

India Is Increasingly Ruled by One Party, Narendra Modi's

BY TRIPTI LAHIRI
AND KRISHNA POKHAREL

NEW DELHI—Economic discontent often leads to ruling parties being unseated. But in India, that sentiment is working in favor of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ruling party—for now.

Voters in the bastions of two powerful regional political parties have ousted their rulers in state elections, providing a boost to Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in what is being seen as an electoral earthquake. Political experts say voters were driven by economic frustrations over a lack of jobs coupled with complaints against the parties, both key members of an opposition alliance that confronted Modi in national elections two years ago.

In Tamil Nadu, an industrialized southern state where most of Apple's India-assembled iPhones are made, voters ousted a veteran party in favor of a popular movie star with a brand-new party who promised to create thousands of jobs and pay monthly stipends to unemployed graduates.

In West Bengal, a state long seen as a secular holdout against the BJP's ideology, Modi's party won in a land-

slide. The shift toward the BJP was driven by a sense that the state's economic prospects have declined under firebrand leader Mamata Banerjee, along with resentment over the heavy-handed influence of her local party workers. Voters were also angry about the rape and murder of a trainee doctor two years ago; her mother ran and won as a BJP candidate.

The result in West Bengal, where the BJP has never won state polls before, marks an ideological homecoming for the party, given some of Hindu nationalism's foundational thinkers hailed from the state. It also consolidated the party's reach in eastern India, where the BJP kept its hold on Assam, which went to the polls with West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

"Bengal is a prized state for both their political project and their ideological project," said Rahul Verma, a political analyst at the Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi-based think tank. "Now...they can shift their gears to the South, which still remains out of bounds for them."

The BJP doesn't rule in any of India's southern states, where pride in local identity and language, as well as social-justice movements around caste, have made it difficult for a party seen



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi waved to supporters Monday at the Bharatiya Janata Party headquarters.

as representing northern and Hindi speakers to make inroads.

In West Bengal, where regional pride has similarly provided a bulwark against the BJP, the party consolidated the Hindu vote, in large part by stoking fears of illegal migration from Muslim-majority Bangladesh, with which the state shares a long border.

The win in West Bengal is a reassuring boost for Modi and his party, after an upset in the 2024 national elections in which they returned to power, but lost their outright majority. Since then, the party has worked hard in the state polls that have followed, racking up wins in a string of states.

The West Bengal election has been one of the most con-

troversial local polls yet. Banerjee and her losing Trinamool Congress party alleged that the Election Commission's revision of voter lists months before the polls disproportionately affected Muslim voters, who were more likely to vote for them. About nine million people, or more than 10% of voter names, were removed from the rolls. While some of those were because of duplicate entries or deceased voters, many were also removed for "logical discrepancies" flagged by software such as too-large families or improbable age gaps between parents and children. The majority of the voters eliminated for such discrepancies were Muslims.

Legal challenges to this elec-

toral roll revision are in courts.

The BJP has disputed the allegation that the revisions, which also took place in other states that voted last month, influenced the election's outcome.

The electoral revision process, which began last year, prompted unusually high turnout as voters who had stayed home in previous polls, or lived outside their home state, rushed back to vote, fearing they could otherwise be struck off the electoral rolls in the future.

With the latest wins, BJP chief ministers will run 15 of India's 28 states; the party also belongs to the ruling coalition in a handful of others. Meanwhile, an opposition alliance helmed by the once-dominant Congress Party is more

fractured than ever, but its alliance in Kerala won in the small southern Indian state, which also voted in April.

Political experts said India is too far from the next general elections—slated for 2029—for the BJP to be complacent, pointing to wild cards such as the Iran war and a simmering energy crisis in India.

Key northern factory hubs have seen protests as fuel prices have risen. Uttar Pradesh, which will hold its state elections next year, and where the BJP has ruled for a decade, saw some of the most intense protests. "Economic pain points of Indian citizens are going to increase if this crisis lingers," said Verma. "No one can take their victory as assured."