

Elections (India) : Narendra Modi Has Lost His Aura of Political Invincibility

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Narendra Modi boasted that his party would win a supermajority in India's parliament, but he came up short and had to form a coalition to stay in power. Modi's surprising setback creates an opportunity to push back against his authoritarian project.

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Indian prime minister Narendra Modi speaks to members of the media outside the President's House in New Delhi, India, on June 7, 2024. (Prakash Singh / Bloomberg via Getty Images)

One rather amusing observation about the Indian election results was that for one side, victory seemed like defeat, while for the other, defeat seemed like victory.

A more accurate way of summing up the political impact of these elections would be as follows. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Narendra Modi's Hindutva ideology have not been challenged, let alone rejected, there are nonetheless powerful limits as to how far the forces of Hindutva can sustain or expand their political hegemony through a form of politics based primarily on this ideology.

Before elaborating on these limits, let us consider the basic facts emerging from the results.

Falling Short

The BJP won 240 out of the total 543 Lok Sabha seats. Together with its coalition partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), it won 293 seats, crossing the 272-seat threshold for a parliamentary majority.

This means that the BJP will form a government for its third consecutive term. However, unlike the previous two occasions when it secured a majority on its own, this time the party will be crucially dependent on two political allies to form a government and keep it going, both of which have a history of periodically working with and then against the BJP. The Telegu Desam Party (TDP) of

Andhra Pradesh (AP), headed by Chandrababu Naidu, secured sixteen Lok Sabha seats, while the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), of Bihar, whose leader is Nitish Kumar, secured twelve seats.

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Modi repeatedly declared throughout the campaign that the BJP alone would cross the two-thirds majority mark of around 370 seats in the lower house. Now he not only has to eat crow, but he also has to make significant concessions to these two parties that the opposition bloc, the Indian National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), will also keep trying to woo.

Although the BJP's national vote share of around 37 percent is roughly the same as it was in 2019, the party lost sixty-three seats. It gained ground in the East in the state of Orissa, where it has made a significant breakthrough in popularity, and has raised somewhat its modest vote share in the South, in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

What caused the drop for Modi's party was its failure in certain key states in the Hindi heartland, most notably in the biggest and most-populated state of Uttar Pradesh or UP (with a population of about 240 million, UP would have the world's fifth-largest population if it were an independent state). The BJP dominated in UP during the previous two elections and was expected to sweep the board this time around.

The state is one of the key bastions of Hindutva forces, from those belonging to the political family headed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to other groups owing greater loyalty to the Hindu preacher and current chief minister Yogi Adityanath. But the INDIA bloc actually won more seats than the NDA in UP, with the Indian National Congress (INC) taking six and the Samajwadi Party (SP) thirty-seven out of the total eighty seats available.

Opposition Unity

The other two big states outside the Hindi heartland where the BJP expected to improve on its previous tally were Maharashtra and West Bengal. In the latter state, the ruling Trinamul Congress (TMC) secured twenty-nine of the forty-two seats, with the BJP getting twelve. In the former, the INC and the regional parties aligned with the opposition bested the BJP and its local allies.

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the poll. While there was no meaningful consensus or unity between them on programmatic grounds, they did come to a basic agreement on how to share seat allocations among their respective party candidates.

This led to effective vote transfers from their respective social bases. Out of the total seat share of INDIA — 234 seats — the INC obtained one hundred, up from fifty-two last time. The mainstream left chiefly represented by India's communist parties collectively got only nine seats, up from a mere six seats last time. This means that the capacity of the Left to influence the INDIA bloc on what issues to take up jointly and the way to fight for them will be very limited.

For all their inadequacies — not rejecting the legacies of Stalinism or Maoism is an ideological handicap in the training of their cadres — these left parties are more social democratic in their economic orientation than the other forces in the opposition alliance, although they do make concessions to neoliberal practices. They also do not play the game of soft Hindutva as the INC and other parties do. The Indian left seriously needs to engage in introspection after this result.

What this election has shown is that there are three major obstacles to the much-anticipated electoral-political advance of Modi and his ruling party. These obstacles are economic, federal, and social in nature.

Barriers to Hindutva

Perhaps around 20 to 25 percent of Hindus have been so strongly radicalized over the last few decades that they are now very strongly loyal to the BJP, the Sangh, and other Hindutva forces, no matter what. It is from this layer that the movement's cadres and activists are drawn. But there remain great difficulties in creating a much bigger, wider, and more homogeneous "Hindu bloc" for political purposes.

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Very widespread feelings of economic unhappiness, in particular at the lack of employment opportunities and decent-paying jobs, have negatively affected the BJP. Youth unemployment is steadily rising and gets worse as one goes up the educational ladder. The proportion of young graduates without a job is around 42 percent.

