

India's General Election: Clear Signal "Modi 2.0"!

More than 900 million voters in India were called to elect a new parliament. Results released 23 May, after seven election phases from April to May with a turnout of 67%, saw a landslide victory for the Modi government and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Narendra Modi's victory was no surprise. But the return to power with a greater majority than before is contrary to media speculations and election forecasts. What was not expected is the poor outcome for the opposition, primarily the traditional Indian National Congress (INC) led by Rahul Gandhi, grandson of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and great grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, as well as a few regional parties. The major opposition alliance won just 91 of 545 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, compared to 303 seats of Modi's BJP. Modi, the strongman, has emerged even stronger now.

Narendra Modi was first elected in 2014. His campaign then had focused on the poor economic performance of the Congress-led Manmohan Singh government, their scandalous corruption cases, the general standstill of development and the INC's lack of vision for India's future. Modi promised jobs and foreign investments, cutting of red tape in the proverbial bureaucracy and getting rid of corruption. He propagated dozens of major projects – "smart cities", "clean Ganga", "make in India", "digital India", "StartUpIndia", "Skill India" and so on. It was laundry list of good intentions. On some projects he actually delivered: More than 90 million toilets in more than 560 000 villages were built to improve hygienic conditions in rural India. Reform of the healthcare program has affected 100 million of the poorest in the country. Other projects just remained pipedreams and the holy river Ganga looks more like a cloaca than a worshiped river.

The INC emphasized in its election manifesto "Hum Nibhayenge" (we shall deliver) the high unemployment, the misery of small farmers, security of women and minimum wages and criticized the Modi government for his broken promises. Modi, in turn, called the INC manifesto „a hypocritical document of lies". And he added that Congress put in the reverse gear when they were in power. The typical campaign rows!

Modi's two most important political short-comings of his first five years in office are his party's divisive ideology and the slow economic development. His BJP pursues Hindu-nationalistic, occasionally Hindu-chauvinistic domestic aims, evident in areas such as education and religious policy. He tolerated "Hindutva" (Hinduness) extremists and hardliners in his party who don't shy away from discriminating non-Hindu groups and propagate a homogenic Hindu society. Their "Hindutva" ideology is the opposite of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence and Jawaharlal Nehru's secular society. Modi's second political failure is the economic performance during his five-year term in office: Although India experiences a phenomenal annual economic growth rate of seven percent, the unemployment rate is now higher than in previous decades. The big push of building up new industries is absent. Small and medium sized farmers experience existential crisis and Modi's monetary reforms with the idea of demonetization have had disastrous effects on the urban middle classes and millions of small traders. Productivity in the agricultural sector in India is less than half of China's. Although Modi got reforms started, the society experiences a slow pace of change to remove the systemic flaws of a clogged and bureaucratic system as well as a time-consuming transformation of a problem-ridden economy.

Why did Modi and his party win again so over-whelmingly anyway? Apparently, Modi's lack of economic success and troublesome ideology did not prevent his election triumph. Modi has always presented himself as the guy who gets things done – never one to hang about rusting. He simply played with the contrast between “Naamdar” versus “Kaamdar”. These Hindi words for members of elitist families, which Rahul Gandhi certainly is, versus the hard-working people like he himself, who started in one of the millions of India's tea shops and worked himself up. Modi presented himself as someone who dashes forward to face the challenges, while he discredited his various opponents as representatives of a fading dynasty, as proponents of caste politics, as regionally based patriarchs and matriarchs.

Modi, no doubt a great communicator, got this message across to people. He delivered with some of the programs for poorer people and he conveyed the message of a rising India that can play a larger global role. The reawakening of nationalism and patriotism gives India's citizens a sense of pride. Voters still remember the Congress party corruption scandals, while Modi, apparently, was able to fight corruption and appears personally as a corruption-free politician. He reformed a complicated, multiple and intransparent taxes system levied by the state and central governments and replaced it by a nation-wide Goods and Services Tax.

During the election campaign, both the government and the opposition competed with each other about their patriotism. In February 2019, one of the regular border skirmishes between Pakistan and India escalated into bombings across the border. Security became an electoral issue. While the opposition downplayed the incident, Modi presented himself as the savior of the nation. He had ordered the armed forces to respond decisively and played this tune during the election campaign. The opposing duo Modi-Gandhi did not hesitate to show a certain degree of hubris, bragging about India's military satellite orbited in March 2019. Both tend to portrait India as a big global and space power, although the country's problems are more on the ground, given the fact that it is host to the largest number of poor in the world.

No doubt, Modi has got more reforms started than any other Prime Minister in recent decades. But he has not been able to hold all his promises. Interestingly, in contrast to his domestic policy, the foreign policy is not focused on the BJP “Hindutva” ideology with the emphasis on Hindu civilization and a homogenous Hindu society. In contrast to its Hinduism focus in domestic social and political policies, the BJP subscribed fully to liberalized foreign trade and to an internationalist foreign policy. Modi struggled in his first term in office to improve India's relations in the region and tries to play the peaceful and benign hegemon.

It can be expected that this approach will continue with a more powerful Narendra Modi in the driver's seat. In his first speech after his outstanding victory he emphasized his willingness in favor of inclusive politics. One urgent priority, indeed, should be restraint from divisive policies at the expense of minorities. The second is the dire state of the economy. One political commentator, Indranij Banerjee, warned about the danger of having “to suffer the hubris of a leader who believes he has made no mistakes and can do no wrong.” This could lead to both economic and political disasters.

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