

Hindu monk seen as successor to Modi

Uttar Pradesh chief minister
tipped as next premier but
anti-Muslim rhetoric criticised

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Yogi Adityanath rises at 4am from his hard wooden bed for two hours of meditation and prayer, followed by a simple vegetarian breakfast before the monk settles down to the day's work: governing India's biggest state.

Adityanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, has led the northern Indian state that is more populous than Brazil for nine years, forging a reputation as one of the doughtiest advocates of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-first agenda. Yogi, as he is universally known, is now the favourite to win a third consecutive term in state elections early next year, a victory that would propel him into the front rank of potential successors to Modi, who is 75.

"Yogi-ji is a mirror image of Modi," said one senior national government official, speaking anonymously due to the sensitivities around discussing two of the country's most powerful figures.

Like the prime minister, Adityanath comes from humble stock and cultivates a hardworking, man-of-the-people image. Where the monk has gone further, critics say, is in his aggressive stance towards the state's large Muslim minority, marshalling rhetoric and policy to oppose practices such as intermarriage and the slaughter of cows.

In 2020, he told the BBC that Muslims "did no favour to India by staying" after the partition of the subcontinent following independence from British rule.

Adityanath has also mastered tech. His 80-strong social media team posts clips of the saffron-robed chief minister delivering fiery speeches and inaugurating public works.

"Monastic life is not different from community life," Adityanath told the FT in his official residence in Lucknow, the state capital. "It is a medium for us to understand society and its problems."

Like Modi, Adityanath has focused on rapid economic development. Uttar Pradesh was for decades one of India's least developed states but the monk reeled off with satisfaction figures for



Bearing fruit: chief minister Yogi Adityanath at a mango festival in Uttar Pradesh capital Lucknow in June. He is on course to win a third consecutive term in state elections

Rajesh Kumar Singh/AP

kilometres of roads built, dollars of investment won and companies created since he took office in 2017.

Critics, however, are focused on his divisive rhetoric. "He mobilises Hindus against Muslims," said Christophe Jaffrelot, a south Asia specialist at Sciences Po in Paris. "Uttar Pradesh is a place which has been the crucible of the Mughal empire [an Islamic dynasty which ruled most of northern India until the mid-18th century] and the population is also very high. So it's easier than elsewhere to mobilise Hindus against Muslims in the state."

Official data shows the state has tended to reflect, rather than outperform, national growth, but public sentiment credits Adityanath with an economic transformation and less crime.

"The chief minister has created such a good investment environment," said one leading Indian businessman with interests in the state. "In the past, Uttar Pradesh had law-and-order issues. Nobody talks about that any more."

Shantanu Gupta, author of an approved biography of Adityanath,

pointed to a crackdown on mafias that earned Adityanath the nickname "Bulldozer Baba" after he sent excavators to demolish allegedly illegal properties.

"UP was known for its lawlessness," Gupta said. "I'm from UP. Whenever I went for a job, they would look at me like: 'Oh my God, he's from UP, he might be a criminal.' That was the image."

Gupta argued that Adityanath's majoritarian politics helped attract Hindu voters. "India was made to feel ashamed of its majority religion," he said. "Now it's running the way the world runs... America runs on a Christian ethos, India runs on a Hindu ethos."

Dharmendar Rajput, a migrant labourer, said Adityanath "really works for the poor and is focused on the development of our state".

"Most importantly," Rajput added, "he works for the Hindus. He only goes after those doing wrong." Not everyone sees it that way. Sushant Singh, a south Asia lecturer at Yale University, described Adityanath as India's leading advocate of Hindu supremacism. "That has been his thing throughout, the eco-

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nomic marginalisation of Muslims, the targeting of Muslims by police," Singh said. "Everything has been directed towards... a particular ideology."

Adityanath denied accusations of discrimination. "There's no segregation in implementing welfare schemes," he told the FT. But he has toughened rules against cow slaughter and targeted "love jihad", a phrase used by Hindu rightwingers to allege that Muslims seek to seduce and convert Hindus to try and alter India's balance of faiths.

Adityanath has deployed "Romeo squads" of police with the stated aim of preventing women from being molested in public places. Critics say thousands of consenting youths have been arrested and interfaith couples harassed.

While Adityanath won a second term in state elections in 2022, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party suffered a shock defeat in the state in the national general election two years later.

Adityanath has quarrelled with the BJP. His own political and ideological formation came from the Gorakhnath temple near the Nepal border where he took vows aged 22 and where he is now chief priest, rather than the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the powerful Hindu nationalist movement that forms the backbone of the ruling party.

The party tolerated Adityanath, who was one of India's youngest MPs when he was first elected in 1998 at the age of 26, because of his charisma and campaign skills, analysts said, but he has on occasion backed his own independent candidates, and in 2002 formed his own movement, a "Hindu Youth Brigade".

These days, Adityanath stresses his loyalty to Modi and avoids discussing his own ambitions. He is more careful about his remarks to foreign media.

But analysts are scrutinising his actions for a hint of other motives or a rivalry with another one of Modi's top lieutenants and potential successors, interior minister Amit Shah.

When a scandal erupted in June over the alleged theft of hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations to the Ayodhya temple, a flagship Modi project built on the grounds of a razed mosque in Uttar Pradesh, Adityanath was among the first to demand an investigation and punishment of the culprits.

Yale's Singh said the chief minister was "trying to position himself as the guy who's cleaning it up".