The various freebies that the Modi government has distributed, such as modest cash transfers to women, provision of free and standardized food grain packets, free gas connections, concessional loans for tiny businesses, subsidized power, and so on, are part of an overall economic policy that we can describe as a form of "compensatory neoliberalism." This policy has increased the inequalities of income and wealth to obscene levels. The top 1 percent of the population accounts for over 22 percent of total income, and wealth distribution is even worse.

According to the study [*Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922-2023*](#) by Thomas Piketty and his colleagues, fewer than ten thousand people have a total wealth share that is nearly three times

greater than that of the bottom 50 percent of the population. With a current total of 271 dollar billionaires (ninety-four of whom emerged in 2023 alone), India now ranks behind only China and the United States in the size of its billionaire class.

Socially, caste division remains a huge problem for the BJP and Hindutva. They have sought to provide cultural upliftment for members of the lower castes through absorption, promotion, and celebration of their deities and rituals within a looser, more accommodating, but still Brahminized understanding of Hinduism. This approach has paid some dividends, but not enough.

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There are sections of the Dalits, OBCs (“Other Backward Classes” or middle castes), and tribals that have rallied to and stayed with the BJP. Yet others are quite prepared to shift allegiances politically and electorally if they think this will benefit them on the local and regional scales. This explains why the SP could do so well in UP.

For those below the upper castes, basic material concerns will lead to greater prioritization of their narrower caste loyalties over their broader religious affiliations. Such concerns also promote undeclared, class-based forms of political-electoral collaboration. There is after all a basic overlap between membership of lower castes and lower classes.

Moreover, Muslims vote as a bloc for the opposition parties that they believe will fare best against the BJP. The latter gets the most solid support from the upper castes, and this happened again in this year’s election. There is an inherent problem for the BJP of how far it can go in retaining that upper-caste loyalty while at the same time extending and enduringly stabilizing its existing degree of influence among the castes below.

Federal Diversity

When it comes to the federal dimension, we have just seen a decisive affirmation of its importance. India’s size and differing spatial and geographical histories, as well as its ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and social diversities, ensure that regional political formations will remain influential.

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The BJP has a longer-term project of eliminating or subordinating all electoral competitors, with the

INC and the mainstream left being the most strongly marked targets, since they obviously would never align with it. Over the last few decades, the BJP appeared to be succeeding in this project as it became the dominant force in more and more states.

Many regional parties that collaborated with Modi's saw themselves being weakened as the BJP cannibalized their social and electoral base, as well as through large-scale defections of many of their former leaders to a more powerful (and much richer) party. These parties have realized that their very existence as regional forces of significant weight requires them to avoid succumbing to the embrace of the BJP. It is this consideration, rather than serious ideological or policy differences, that constitutes the main source of pressure serving to keep them apart from the BJP.

By working with these parties and conceding seniority status in the states where they were stronger, the INC benefited overall. The INC contested much fewer constituencies than in the previous election and only increased its vote share by a small amount but saw its seat share rise dramatically from fifty-two in 2019 to one hundred today.

The INC will now be leading the opposition in parliament, where the BJP will find it more difficult to pass all the laws and measures it would want. It can no longer ride roughshod over proper parliamentary procedures in the way it did previously.

What Comes Next ?

On foreign-policy matters, the BJP will continue to decide the direction, so let us leave that topic aside. It is the domestic arena that is all-important to watch. Modi must solidify the NDA, which means giving important cabinet posts to the JD(U) and TDP, even though the BJP will keep the top four ministries : defense, home affairs, finance, and external affairs.

The relationship with the BJP's regional allies will prove tricky to manage when they press for certain forms of special largesse from the central government to the states of Bihar and AP. This is likely to arouse some level of contestation, since other state governments composed of parties aligned with the INDIA bloc (or even with the NDA) will be unhappy at such partisanship.

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For its part, the INDIA bloc will try and stay united, which will also prove challenging. The key unifying force for the alliance has been and remains hostility to the BJP. But such hostility acts as a more powerful adhesive factor while preparing for upcoming elections than in the aftermath of the vote.

Whereas the BJP's weight within the NDA is around four-fifths, that of the INC in the INDIA bloc is around two-fifths. It also does not have recourse to the resources of government to provide leverage. Nor can any opposition party ever come close to matching the finances of the BJP, separately or in combination with others.

Modi will find it more difficult to win over or split opposition parties through large-scale defections. But he can settle for simply making backroom deals with regional parties that can prevent the opposition alliance from repeatedly mounting the kind of united resistance to his policies that is required.

