

Elections : Modi's narrow win suggests Indian voters saw through religious rhetoric, opting instead to curtail his political power

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The ruling BJP failed to see that those who had not benefited from the country's rapid economic growth were deeply unhappy.

Narendra Modi, India's two-time prime minister, [was elected](#) on June 5, 2024, as the leader of the National Democratic Alliance, a coalition of political parties that won with a slim majority in the recently concluded parliamentary election. Modi is expected to be sworn in for [his third term as prime minister](#) on June 8.

The BJP had [hoped for a landslide victory](#) in the country's six-week general election – [the largest display of democracy](#), by far, in a year of voting around the world. But the party scored only [240 parliamentary seats](#) in the final tally and needs coalition partners to secure a majority of 272.

The Conversation U.S. spoke with [Sumit Ganguly](#), distinguished professor of political science and the Tagore chair in Indian Cultures and Civilizations at Indiana University, to understand more about the election results and what they mean for Indian democracy.

The BJP had talked about an overwhelming victory, but it seems it will not get a majority. How do you explain these results ?

Part of the answer lies in the Modi government's failure to realize that while [economic benefits had been substantial](#), their distribution has been uneven. India has seen a [growth in inequality](#) and [persistent unemployment](#) both in rural and urban areas. Unemployment of those aged 20 to 24 years is [at a high of 44.49%](#). And that is the overall national number ; that data does not tell us that it may be much worse in certain regions.

The other explanation is that Modi's exploitation of historic Hindu-Muslim tensions seems to have run its natural course. You can beat the religious drum – and Modi did with rhetoric including calling Muslims “[infiltrators](#)” – but then the day-to-day issues of jobs, housing and other such necessities take over, and these are the things people care about the most.

BJP made a miscalculation, in my analysis. It failed to realize that in a country where only [11.3% of children get adequate nutrition](#), Hindu pride cannot be eaten – ultimately, it's the price of potatoes and other essentials that matter.

Let's talk about Uttar Pradesh, the northern Indian state with 80 parliamentary seats. It plays a crucial role in any national election, and Modi and his alliance are set to lose the state. What happened ?

It's another example of the same miscalculation we are seeing nationally by the BJP. The chief

minister of the state, [Yogi Adityanath](#), saw himself as a firebrand Hindu nationalist leader and [likely a successor of Modi](#).

But he, too, failed to take into account how his policies were playing out in the poorer segments of the state's population, who are mainly Muslims and those at the bottom of India's caste hierarchy.

He pursued grand [infrastructure projects](#) such as new highways and airports, and those might well have appealed to the middle class – but not to the poor.

AP Photo/Rajesh Kumar Singh

Additionally, years of presiding over a state government that has used [police power to suppress dissent](#), often those of the poor and marginalized, have taken their toll on Adityanath's support.

What explains BJP's inroads into the southern state of Kerala, where it is on course to make history by winning a parliamentary seat for the first time ?

The gains in the south are perplexing and will require more data on voting patterns for a more accurate analysis.

Historically, the [BJP has not been able to make inroads](#) into the southern states for a number of reasons. These include [linguistic subnationalism](#) owing to the hostility toward Hindi.

The other issue in the south is that the practice of Hinduism is quite different, including festivals and other regional traditions. The BJP's vision of Hinduism is based on the "[great tradition](#)" of northern India, which believes in the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as the creator, the sustainer and the destroyer gods.

The southern states are also engines of economic growth and end up subsidizing the poorer states of the north. As a consequence, there is [resentment against the BJP](#), which has long had its political base in northern India.

In July 2023, 26 opposition parties formed a coalition called INDIA - the Indian National Developmental and Inclusive Alliance - to challenge the BJP in the election. Were they given a fair chance ?

No, the playing field was far from level. The mass media [has been mostly co-opted](#) by the ruling BJP to advance its agenda. Apart from one or two regional newspapers, all the national dailies [scrupulously avoid any criticism of the BJP](#), and the major television channels mostly act as cheerleaders of the government's policies.

A number of intelligence agencies are alleged to [have been used for blatantly partisan purposes](#) against the opposition parties. Political leaders have been jailed on charges that may prove to be dubious. For example, Arvind Kejriwal, the highly popular chief minister of New Delhi, was [charged with alleged improprieties](#) in the allocation of liquor licenses and jailed just days after election dates were announced.

Despite the electoral losses, Modi is expected to return as prime minister for a third term. Given that the BJP got just two seats in the 1984 elections, what factors led to the party's meteoric rise ?

The BJP has built a solid organizational base across the country, unlike the Indian National Congress, the principal opposition party. And the Congress party [has done little to revitalize its](#)

[political foundations](#), [which had eroded in the 1970s](#) after then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency and a non-Congress government came into power for the first time.

The BJP has also appealed to the sentiments of the majority Hindu population through slogans that paint India's principal minority, [Muslims, as the source of myriad societal problems](#). Hate crimes against Muslims and other minorities [surged across India](#) over the past few years.

Finally, the BJP also benefited from economic reforms [that the earlier Congress government had set in motion](#) from the 1990s, including a national goods and services tax and the privatization of the loss-making, state-owned airline, Air India, thereby contributing to [substantial economic growth in India](#).

In December 1992, Hindu nationalists destroyed the 16th-century Babri Mosque. How crucial was that to BJP's rise to power ? And what should we read into BJP losing its seat in Ayodhya ?

The destruction of the Babri Mosque certainly galvanized an important segment of the Hindu electorate and led to a growth in support for the BJP. In 1999 – just seven years after the event – the BJP first came to power in a coalition government in which it had [182 out of 543 seats in the Indian Parliament](#). Two national elections later, in 2014, Modi assumed office as the prime minister with a clear-cut majority of 282 seats.

In January 2024, just a few months before the election, [Modi inaugurated a newly constructed temple in Ayodhya](#), the site of the Babri Mosque. It was a carefully stage-managed event with an eye on votes.

However, [BJP lost its seat in Ayodhya](#). It's possible that all the fanfare around the new temple appealed to people outside of Ayodhya – but not to the city's residents who continued to deal with [waste mismanagement and other issues](#).

What's next for Modi ? And what do the results tell us about Indian democracy ?

It's certainly possible that Modi will form the government with coalition partners. I believe that Modi, [as an astute politician](#), will most likely learn from this setback and adapt his tactics to new realities.

Supporters of another political party, the Trinamool Congress, celebrate the election results in Kolkata, India, on June 4, 2024.< AP Photo/Bikas Das

The results might also be a useful corrective – the Indian voter has once again demonstrated that he or she might be willing to put up with some things but not others.

Indian voters have demonstrated in the past that when they see democracy being threatened, they tend to punish leaders with autocratic tendencies. We saw this when the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi [suffered a crushing defeat in the elections in 1977](#). The elections followed a state of emergency that Gandhi had imposed on the country, suspending all civil liberties. Back then, it was India's poor who voted her out of power.

This time around, we might need to wait on additional electoral data about how particular caste and income groups voted.

This article was updated on June 5, 2024, with the final election results and other developments.

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