

Voters Tell Modi: Keep Going, But Under Caution

Ramesh Thakur

The biggest takeaway from India's eighteenth general election is that the death of Indian democracy has been much exaggerated. The exercise was a resounding win for the election machinery of the world's most populous democracy. The entire exercise and the outcome affirm once again the competence, professionalism and integrity of the country's election machinery. 'India is starting to look like a [Central Asian dictatorship](#),' said an article in the *Australian Financial Review* on 7 May. Really? That particular analyst will not be the only one with egg on their face.

A longstanding cliché holds that every statement about India is true, but so is its opposite. The truth is that Modi's India has become more illiberal than many Indians, as well as Westerners, are comfortable with, but his mass appeal has endured because he has provided the most competent governance in decades that delivered more tangible outcomes on the ground.

India's Magnificent Election Machinery

India has the world's most efficient, effective and credible election machinery. The Election Commission of India (ECI) does a brilliant job of organising and conducting elections, counting votes and certifying results under the most challenging of circumstances. The ECI is a constitutional office with correspondingly elevated status, authority and importance. The Chief Election Commissioner is given security of tenure on par with the judges of the

Supreme Court of India. Not one of the many federal and state elections since 1950 has had the overall outcome questioned. This is not an assertion that can be made of the US, to take one example, with any degree of plausibility.

The total number of registered voters is 968 million, of whom 642 million voted. The 66.3 per cent turnout (down from 67.1 per cent—604 million—in 2019) is 2.5 times the total number of voters in the 27 European Union (EU) countries. At 312 million, women voters were 1.25 times the total voters of the EU 27.

The ECI is vested with enormous powers to organise and conduct national and state elections, recognise political parties, establish procedures for the nomination of candidates and register all eligible voters. It also has the responsibility to delimit all the parliamentary and state assembly constituencies. This takes away opportunities to gerrymander constituencies to favour the party in power.

Elections were conducted in seven phases and spread over 44 days from 19 April to 1 June. Counting began at 8.00 am on 4 June and most individual results and the national outcome were known by the end of the day. The reason for the staggered voting is the sheer scale of the exercise spread across [28 states and 8 Union Territories](#). The numbers are eye glazing. The size of the individual constituencies ranges from 800,00 to 3.15 million people. Around 1.05 million polling stations were manned by 15 million personnel. There were 5.5 million electronic voting machines (EVMs) to tabulate the results.

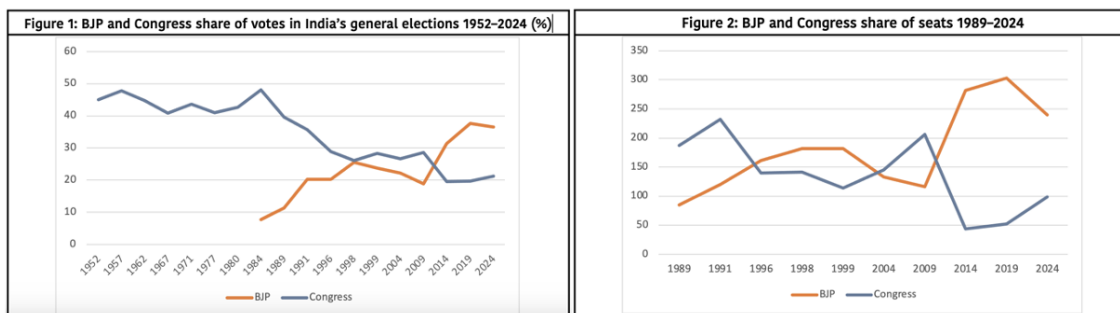
Voting choices include 'None of the Above' – NOTA. This follows a decision of the Supreme Court on 27 September 2013 that voters have this right and the ECI was directed to provide a button accordingly in all EVMs. The option has been used in elections for state legislative and Lok Sabha (House of the People) elections since 2013. That said, in the counting process NOTA is treated as an invalid vote. Even if NOTA tops the votes, the next highest polling candidate is still declared elected. This is done to ensure there is no disruption to the elections.

