



► ing built for himself.

This is because Mr Modi has more than luck on his side. He has charisma, enough to sustain his image as a longed-for strong leader even beyond his Hindu-nationalist fan base. Like followers of Donald Trump in America, Mr Modi's admirers seem impervious to glaring evidence of poor decision-making. Opinion polls, while generally unreliable in India, do reveal clear trends. MorningConsult, which tracks national ratings of the elected leaders of 13 countries, shows a 20-point slide over the past year in the proportion of Indians who approve of Mr Modi. Yet at 66% in early June, he still outperforms all the rest. Another recent survey by Prashnam, an Indian pollster, found that, although 42% of respondents who say they suffered personally from covid-19 blamed Mr Modi's government, a bigger share blamed local leaders or simply fate.

Even sceptics who note that Mr Modi's older, greyer image has lost appeal, and that after so long in power his attacks on rivals carry less sting, admit that he holds another strong card. The BJP remains a daunting political machine. What public records there are in the murk of Indian political finance suggest that the party rakes in more than four-fifths of known contributions to all parties combined. The BJP also enjoys firm backing from the powerful Hindu-nationalist *parivar* or family, a constellation of groups ranging from trade and student unions to vigilante gangs. Despite occasional setbacks, and the wariness of India's periphery about the Hindi-speaking heartland where the party is strongest, the BJP remains the only outfit able to lure political talent and contest elections virtually anywhere in the country.

Mr Modi also holds a powerful joker. For all its point-scoring against his government and even its victory in elections here and there, India's opposition remains as fragmented and vulnerable as ever. Its only hope lies in pulling together to form an unlikely coalition such as the Israeli front, uniting hard-right Zionists with leftists and Arab parties, that recently ended Benjamin Netanyahu's 12-year reign.

The fact is that most of India's political opposition consists of regional parties that are content to reach a *modus vivendi* with a BJP-ruled "centre". Congress ran India as a virtual fief for decades and still pretends to nationwide influence. But under its current leader, Rahul Gandhi, it lacks both street clout and the tenacity and agility to rally allies. "However embattled Modi may be after getting almost everything wrong in handling the pandemic, Rahul Gandhi, who got almost everything right, is not likely to be the preferred option," is the judgment of Samar Halarnkar, an editor and columnist. It is not just Mr Modi's luck that needs to turn for change to happen. ■