

Indian Elections & Narendra Modi: is a hi-tech populist the best India can hope for?

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Talk of a 'revolutionary moment' is usually hyperbole, but not here: NaMo ticks none of the values that are laid out in his country's constitution.

"There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen," wrote Lenin. This weekend, as the Nehru-Gandhi franchise took one of its biggest beatings ever and Narendra Modi made his first speech as PM-elect, India could be seen lurching in a new direction.

Talk of a "revolutionary moment" is usually journalistic hyperbole, but not here. The superlatives stack up: at 550m, or two-thirds of voters, this was a record turnout, delivering an absolute majority to one party for the first time in 30 years. And this is the first time the Hindu-fundamentalist BJP will be able to govern alone.

Couple that with the particular characteristics of the man who will be the next prime minister. India has had plenty of aberrant politicians: there was Lalu Prasad Yadav, who reportedly ruled Bihar from a prison cell, ringing his illiterate wife with instructions (Bihar, by the way, has a population almost one and a half times the size of Britain). Or Mayawati next door in Uttar Pradesh, who erected statues of herself.

Narendra Modi has the requisite colourful "backstory": he sold tea at railway stations and his election campaign was disrupted by the emergence of his long-ignored wife. But that is not what makes his ascension to ruling over a billion people most significant.

The simplest way to bring out the historical novelty of Modi is by comparing him with the values laid out in the first few words of his country's constitution.

Independent India, it says, will be a "Socialist, Secular, Democratic Republic". Well, the man they call NaMo is no socialist: the "development model" he coined while running Gujarat was based on handing cut-price land and soft loans to big business, who in turn flew him around on private jets. This brought cash into the state, but very little of it has been shared out beyond big cities such as Ahmedabad. Modi's Gujarat lagged behind the other big states in India in tackling infant mortality, poverty and illiteracy.

Secular? Modi was interviewed by one of the country's leading intellectuals, Ashis Nandy, in the 1990s, when he was almost unknown. Nandy later wrote: "I still remember the cool, measured tone in which he elaborated a theory of cosmic conspiracy against India that painted every Muslim as a suspected traitor and a potential terrorist. I came out of the interview shaken and told [his companion] Yagnik that, for the first time, I had met a textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer, perhaps even a future mass murderer." In 2002, Modi presided when a pogrom killed 1,000-2,000 Muslims. As for "democratic", Modi ran his home state like an autocrat, giving thuggish lieutenant Amit Shah no fewer than 10 portfolios.

A man who opposes all the foundational ideals of the Indian state now has an absolute majority to demolish. Why? First, those pluralist principles were seriously eroded by those in Congress who mouthed them. Indira Gandhi suspended basic rights during the “emergency” of 1975; her son, Rajiv, played with the iconography of Hindutva. More recently, Congress had settled into a warm bath of corruption. And finally, this year’s election was notable for its parade of unpalatable characters.

As a joke doing the rounds in Delhi put it, the three national-party candidates were a Duffer, a Bluffer and a Muffler. The duffer was Rahul Gandhi; the muffler referred to third-party leader Arvind Kejriwal’s habit of wrapping himself in a scarf. As for Modi the bluffer, his party has won a simple majority on only 31% share of the vote (by way of an indicator, David Cameron was forced into coalition with 36%).

For over a decade, Modi has not lacked for comparators. He’s been likened to Nero, Hitler, Putin. To me, he has all the makings of a Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: a hi-tech populist holding together a fragile coalition of big business, impatient urban youth and religious fundamentalists. Those disparate groups can be kept together as long as growth comes. But if it doesn’t, Modi and his generals will go hunting for an enemy: Pakistan, India’s own minorities, and the pseudo-seculars.

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P.S.

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<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/19/narendra-modi-populist-india-revolutionary-values-constitution>

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