The Results

With 543 elected seats in the Lok Sabha, a party or alliance needs a minimum of 272 seats to form the government. The incumbent government since 2014 has been a multiparty coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that came together in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The multiparty opposition bloc, including the Indian National Congress, was called the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Despite the multitude of political parties across the many states, there are only two really pan-national parties: BJP and Congress. In parliamentary systems that operate on the first past the post system, as in the UK, the candidate with the most votes is elected, even if well short of the fifty per cent majority threshold. This has two major distorting consequences. First, if there are several political parties competing on one side of an ideological divide or policy program, their votes are fragmented and it is considerably easier for the other side to emerge victorious. Second, between the two major parties, if both poll substantial votes,

slight readjustments to vote shares produce dramatically wide differences in seat shares. The impact of this double distortion for the BJP and Congress is shown in Figures 1 and 2.



In this year’s election, the BJP’s strength fell substantially from 303 to 240 seats and that of the NDA alliance fell from 354 to 293. Meanwhile Congress almost doubled its seats tally from 52 to 99 and the INDIA group claimed 234 compared to just 93 in 2019. The BJP’s vote share also fell from 37.7 to 36.6 per cent, while that of Congress climbed from 19.7 to 21.2 per cent. In a particularly [telling statistic](#), five years ago the BJP had won 224 seats with more than 50 per cent votes in each constituency. This year the number fell to 156.

The BJP had set itself the target of increasing its number of seats to 370, with additional seats for allies taking the combined NDA total to beyond 400. This was expressed in the campaign slogan *abki baar, 400 par* (this time round, across the 400 threshold). Exit polls, published after the final round of voting finished on the evening of 1 June, fuelled the expectations of an increased BJP majority. After the exit polls, Modi took a dig at the ‘opportunistic’ INDIA alliance and said the [‘casteist, communal and corrupt’](#) combine of dynastic parties had been rejected by the people.

That dismissive assessment proved premature. The actual results thus added to the shock of expectations belied. This was evident in the contrasting moods – a jubilant and celebratory Congress and INDIA alliance and a sombre and introspective BJP.

#NDTVPollOfPolls Lok Sabha 2024		Seats: 543 Target: 272	
Source	NDA	I.N.D.I.A	OTH
India News- D-Dynamics	371	125	47
Jan Ki Baat	362-392	141-161	10-20
Republic Bharat- Matrizo	353-368	118-133	43-48
Republic TV - P MARQ	359	154	30
NDTV Poll of Polls	365	142	36

Interpreting the People's Verdict

The government went into the election with the appeal of continuity. The BJP enjoyed an unmatched country-wide organisational machinery; massive advantages in political fundraising; a record of stable governance, streamlined and efficient welfare programs with digitisation taking delivery directly to recipients, cutting out middlemen and cutting down corruption, extortion and delays; and the perception of a greatly enhanced India's global image.

Narendra Modi becomes the first leader since founding Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru to win three consecutive elections. The BJP's campaign this year was the most personalised in the history of a party that has previously shunned a personality cult that it associated with the Congress disease. Modi the strongman was projected and perceived as incorruptible, with no children for whom a new political dynasty was being founded. Indians were his family instead, a decisive leader with a strong and disciplined work ethic who would oversee development and prosperity while safeguarding India's security. His vision for India's future was inextricably tied to his own public image of a leader connected to the people through social networks exploiting innovative technology.

Modi made himself available for an extraordinary number of media interviews. By contrast, the gaffe prone Congress chief Rahul Gandhi refused to do any and thereby avoided committing a single gaffe.

Modi is unquestionably a colossus bestriding India's political landscape and also a dominant current world leader. He remains immensely popular at home, employs powerful oratory, connects emotionally, leverages his popularity in state elections and is easily the party's strongest asset. That said, Modi's trusted right-hand man, election strategist and the face of Hindutva, Home Minister Amit Shah, did come out from Modi's shadow as a key campaigner in his own right.

Yet, no previous election was so clearly and totally identified with and centred around a single individual. The BJP sought votes for Modi as its one all-India candidate and the opposition parties reciprocated by targeting him as the opponent they wanted checked and defeated. Consequently, the conclusion is inescapable that Brand Modi has been dented and his aura of invincibility punctured.

