

India: Narendra Modi's Election Setback Has Opened Up a New Horizon

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The political formulas that worked so well before for Narendra Modi proved less effective this year and he lost his single-party majority. Modi will remain in office, but his opponents will be more confident that they can challenge his Hindutva agenda.

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Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, left, speaks with Rajnath Singh, senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party, during a swearing-in ceremony at the Rashtrapati Bhawan in New Delhi, India, on June 9, 2024. (Prakash Singh / Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Narendra Modi has won a third successive term as India's prime minister in a much closer general election than expected. The ruling coalition, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is dominated by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), won 293 of the 543 seats in the lower chamber of the Indian parliament, the Lok Sabha. The opposition bloc, the Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), led by the Indian National Congress (INC), got 234 seats.

Many pundits and a major portion of the media had believed that Modi's unbridled march would result in an easy victory, but the results showed otherwise. Modi's ambitious slogan "*Ab ki baar, 400 paar*" ("this time, 400 plus") failed terribly, with the BJP losing its single-party majority and obtaining only 240 seats in the Lok Sabha, down from 303 in 2019.

If there is one figure that reflects the personal aspect of Modi's tumble, it is the reduced victory margin of 152,513 votes — down from 471,000 in 2019 — by which he won his own seat in Varanasi. It is not only the margin that has decreased. The prime minister received roughly sixty-two thousand fewer votes this time, despite the fact that the total number of votes cast in the constituency increased by about seventy thousand, with his vote share dropping from 63.6 percent to 54.2 percent.

With the BJP not securing an absolute majority, Modi will have to rely on his alliance partners, which comes as a shock for someone accustomed to having unrestricted power and authority. Modi had to rely on regional parties such as Telugu Desam, Janata Dal (United), and others to save him.

Not only will India's political landscape change as a result of the election result, with Modi substantially weakened. He will also face a freshly rejuvenated opposition out to challenge his omnipresence in Indian politics and society.

The Double Crises

The elections were held against the backdrop of an unparalleled socioeconomic crisis, with high levels of inequality, unemployment, and inflation. According to [data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy](#), India has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, at 45.4 percent. The general unemployment rate is 8 percent, which may not account for numerous types of underemployment and disguised unemployment in a country where nearly 94 percent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector.

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While all government messaging focused on achieving a high GDP growth rate and a \$5 trillion economy by 2028, few questioned who would benefit from the race toward these goals. The ruling party vowed to boost the manufacturing sector's share of the economy to 25 percent by 2025, but investments in India have primarily been in capital-intensive manufacturing, which has failed to produce jobs.

The Indian state substantially backs this sector through Production Linked Incentive schemes and other policies, to the detriment of labor-intensive industries. It is no surprise under these conditions that employment growth has stagnated at 2 percent for two decades. Economists [anticipate](#) that the task of absorbing surplus labor will be difficult unless the growth rate rises to 4 to 5 percent.

With labor's share of GDP declining, inequality has reached record levels. While the country now has 271 dollar billionaires, ranking behind only China and the United States, eight hundred million people rely on free food grains to survive. The problems faced by the latter, as well as a major segment of the middle class, are exacerbated by high inflation levels, particularly increases in food prices.

At the same time, the political crisis has been constantly worsening. Over the last decade, Indians have helplessly witnessed the imprisonment of civil society activists, journalists, students, and other dissidents. There has been a process of institutional capture by the BJP alongside the spread of hate speech, violence against Muslim and Christian minorities, and the suppression of all forms of political opposition.

Last year, 141 MPs were [suspended](#) in a bid to remove any dissent from parliament. Their only transgression had been to request a debate in parliament on a security breach from a government that uses the phrase "national security" to justify arresting thousands of people across the country. Many members of the opposition believed that a total purge was taking place so the government could pass draconian bills without any significant debate.

The standard of parliamentary processes also reached an unprecedented low, with the entire budget passed without debate and the bulk of bills passed without a recorded vote. The investigating agencies and other institutions were mostly (mis)used to target opposition leaders and promote the breakup of rival parties.

The democratic backslide has never been more obvious, with a clampdown on visual and print media and universities deprived of their vital function of inculcating the spirit of critical thinking in students. Takeover strategies for Indian-style fascism, like those of its global counterparts, involve the gradual erosion of democratic institutions and practices until only elections remain as a symbol of their democratic credentials.

Modi Magic

The BJP's election strategy depended on "Modi magic." Previously, the BJP leveraged the ultranationalist fervor sparked by the Pulwama attack on Indian security personnel in Kashmir and the subsequent Balakot air strike that Modi ordered on Pakistani soil to win the 2019 elections. This time, without a major sensation to rely upon, India's Pied Piper depended on his claim to offer stable governance, continuity of "development," and efficient welfare measures, as well as on the idea that he has improved India's global image.

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The BJP also promoted a batch of hypernationalist achievements since it came to power in 2014: revoking Kashmir's autonomy, constructing the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and enacting a discriminatory citizenship law. Modi's party also expected to secure large dividends from the success of many BJP-ruled states in tightening rules on interreligious marriages and targeting minorities in the name of cow protection.