There are three important assembly elections due to be held later this year in Maharashtra and Haryana — two states where the BJP did badly — as well as Jharkhand, where it did well. Depending on what the final results prove to be, they will give a strong fillip to the unity of one or the other bloc.

The coming period of six months to a year is going to be very important. There will be policy confrontations whose scale, depth, and final outcomes we cannot now be confident of predicting. There is also another dynamic that will be in operation.

Modi is an extremely autocratic personality who has never shown (or had to show) skills in managing a coalition or making compromises, even on domestic issues. During his time as chief minister in Gujarat, where the BJP was supreme, he could rule uncontested. As India's prime minister, he did not seriously bother about the other parties in the NDA since he had a single-party majority.

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Moreover, while he is utterly loyal to the Hindutva project, he has always placed himself above the RSS as an organization, although it is the parent body of the whole network of organizations that make up the Sangh Parivar, including the BJP. Modi has deliberately sought to make the top leadership of the RSS more beholden and subordinate to himself and his second-in-command, Home Minister Amit Shah, who also has his own ambitions.

There will now be greater dissent and tension between the RSS and the BJP, as well as within the BJP itself between those who are strong Modi loyalists and those who are not. It remains to be seen what lasting outcomes will result from these various interactions within the BJP and the NDA as well as the back-and-forth effects of contestations in the wider political arena.

The Hindutva Agenda

So what measures can we expect the government to carry out in the short and medium term, and with what degree of aggressiveness? What initiatives will it consider initiating more cautiously, or pursue at a slower tempo, or perhaps hold back indefinitely, until it considers circumstances to be more favorable?

We can sum up the goals guiding the BJP's Hindutva project in the following manner :

- 1) Eliminate and subordinate all electoral competitors
- 2) Hollow out the structures of democracy and federalism

3) Restrict the space for, and willingness to, dissent

4) Ideologically homogenize the media and education to make Hindu nationalism the public common sense

5) Terrorize and ghettoize Muslims and make them second-class citizens and politically obedient

The first goal has now suffered a serious setback. This naturally means that it will be more difficult for the BJP to further hollow out India's federalism on top of what it has so far achieved.

Some other BJP ambitions are also now significantly stalled. With insufficient MPs at his disposal in the two parliamentary houses, there is no likelihood in the current election term of Modi's government securing his One Nation, One Poll (ONOP) project, which would mean simultaneous conducting central and state assembly elections.

The BJP has gravely undermined the system of checks and balances that relies on the relatively independent powers of the various structures and apparatuses of the Indian state.

A long-delayed census has to take place. But the project of carrying out at the same time a National Population Register (NPR) to collect detailed personal data will meet more resistance. The NPR, once completed, is meant to segue into the establishment of a National Register of Citizens (NRC). This basically aims to create a category of "doubtful citizens" who do not have sufficient documentary proof of their status, of whom a very high proportion would certainly be Muslims.

A further process of adjudication would then determine who the "illegals" are, and they would be disenfranchised and placed in long-term internment camps where they could be subject to forced labor. The work of preparing this whole structure, including the first stages of building several internment camps, already began in the previous term. But this process will now most likely be slowed down or held back for some time, given the previous opposition by many non-BJP state governments, which will be reinforced in the wake of the elections.

As for the process of hollowing out the key institutions of democratic governance, over the last ten years, the BJP has gravely undermined the system of checks and balances that relies on the relatively independent powers of the various structures and apparatuses of the Indian state. It has succeeded in substantially suborning the Supreme Court (SC), the Election Commission (which behaved in a shamefully partisan manner during these polls), and the top rungs of the Central Services Bureaucracy.

Most regional parties, with their narrower geographical focuses, did not seriously speak out against what was happening on these fronts at an earlier stage. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the INC and other parties have accepted (and will not challenge) unconstitutional changes that have dramatically transformed the Indian polity.

These changes are the annulment of Article 370 on Kashmir's status ; the SC verdict endorsing the destruction of the Babri Masjid and its replacement by the Ram Mandir ; and the Citizenship

Amendment Act (CAA), which for the first time introduced the principle of religious discrimination (against Muslims) into a law pertaining to citizenship.

Ideological Conformity

When it comes to the third point on the Hindutva agenda, there has been systematic politicization of the police and other security and investigative agencies. The government has used them to go after its opponents, from party leaders to civil society organizations and groups critical of government policies as well as dissident individuals.

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There is no particular reason why this process should not continue. New criminal laws that will make India into more and more of a police state are coming into force from July. The BJP's new partners will not oppose these laws. We will have to see if the INC-led INDIA bloc will try to launch mass mobilizations and public resistance against them.