Unlike the previous two elections, this time round most of the opposition parties did manage to cobble together seat-sharing and non-compete arrangements to maximise their chances of success. If next time they can agree on a prime ministerial candidate in advance, they will be far better positioned to compete in elections that, as in other parliamentary democracies including Australia and the UK, have become increasingly presidential.

The BJP and Modi may have fallen victim to hubris and complacency. Surrounded by sycophants and courtiers, with a reputation for not taking kindly even to constructive and well-meaning criticism, and having co-opted, bribed and intimidated most of the media, the PM and party had lost all channels of communication to gauge the popular sentiment and people's concerns with any degree of reliability.

Party loyalists were further disaffected by the number of popular incumbents who were shunted aside in favour of political lightweights and, even worse, political turncoats from other parties. 'You cannot order us to blacken a corrupt Congress leader's face one day and then turn around and ask us to campaign for him the next', one [BJP worker protested](#).

The BJP also failed to come up with a winning overarching national narrative. In 2014, the party promised *achche din* ('good times'/'better days') to separate it from the drift, corruption and general bad governance of the Congress-led coalition government that had been in power for ten years. In 2019, it was the double barreled *abki baar, phir Modi sarkar* ('this time, again a Modi government') and *Modi hai, to mumkin hai* ('so long as Modi is there, anything is possible', which riffed off the common perception that Modi was the solution to every problem that India faced), playing to his reputation for decisive leadership.

This year the attempt at *abki baar, 400 paar* backfired as it raised fears of unchecked state excesses with a two-thirds parliamentary majority that could bring about constitutional changes. Some worried about the impact on religious and individual freedoms of a government drunk on power while many others were not prepared to risk any rollback of constitutionally guaranteed affirmative action programs. The slogan was abandoned after the first two rounds of voting.

But the alternative *Modi ki guarantee* (Modi's guarantee) didn't quite stack up against the actual ten-year record of capricious and arbitrary authoritarian tendencies. This included a string of anti-Muslim and sexual assault allegations against BJP and coalition party politicians and supporters that the Modi government was slow to denounce. For example, multiple rapes-accused NDA MP Prajwal Revanna, grandson of former PM HD Deve Gowda, lost from the 'family seat' of Hassan by 46,000 votes.

Growing Discontent

There was rising discontent at the failure of the much-ballyhooed economic miracle to trickle down to the people. India has been the fastest growing major economy but the growth in aggregate GDP was led by government spending and not consumer spending and private sector investment. People were struggling with inflation amidst rising food and fuel prices. Consequently, there has been no matching rise in per capita incomes, no job creation to absorb the new entrants into the labour force to reduce unemployment, especially among the youth. The persistence and indeed widening of inequality further undermined the original promise of *achche din* and the hyperbole of an emerging global economic powerhouse.

While the government was enamoured of its vision of India as a developed economy by the time of the independence centenary in 2047, the people looked back over the decade's experience of rising costs, growing unemployment and widening inequality. The disconnect between the image of a global economic powerhouse with glitzy billionaire moguls throwing lavish wedding parties for the international elite and hundreds of millions of Indians struggling amidst bleak job prospects and soaring costs, proved impossible to bridge.

A country arrives at the demographic sweet spot when the number of dependents, namely children and retirees, form the smallest share of the population and the working age constitutes the biggest cohort. Japan reached this tipping point in the mid-1960s and China thirty years later. India is expected to arrive at its historically low dependency ratio around 2030 and hold that spot for the next 25 years that encompasses the centenary of its independence. This is the timeframe in which India must maximise wealth creation and national prosperity, poverty and inequality reduction and employment. Otherwise the promise of a demographic dividend will morph into the nightmare of rising joblessness, youth unemployment and discontent.

The Limits of Hindutva Politics

Muslims make up 14.2 per cent of India's population, the largest religious minority in the country. Over the last decade, because of acts of commission and omission by BJP governments in New Delhi and many states, Muslims have come to believe they have been targeted with violence and been steadily marginalised in pursuit of the Hindu-first identity for India as one of the BJP's major goals. As explained in [this Policy Brief](#) back in 2021, there is much to justify their fears.