However, the electoral theater did not conform to this script, and the constant talk of an invincible BJP from Indian news channels proved ineffective. As the campaign began, the opposition seemed weak and trapped in confusion over seat-sharing arrangements, internal rivalries, and desertions. Yet despite its own inherent fragility and lack of a strong leader, the INDIA bloc managed to challenge Modi's larger-than-life image and aura of invincibility.

The opposition also had to deal with the BJP's vast financial resources, which ensured that its campaign would enjoy greater reach and influence. The lavish spending of Modi's party, including vast sums from the now-illegal Electoral Bonds scheme, aimed to overwhelm the electorate. It spent significantly more than all other parties combined, and [total election expenditure this year](#) exceeded that of the US presidential election in 2020. This deluge of cash undermined the already undemocratic Indian system of elections.

However, Modi appears to have lost some of his luster. The BJP experienced a stunning defeat in Uttar Pradesh, the Hindi heartland state that has been the laboratory of Hindutva politics over the last decade. The setback comes just a few months after the much-hyped consecration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, which was supposed to polarize religious feelings during the election. The BJP lost the Faizabad constituency, which includes Ayodhya, despite extensively campaigning on the Ram temple issue.

Explaining the Setback

How can we understand such an election result for a leader whose popularity ratings have always been high? Is it simply a reflection of anti-incumbent sentiment? Are we seeing widespread discontent at inflation, unemployment, and rising public suffering on the one hand, and the government's attempt to impose unpopular measures such as farm regulations or labor law reforms on the other?

It has long been clear that the BJP loses elections that are based on (deflected) class issues, while elections dominated by communal themes and chauvinism have favored its return to power. This is a pattern we have observed in previous state-level elections.

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Setbacks for the BJP in [Karnataka](#) last year, and earlier in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and other states, show how the party lost power when it failed to polarize public opinion along communal and chauvinistic lines. Its success in promoting such polarization in Uttar Pradesh, on the other hand, turned the state into the BJP's strongest bastion in the country and the laboratory of Indian-style fascism.

Modi's political formula had worked best in the parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019, when he projected himself as a strong leader capable of assuring the country's political and economic security. This time, however, his campaign lacked a unifying narrative, resulting in a provincialization of political concerns.

With state-centered issues coming to the fore, the Modi formula lost much of its appeal. The BJP was also unable to cast Modi as a beacon of hope for development, as this might simply have opened a can of worms in view of the current socioeconomic situation.

As he leaned on the issue of Ram temple, the prime minister hoped to beat back the challenges of a loose opposition coalition. The "400 plus" slogan was intended to mobilize voters and create disarray within the opposition ranks. But it backfired, supplying the opposition with a rallying cry, as it warned that a landslide victory would enable the BJP to amend India's constitution.

While Muslims and other religious minorities were the ones most horrified by such a prospect, Dalits and "Other Backward Classes" (OBCs) were also concerned that their reservations might be taken away. The INC and other opposition parties cleverly capitalized on the BJP's resistance to conducting a caste census. The shift in votes from Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs cost the party dearly in North India.

The Way Forward

We also need to recognize the importance of mass action in the past few years. The BJP lost thirty-

eight seats in the constituencies that saw active participation in the [farmers' struggle](#) against [Modi's neoliberal laws](#). From farmers to doctors to the movements against the discriminatory citizenship law, each battle shifted popular opinion against the BJP government.

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While a large section of society actively marched on the streets, ignoring the danger of serious reprisals, an even larger number silently endorsed the mood and acted in this year's polling booths. With the iron fist of Modi's autocracy apparently showing signs of weakness, more such movements are bound to occur in the future, given the all-pervasive crisis that is engulfing us. But are spontaneous outbreaks of protest enough to defeat the threat of fascism?

Let us not forget that we are dealing with a powerful adversary that has the lethal capacity to strike back, given the global right-wing upsurge. The BJP has a track record of springing back powerfully after each electoral setback, assisted by the strong presence of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its fascist network of supporters on the ground.

We need a clearly articulated strategy and a counterhegemonic narrative based on an anti-capitalist transformative vision with a strong democratic component. The Indian left ought to be playing a central role in this project, but it is not a force to reckon with in the current Indian political landscape, even though India's communist parties have slightly increased their parliamentary presence from six to nine seats.

For too long, India's left has been bogged down in parliamentarism without any real strategy and has slowly but steadily lost touch with its constituencies on the ground. The mainstream left finds itself unable to win support from any section of the masses suffering under the impact of multiple crises.

While the BJP has not secured an absolute majority, the party has certainly not been vanquished, and we should not be tempted to exaggerate the opposition's achievements. However, there are certain outcomes of the 2024 result that need to be carefully analyzed.

As well as bringing Modi's image of hegemonic invincibility into question, the election has also returned the country to a situation of coalition government after a decade of single-party control. A strong government with total control over parliament would not have augured well for the interests of the working class, while a weak government led by Modi may open up certain options and possibilities for India's left and social movements.

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P.S.

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