

Modi 2.0 Heralds a New Era in Indian Politics

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Within a span of one week two astonishing electoral victories have dominated the world's media headlines. Scott Morrison led 'miraculous' Liberal National Party coalition victory in Australia, and his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janta Party's landslide victory beating the 2014 record, securing 303 seats in the lower house. Both leaders stand re-elected for another term which will ensure bilateral policy, business and trade continuum.

Modi's massive sweep has obliterated the Indian National Congress—the key national opposition party—which was limited to 52 seats (8 better than 2014) but failed to secure a single seat in 17 states and union territories. The BJP for the first time replaced the INC and the Left parties in Orissa, West Bengal and Assam, as the main opposition party.

From winning just two seats in the 1984 elections to securing 303 seats, 28 more than the majority, and 18 more than in 2014, and 350 overall with its National Democratic Alliance partners, the BJP has rendered the political pundits gobsmacked.

The success can be attributed to Modi's incorruptible political career, towering international stature, simple lifestyle and personal drive to work 15-18 hours a day, which has won wide respect from the people. In the popular narrative, people say, Modi was contesting at all 542 seats, as people largely voted for him, and not the local candidate.

This victory has been underpinned by multiple factors and also heralded new trends in the Indian politics.

First, it has rendered the Nehru-Gandhi style of dynastic politics redundant as the INC President Rahul Gandhi lost the traditional INC seat of Amethi, and secured a win from a safe seat, after moving to the southern tip of Kerala in Waynad helped predominantly by the minority votes. His mother Sonia Gandhi won from Rae Bareilly, but the loss of Amethi, and of other dynastic Congress leaders inter alia, Jyotiradiya Scindia, Milind Deora, Jitin Prasad, Deepender Hooda, heralds a new phase of aspirational politics, where performance now trumps pedigree.

Second, the political machinations caste and minority in states like West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh was rejected decisively, which promotes a pan-Indian identity. West Bengal, under Mamta Bannerjee's Trinamool Congress, witnessed over 80 deaths in political violence and a deeply polarised communal and slanderous debate with Modi and BJP president Amit Shah over law and order, governance and illegal migrants. Here, the BJP jumped from 2 seats in 2014 to an unprecedented 18 seats out of 42, with a vote share of over 40% compared to the dominant TMC's 43%.

Similarly, Uttar Pradesh with the largest number of seats (80), the alliance touted as a game-changer, between the Bahujan Samaj Party (backed by the lower castes), Samajwadi Party (supported predominantly by the Other backward classes and the Muslims) and the Rashtriya Lokdal (a representative of the farmers and Jat community of Western Uttar Pradesh), failed to make a significant dent into BJP's number. The BJP secured 60 seats (13 less from 2014), disproving psephological estimates of less than 25. The rejection of the caste-communal arithmetic and expansion of the BJP as an alternative into far flung states the main opposition portends well for India's federally diverse polity, along caste, class, communal and regional lines.

Third, political ideology on its own failed to appeal to the people if not backed by concrete program delivery on the ground. The INC's offer of farm loan waivers and rupees 72,000 annual sustenance to the "poor" without actually defining the category, failed to woo the voters who questioned its failures over 60 years delivering public goods. The lack of development in Amethi despite being a traditions seat of the Gandhis, and the party's corruption-ridden record rendered Rahul Gandhi's sales pitch to deaf years.

The BJP, instead, targeted the economically weaker section (EWS)/lower income group (LIG), the middle income group (MIG), the Hindu middleclass, and Muslim women.

The EWS and LIG sections were given over 50 million free LPG (cooking gas) connections making cooking a smoke-free chore for women. The \$20 bn Clean India campaign constructed 80 million toilets, improving public hygiene and safeguarding personal dignity and safety of women. Prime Minister housing scheme subsidy for the EWS, LIGs and MIG constructed and refurbished over 10 million houses by March 2019.

Under the Prime Minister public wealth scheme over 330 million bank accounts were opened for the EWS and LIG consumers, raising over \$1 billion in deposits and facilitating a direct transfer of subsidies to the people, bypassing middlemen.

Announcing 10% reservation for the economically backward people from the upper caste, proved a master stroke and full tax exemptions for up to rupees 500,000 income and rupees 6,000 annual assistance to poor farmers further boosted Modi's popularity.

The Triple Talaq Bill pending approval, which criminalises verbal divorce, and on skype and facebook by Muslim men, secured a thumping backing of the Muslim women, and INC objections, to keep the Muslim men pleased, bolstered Modi's standing further.

Fourth, excessive media and opposition assault was cleverly exploited by Modi to his advantage. A barrage of anti-Modi reports in India and the western press since 2014, over farmers' plight, cow-lynching, 'anti-national' debate and right-wing Hindu nationalism (Hindutva) cut little ice among the masses, baring the English-speaking urban liberals and intellectuals. Also, paralysing the functioning of the parliament over corruption allegation, despite a Supreme Court ruling otherwise in the Rafale aircraft deal, and labelling Modi (who described himself as a 'Chowkidar' or a watchman), as anti-poor and coining the phrase Chowkidar is a "chor" (thief) only antagonised the voters further. People overlooked the impact of demonetization and GST for Modi's well-intentioned efforts at curbing corruption and delivering basic amenities such as electricity to 24 million households across 25 states, 28,000 kms of national highways construction beating past records, providing subsidised housing, better sanitation and healthcare schemes to the masses.

Fifth, Modi's success in tackling national security matters firmly turned the BJP's electoral fortunes on its head. India's Surgical strikes following the Pathankot military base attack by terrorists, and Balakot airstrikes following the Pulwama terrorist attack to destroy a Jaish-e-Muhammad camp inside Pakistan, and securing the release of wing commander Abhinandan within 48 hours from Pakistani captivity, left an indelible impact on public minds and subsumed the country with nationalist fervor. In response, demanding proofs of the strikes, eroded the INC's and opposition's public support further.

And last, the INC inability to the cadre discipline of the BJP's discipline, booth level coordination, and ability to connect the apex leadership with the ground workers sowed in the results. Among the BJP, a sense of belongingness was reinforced by Modi's pro-poor and

non-elitist public image and party president Amit Shah's relentless nation-wide campaigning. The decision of Rahul Gandhi to seek a safe seat in Waynad (Kerala) abandoning the traditional set of Amethi, proved cataclysmic for the party. His periodic gaffe in the public and parliamentary speeches, inability to convey the message to the people effectively and motivate the party workers, and a last ditch effort to introduce his sister Priyanka Gandhi, proved not only too little too late, but also out of sync with the new age aspirational and youthful India where performance had laid dynastic entitlements to rest for good.

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