Worried about the all too apparent lack of enthusiasm in the first two phases among party workers and the base compared to 2014 and 2019, Modi decided to descend from his lofty status above the fray into the gutter of political street fights. The reluctance to play Hindu-Muslim politics was shed as he began to use coded but not very subtle references to the threat posed by Muslims to India's Hindu identity and national interests. Former PM [Manmohan Singh](#) complained that Modi's vicious, 'hateful, unparliamentary and coarse' speeches had lowered 'the dignity of public discourse' and the gravitas of the PM's office.

The political history of India since independence shows that the 80 per cent majority Hindu voters can be mobilised along either religious or caste lines. When the BJP went low along the religious divide, several opposition parties responded by taking the parallel low road along the caste divide. Gandhi dubbed the BJP the party of upper caste Hindus and practitioners of crony capitalism that favoured Modi's and Shah's fellow-Gujaratis like the Ambani and Adani industrial families.

In the end, the [dog whistles](#) targeting Muslims hurt Modi. With a total of 80 seats, Uttar Pradesh (UP) is the most politically consequential state of all. The BJP is in power there and its chief minister is the most draconian and hardline Hindu Yogi Adityanath. The regional Samajwadi Party increased its share to 37 seats and Congress won another 6. The BJP's haul was almost halved from 62 to 33.

BJP lost even in Faizabad, within which constituency lies Ayodhya where Modi inaugurated the grand new temple to Lord Rama earlier this year, the Samajwadi Party's candidate was Awadhesh Prasad from the Pasi subcaste. Their winning campaign slogan was '[Na Mathura, Na Kashi, abki baar Awadhesh Pasi](#)' ('Neither Mathura nor Kashi, this time Awadhesh Pasi'). Mathura is where Lord Krishna was from and Kashi is the popular Hindi name for the holy city of Varanasi.

Only 15 of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies have Muslim majorities. On the one hand, that is a substantial bloc of voters if Muslims vote monolithically. On the other hand, such bloc voting ensures a diminished political influence. The BJP writes them off and is unresponsive both to their apprehensions and aspirations. But the Congress Party takes them for granted because they have nowhere else to go and is just as unresponsive, seeking to woo other voting cohorts instead. They should learn tactical voting.

Meanwhile many in the majority Hindu community have also become exhausted with belligerent Hindu nationalism as the only 'political' offering on the table. Some argue that using religion for political gain is anti-Hindu and also, in its divisiveness, anti-national. The 2024 election verdict might indicate the limits of putting identity politics before rising incomes and jobs-led growth.

Abuse of State Power

There was also growing unease with the misuse and abuse of state power to harass and hobble political opponents. The Congress Party's assets were frozen. Two state chief ministers were arrested and many prominent and outspoken opposition leaders lived with the fear of raids and arrests. On 21 March, *The Indian Express* [reported](#) that between Modi becoming PM in 2014 and September 2022, 121 senior politicians had been investigated by the Enforcement Directorate, of whom 115 (95 per cent) were from opposition parties. In the decade in which Modi has been PM, 25 opposition leaders facing corruption probe crossed over to BJP and 23 of them managed to get a reprieve, *The Indian Express* [reported](#) on 3 April.



The screenshot shows the homepage of The Indian Express website. The main headline reads: "Kejriwal arrest: 95% of ED cases since BJP came to power in 2014 against Opposition leaders". Below this, it states: "A report by The Indian Express showed that between 2014 and September 2022, 121 prominent leaders came under ED radar, 115 of them Opposition leaders; the list has grown since". The sidebar features a prominent article titled "Since 2014, 25 Opposition leaders facing corruption probe crossed over to BJP, 23 of them got reprieve". The website header includes the date "Apr 03, 2024" and the tagline "JOURNALISM OF COURAGE".

The anatomy of a political trial is one where the ruling party tries to evict the leading opponents from the political sphere by incriminating them in crimes and entangling them in the legal process. The defining element of a political trial is not the nature of the alleged crime but the identity of the alleged culprit: 'Show me the man and I'll find you the crime' was Lavrentiy Beria's infamous if apocryphal boast in Stalin's Soviet Union.