The public media, apart from those outlets that are directly owned and controlled by the government, is characterized by the domination of a few very big media houses, each of which has numerous TV channels and major print outlets at its disposal. The big players in this field are close to the Modi government for financial and other reasons. Meanwhile, smaller capitalist proprietors in print and electronic media realize how important government advertising is for them. Regional parties want to control regional media outlets and their owners, but how much can they offer them ?

When it comes to the transformation of educational curricula at the school and university level in line with Hindutva precepts, it is the left-wing unions of students and teachers that have been in the forefront of resistance. Owing to their posture of soft Hindutva, the INC-led unions have been much weaker and more sporadic in their resistance to such measures. University campuses, with very few exceptions, have no Dalit student groups of any size and influence.

At a national level, the student and teacher federations controlled by the RSS and BJP are by far the biggest and strongest. The coalition-based character of the new government will not really affect the existing policy direction on the educational front.

Religious Minorities

Since Modi became prime minister, the BJP has avoided large-scale riots against Muslims or Christians. The exception to this rule is in the northeastern state of Manipur, where both state and central governments have backed the brutal physical assaults of Hindu and non-Christian Meitei tribal groups on the majority Christian Kuki-Zo hill tribal population.

This violence is motivated by the aim of grabbing more hill land for housing and farm settlements and for exploitation of its forest and mineral wealth. However, these tribes have kinship connections

with nearby Christian-majority states in India and across the border in Myanmar and have fought back, creating something of a political stalemate.

Macro-level violence against Muslims in BJP-ruled states has largely been replaced by routinized, micro-level violence and harassment of Muslims.

It is no surprise that the INC won both the Lok Sabha constituencies here. The Manipur issue remains to be stabilized one way or the other, whether through successful mass repression or through concessions and compromise by the center.

Macro-level violence against Muslims in BJP-ruled states has largely been replaced by routinized, micro-level violence and harassment of Muslims, which occasionally flares up to a somewhat higher intensity. The authorities then step in to restore an uneasy calm, with measures taken that are intended more to satisfy the culprit gangs than to protect the victims. This pattern creates a general climate of perpetual fear among local Muslims that helps to keep them under stronger control. The organizations of the Sangh will continue along this well-worn path.

However, bloc voting by Muslims against the BJP has had a real impact on the poll results. The BJP is prepared to permanently alienate Muslims and abandon seeking their votes ; indeed, its core ideology guarantees this. However, this is not the attitude of its new regional partners.

Nor is it the stance of the parties in the INDIA bloc, who will try to balance soft Hindutva with assurances of protection and support for Muslims. The new relationship of forces between the BJP and the opposition will afford some small relief to the Muslim community even in the Hindi heartland states.

Popular Resistance

The key factor that can most threaten the existing hegemony of the Sangh and the BJP's political appellation is an as yet intangible one. How much independent popular resistance will there be against the new government ?

One guarantee that there will be great public discontent and eruptions is the state of the Indian economy.

One says "independent" because opposition parties that are otherwise divided by their various sectoral concerns and political ambitions will find it very difficult to remain aloof from public campaigns that are not the handiwork of any particular party and cannot be dismissed and maligned as such by the BJP-led government. Will these upsurges happen more frequently and on a large scale ?

One guarantee that there will be great public discontent and eruptions is the state of the Indian economy. Although Modi will likely provide more handouts, the structural deficiencies will remain. Had the poll result given the BJP a majority, it would have moved to carry out the policies that the farmers' agitation of 2011 blocked, this time in a more gradual and piecemeal manner.

This would mean promoting the polarization of landholdings so as to enable much greater contractualization and corporatization of agricultural production, processing, and retailing. Now it will be more difficult to impose such changes, certainly in the short and medium term.

This scheme was never going to resolve the key problem of the Indian economy : namely, the

dilemma of an agricultural sector that accounts for 14 percent of GDP but provides over half the total workforce with its principal source of income. It is not clear how any capitalist reform measure could solve this issue. India remains the country with the largest absolute numbers of undernourished and malnourished citizens.

On the all-important democratic front, we can draw some degree of optimism from the fact that the ongoing “forward march” of the forces of Hindutva has lost its earlier sense of inevitability. While the general political shadow of intimidation and fear of legal harassment and punishment for those willing to oppose the Modi government has by no means disappeared, it has nonetheless been lightened.

The steady authoritarian drift toward cumulative erosion of civil liberties has been halted temporarily. There is now an opportunity for widening the liberal-democratic space that can and should be grasped. The sooner this momentum is created, the better the chances of progressively strengthening the resilience of the Indian polity against its most dangerous far-right enemy, the Sangh Parivar.

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• Jacobin. 06.12.2024 :

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