https://www.newsweek.com/2024/04/19/exclusive-interview-narendra-modi-unstoppable-rise-india-1888678.html)

⁴⁸ [hXXps://www.theguardian\[.\]com/technology/2024/apr/05/china-using-ai-disrupt-elections](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/apr/05/china-using-ai-disrupt-elections)

| Terrorism

A major act of terrorism occurring during the India elections is unlikely. There could be low-level attacks, but those are highly unlikely to have any influencing or disruptive impact on the elections taking place. India has seen few high-profile terror attacks in recent years, though the country has a history of activity by terror groups both foreign and domestic.

- Terror groups in India often stage small-scale attacks on military and police patrols but likely view electoral infrastructure as a lucrative target.
- In the north, India has suppressed but not eliminated a separatist insurgency seeking independence or absorption of the Jammu and Kashmir territory by Pakistan. In past years, militant groups in Jammu and Kashmir targeted political candidates and poll workers. Such attacks remain possible but will be complicated by heightened security.⁴⁹

In central India, a Maoist insurgency remains active but has few resources and little ability to strike outside the remote forests where it operates. Authorities have stepped up security measures in parts of Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Telangana where Maoists operate and plan to maintain security measures throughout the entire election period—even when affected areas are not voting.⁵⁰

- During the 2023 state-level elections in Chhattisgarh, Maoist rebels launched multiple attacks using improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and small arms, injuring two poll workers and several security personnel.⁵¹

⁴⁹

[hXXps://www.deccanherald\[.\]com/elections/india/authorities-in-jammu-kashmir-taking-steps-for-robust-voter-turnout-2944445](https://www.deccanherald.com/elections/india/authorities-in-jammu-kashmir-taking-steps-for-robust-voter-turnout-2944445)

⁵⁰

[hXXps://www.newindianexpress\[.\]com/states/odisha/2024/Apr/11/we-hit-states-to-maintain-deployment-till-end-of-polls](https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2024/Apr/11/we-hit-states-to-maintain-deployment-till-end-of-polls)

⁵¹

[hXXps://economictimes.indiatimes\[.\]com/news/elections/assembly-elections/chhattisgarh-assembly-elections/first-phase-of-chhattisgarh-polls-marred-by-naxalite-attacks-and-encounters/articleshow/105037127.cms?from=mdr](https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/chhattisgarh-assembly-elections/first-phase-of-chhattisgarh-polls-marred-by-naxalite-attacks-and-encounters/articleshow/105037127.cms?from=mdr)

- Authorities will use helicopters and drones to surveil Maoist-affected areas and plan to deploy tens of thousands of security personnel during the 2024 election.⁵²
- Security forces will highly likely step up raids against insurgents, such as one that reportedly resulted in the deaths of 29 rebels on April 16, 2024.⁵³

India has also seen sporadic terrorist activity from lone actors and other groups. On March 1, an IED at a popular cafe in Bengaluru injured nine people and caused extensive property damage. Two men suspected of conducting the attack were arrested on April 12. Government officials later claimed they were affiliated with the Islamic State.⁵⁴

Conclusion

India is the world's most populous country and the fastest-growing major economy, making the upcoming election important for numerous reasons. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi is heavily favored to win a third term, his perceived strongman tactics against critics could lead to instability in minority regions of India and inspire cyberattacks against the country. If re-elected, Modi is highly likely to continue his pursuit of Hindu-centric policies while attempting to strengthen India's manufacturing sector. His continued popularity may hinge partly on his ability to create jobs for India's large and growing workforce, especially for low-skilled workers. Absent a reinvention of the political opposition headed by the Indian National Congress, few political actors appear poised to challenge Modi in the short term.

⁵²

[hXXps://www.deccanherald\[.\]com/elections/india/lok-sabha-polls-2024-choppers-drones-to-keep-electoral-field-safe-in-maharashtras-naxal-belt-2977813](https://www.deccanherald.com/elections/india/lok-sabha-polls-2024-choppers-drones-to-keep-electoral-field-safe-in-maharashtras-naxal-belt-2977813)

⁵³

[hXXps://www.hindustantimes\[.\]com/cities/others/29-maoists-killed-in-encounter-with-security-forces-in-bastar-s-kanker-101713277419760.html](https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/others/29-maoists-killed-in-encounter-with-security-forces-in-bastar-s-kanker-101713277419760.html)

⁵⁴

[hXXps://www.thenewsminute\[.\]com/karnataka/war-of-words-between-bjp-and-mamata-over-arrest-of-bengaluru-bomb-blast-accused](https://www.thenewsminute.com/karnataka/war-of-words-between-bjp-and-mamata-over-arrest-of-bengaluru-bomb-blast-accused)

| Appendix A: Traffic Light Protocol for Information Dissemination

	Red	Amber
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:RED when information cannot be effectively acted upon by additional parties and could lead to impacts on a party's privacy, reputation, or operations if misused.	Sources may use TLP:AMBER when information requires support to be effectively acted upon but carries risks to privacy, reputation, or operations if shared outside of the organizations involved.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may NOT share TLP:RED with any parties outside of the specific exchange, meeting, or conversation in which it is originally disclosed.	Recipients may ONLY share TLP:AMBER information with members of their own organization and its clients, but only on a need-to-know basis to protect their organization and its clients and prevent further harm. Note that TLP:AMBER+STRICT restricts sharing to the organization only.
	Green	Clear
WHEN SHOULD IT BE USED?	Sources may use TLP:GREEN when information is useful for the awareness of all participating organizations, as well as with peers within the broader community or sector.	Sources may use TLP:CLEAR when information carries minimal or no risk of misuse in accordance with applicable rules and procedures for public release.
HOW MAY IT BE SHARED?	Recipients may share TLP:GREEN information with peers and partner organizations within their sector or community but not via publicly accessible channels.	Recipients may share TLP:CLEAR information without restriction, subject to copyright controls.

| Appendix B: ZeroFox Intelligence Probability Scale

All ZeroFox intelligence products leverage probabilistic assessment language in analytic judgments. Qualitative statements used in these judgments refer to associated probability ranges, which state the likelihood of occurrence of an event or development. Ranges are used to avoid a false impression of accuracy. This scale is a standard that aligns with how readers should interpret such terms.

Almost No Chance	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Roughly Even Chance	Likely	Very Likely	Almost Certain
1-5%	5-20%	20-45%	45-55%	55-80%	80-95%	95-99%