Revenge of Regional Parties

The arrogance and high-handedness often took the form of trampling over state governments and sensitivities. This was especially pronounced in Maharashtra, West Bengal and Punjab. The BJP has suffered severe reversals in all three.

One of the more telling trends in the results is the return of powerful regional parties and leaders in those states where the BJP was at its most meddlesome, using central government agencies and the state governors who are appointed by, answerable to and serve at the pleasure of the central government. Destabilising and ‘toppling’ opposition-ruled state governments with financial or political bribes for opposition MPs, and by abusing the post of governor who is appointed by, answerable to and serves at the pleasure of the central government, was another trait of the Congress Party that dominated Indian politics until the 1980s that had sowed revulsion among voters. By employing the same tactics, the BJP destroyed its own carefully cultivated persona of the party that was different.

In the east, the Trinamool Congress went from 19 to 29 of 42 seats in West Bengal (the third biggest among states) while the BJP slipped from 18 to 12. Trinamool Congress candidate [Mahua Moitra](#) won the Krishnanagar Lok Sabha seat by 56,705 votes. She was expelled from Parliament in December 2023 following cash-for-query allegations against her. A BJP-dominated ethics panel had found her guilty and outraged opposition parties had walked out in protest.

Two [Sikh separatists won](#) in Punjab as independents. Amritpal Singh, arrested in April 2023 after a month-long manhunt, campaigned from jail and won by 197,000 votes. Sarabjit Singh Khalsa, the son of one of PM Indira Gandhi’s assassins, won by 70,000 votes. In Maharashtra, the second most populous state after UP with 48 seats, the NDA alliance got just 17 seats and the INDIA bloc won 29. The BJP drew a blank in Punjab (only 13 seats, but symbolically important) and Tamil Nadu (39 seats, the fifth most). But the BJP did achieve a breakthrough of sorts in southern India with one seat in Kerala.

Prospects

[After the 2019 elections](#), I had asked in an analysis in *The Japan Times*: ‘In the second term, will we see the business-friendly Modi who implements bold structural reforms to create the necessary million new jobs every month [or] the divisive cultural nationalist who refuses to check the vicious and ugly lynch mobs who threaten to turn India into a Hindu Pakistan?’

The answer over the following five years was more of the second and less of the first. The voters have duly rebuked him and he should, if he is as smart a politician as he believes, emerge suitably chastened.

In a prescient article in *The Print* on 18 May, veteran journalist [Shekhar Gupta](#) argued:

An additional 30 seats for the BJP, going up to 330s, won't make any difference to the strength of its next government. Thirty fewer will have several substantive consequences... Every Congress seat above 70 will rebalance national politics.

And so it has come to pass.

In sum, therefore, the results are an all-round win-win outcome.

- The BJP gets to form a third consecutive government to consolidate its transformative agenda.
- Coalition allies will have more say in governance.
- Congress and other opposition parties have given a respectable showing and will form a credible opposition and be better positioned to hold the government accountable.
- The return of regional parties means the prospect of over-centralisation, which would constitute an existential threat to India's unity, has receded.
- The potential for mining anti-Muslim sentiment to mobilise the Hindu vote has been exhausted.

The superficial continuity of the first bullet point is deceptive because it masks the deeper reality of significant change. The BJP lost more than one-fifth of seats and no longer commands a majority on its own. Although the BJP has led a coalition government since 2014, it has not been reliant on parties in the alliance for a majority in parliament. Modi had no such need in Gujarat either.

Working with fractious allies whose votes he needs for implementing the BJP policy agenda and getting laws passed will not come naturally to the imperious PM. The two most critical leaders of the minor allies are Chandrababu Naidu from Telengana and Nitish Kumar from Bihar, with 16 and 12 MPs respectively. Both are political veterans who have served in BJP-led coalition governments before but left over policy differences.

Normalcy has returned with coalition governance and a more centrist political outlook. The BJP will be forced to become more inclusive and constructive in its approach to nation building. State elections will become a lot more interesting. At the same time, we should expect continuity in India's foreign policy with wariness of China, progressive decoupling of military ties with Russia and gradually strengthening ties with Japan and the major Western countries, without any formal military alliances or pacts.

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