

World

India's 'watchman' cruising to re-election

NEW DELHI

Prime minister is seen as divisive, but voters like his pro-business policies

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Narendra Modi, India's dominating and divisive prime minister, was cruising toward this nation's biggest re-election victory in decades, the Indian Election Commission said on Thursday.

His brand of brawny Hindu nationalism and pro-business policies seem to have played stunningly well with voters, despite concerns that he had not delivered on promises to create jobs.

Partial results showed that his Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., was on its way to a commanding majority in Parliament for the second national election in a row. That would ensure back-to-back terms for him as prime minister with a legislative majority — a feat no Indian politician has achieved since 1971.

Many Indians see Mr. Modi, 68, as a nationalist icon. He has confronted China, nearly gone to war with Pakistan and brought India closer to the United States. He calls himself India's chowkidar — or watchman — and his success is congruent with the rise of right-leaning populist figures around the world.

While Mr. Modi has built a reputation as a crusader who speaks the common man's language, his detractors say his policies are pulling India's delicate social fabric apart. His commitment to giving more power to the country's Hindu majority has struck fear in the Muslim minority and left the country increasingly polarized.

Under him, mob lynchings have increased, Muslim representation in Parliament has dropped to its lowest level in decades, and right-wing Hindus have felt emboldened to push an extreme agenda, including lionizing the man who shot to death the independence hero Mohandas Gandhi.

But there is no other figure on the In-



Supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party celebrating election victories in Siliguri, India, on Thursday.

dian political landscape who can touch Mr. Modi's aura. His party, by far India's richest and most aggressive, has built a personality cult around him, and in speeches he refers to himself in the third person, discussing what "Modi" would do.

"Are you happy that Modi kills by entering homes?" he thundered at a recent rally, recalling the airstrike he ordered on Pakistan in February. "Doesn't your chest puff out with pride?"

The crowd cheered. Political analysts call him "larger than life," "a cinematic character," and someone who displays an innate sense for "what people are looking for."

"Modi has embedded himself in every Indian's consciousness," said Aarti Jerath, a newspaper columnist.

In contrast, Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the opposition Indian National Congress party and the scion of a long political dynasty, is widely perceived even among some supporters as cultivating too gentle an image. And though his party, once dominant for decades, cast itself as a unifying force, the results indicated that it was facing another disastrous loss.

In interviews around the country in recent weeks, a common theme emerged: Many voters who said they didn't like Mr. Modi would then say he might be the forceful personality India needed now.

The election turnout was one for the history books — the largest democratic exercise ever. In seven phases over 39 days, more than 600 million Indians cast

ballots at a million polling stations, spread across densely populated megacities and far-flung villages, from high in the Himalayan mountains to tropical islands in the Andaman Sea.

Experts say the force of Mr. Modi's personality, with many Indians intensely for him or against him, drove turnout to 67 percent, the highest this nation has ever seen.

Many voters said that they didn't like the way Mr. Modi has stirred up communal divisions or the fact that economic problems, such as joblessness, have increased under him. But, they said, he was still the best leader to keep India safe and strong.

"Farmers are in trouble," said Vinay Tyagi, a wheat and sugar cane farmer in the swing state of Uttar Pradesh. "We're

not getting a good price for our products, but we still voted for the B.J.P. because there was no alternative for us. The other candidates weren't good, and Mr. Modi is fighting for the country."

To keep his job Mr. Modi campaigned relentlessly, holding 142 rallies and covering 65,000 miles. On the last night before voting ended, he meditated in a Himalayan cave in the same area where he wandered more than 50 years ago as a young man searching for purpose.

Mr. Modi will be the first two-time prime minister ever to come from a lower caste. He grew up in a small town north of Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat, the son of a tea seller. This has been a powerful part of his narrative; he calls himself a lowly *chaiwalla*, a tea seller, a clear jab at India's elite.

At age 8, he became part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, known as the R.S.S., a right-wing Hindu group that would play a huge role in his life. The R.S.S. believes in Hindu supremacy and many people consider them fascists (in the 1930s they were inspired by Mussolini's Italy).

It was a former R.S.S. member, Nathuram Godse, who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. He was furious that Gandhi had allowed Muslim Pakistan to separate from India.

In school Mr. Modi was an average student, but he demonstrated a talent for theater and debating. His forcefulness propelled him up the R.S.S. ranks.

When he was around 18, he took a two-year sojourn and drifted around the Himalayas, contemplating a life as an ascetic priest. In a recent interview, he said that he had bathed in freezing rivers, hung around holy men and learned to "align himself with the rhythm of the universe."

He also deserted his young wife. When he was around 13 his parents had arranged for him to marry a woman from a neighboring town. Even now it's unclear if Mr. Modi ever lived with her.

His supporters say he is married to the country. His private life remains in deep shadow.

In his 20s and 30s, he was a preacher for the R.S.S. and then a foot soldier for the B.J.P. Colleagues remember him as passionate, dedicated and ruthlessly efficient.

He oversaw the secret printing of banned pamphlets pushing Hindutva, the belief in the primacy of the Hindu religion. Analysts say he remains an "ultranationalist" at his core.

"He is a very divisive," said Mrs. Jerath, the newspaper columnist. "He believes in the politics of polarization: us against them, Hindu against Muslims, rich against poor, poor against rich."

And he's used to being the boss. His first government job came in 2001, at age 51, when the B.J.P. appointed him Gujarat's chief minister, the state's top job. The next year, riots between Hindus and Muslims erupted across Gujarat, and Mr. Modi was accused of standing by as mobs massacred more than 1,000 people.

Women were raped, children were slaughtered and the majority of the victims were Muslim. For Mr. Modi, the Gujarat riots were a defining moment.

From then on, he would be known among the Hindu right as a hero. Among many Muslims, he was considered a killer.

But in the next few years, Mr. Modi deftly tacked away from religious issues. He became a friend of free enterprise and helped attract thousands of manufacturing jobs to Gujarat.

Business people and middle-class voters began to rally around him, seeing him as someone who could shake up India's notorious bureaucracy and get results. At the same time, the dynastic Congress party, which led India for most of its history since independence from Britain, was collapsing, racked by infighting, corruption and the absence of an inspiring leader.

Those two story lines converged in 2014, the first time Mr. Modi ran for prime minister.

He emphasized infrastructure, development and rooting out corruption. He played down his Hindu nationalist side. His party won in a landslide and Congress — winning only 44 seats out of 543 — suffered the party's worst showing in its long history.

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