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Expected to cruise to a third term, India's Narendra Modi instead will be forced to build a coalition government to keep power.

# Modi Declares Win but Faces Setback

India's leader set for third term, yet his Hindu nationalist party loses majority

Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India is poised to keep power for a third term even after voters dealt the Hindu nationalist a stunning setback by denying him an outright majority following an election dominated by high unemployment and inflation.

Modi and his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party will now have to rely on allies in his coalition to cross the 272-seat threshold for a majority in the lower house of Parliament to form a government. It is the first election since 2014, when Modi won his first term as prime minister, that the BJP hasn't scored an absolute majority on its own.

Modi would be only the second leader after Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister, to return to

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power for a third straight term. Official results show the BJP winning around 240 seats. It won 303 seats in 2019.

Modi didn't acknowledge the upset and claimed a historic victory. "In our third term, the country will write a new chapter of big decisions," he said. "This is Modi's guarantee."

The opposition hasn't con-

ceded defeat. The Indian National Congress party, which ruled India for decades but had seen its popularity plunge in recent years, was set to nearly double its seat count compared with the last general election. Its opposition alliance gained well over 200 seats, far surpassing the performance of the opposition bloc it led five years ago.

Rahul Gandhi, the face of the Congress party, said the opposition alliance would

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# Modi Set to Keep Power, Loses Seats

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meet on Wednesday to discuss their options. He said the result was a victory for democracy.

“The deprived and poor population of the country stood with India to protect their rights,” Gandhi wrote on the social-media platform X.

Political analysts said the election results punctured Modi’s aura of invincibility. The 73-year-old leader has long relied on his personal charisma to woo voters, and he campaigned extensively up and down the country in the months leading up to the election season.

“The results show that Brand Modi has diluted,” said Rasheed Kidwai, a political analyst affiliated with the Observer Research Foundation, a New Delhi think tank. “It’s a big setback.”

India’s stock markets plunged on Tuesday, after closing at record highs on Monday due to exit polls that predicted a landslide win for Modi, who had pledged to make India the world’s third-largest economy in his third term. Modi has sought to boost manufacturing in India, and convinced Apple suppliers to invest in the country. These efforts aren’t creating enough jobs for India’s young people.

There were early hints that the BJP was worried about low voter turnout amid a record-setting heat wave searing much of India. Modi began his campaign touting his economic record, but quickly pivoted to attacking Muslims and painting the opposition Congress party as pro-Muslim. In an April speech, he called Muslims “infiltrators” and “those who have too many children.”

During Modi’s time in power, he has foregrounded the country’s Hindu identity. India’s Muslims, the country’s largest religious minority, said they have been politically marginalized and at times targeted with violence as



Supporters in the Indian city of Varanasi carry images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi as they cheer the vote results.

Hindu nationalist ideas became more prominent.

But attempts to fire up his Hindu nationalist base flopped in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state and a political bellwether, where the opposition combined to come out ahead of the BJP, which saw its seat count plunge to the low 30s, down from 62 in 2019.

Modi’s party lost even in the constituency that includes Ayodhya, the site of a contro-

versial Hindu temple inaugurated by the prime minister in January that fulfilled one of his key election promises. That was expected to help him clinch another majority.

Political analysts said that many people appear to have cast their ballots over unhappiness with economic issues. Some voters have questioned the disconnect between two images of India: one of a global economic powerhouse

populated by glitzy billionaire moguls, and the second where hundreds of millions of people face bleak job prospects and soaring costs, leaving them reliant on the government’s free food grains program.

Mohammad Ahmed, a 42-year-old laborer from Uttar Pradesh, said he stands at the main traffic intersection in his village, along with hundreds of others, hoping to pick up daily work as a farm laborer. Over the last six years, he said, the number of people waiting at that traffic signal has increased 10-fold.

“Modi distributed free food, but gave no jobs,” said Ahmed. “In the 10 years of Modi’s rule, the rich have become more powerful and the poor more helpless.”

This time, Ahmed switched his vote to Congress. “I used to think of Modi as my father. But he let us down,” Ahmed said.

The results in Uttar Pradesh were particularly telling because the state has been the home of the Hindu nationalist experiment, said Yamini Aiyar, a public policy expert. “The everyday lives of the

people, the issues around unemployment, the issues around inflation, they mattered,” said Aiyar.

In Delhi, Khemchand Sharma, a BJP spokesperson noted that the party had won the largest share of seats, but would analyze the results. He said the party might be facing anti-incumbency against local candidates, rather than a rejection of the national leadership’s vision for the country.

Political experts credited the opposition gains in large part to grassroots campaigning by Gandhi, who in recent years has gone on monthslong cross-country walking tours to connect with the public. In speeches across India, he has called for more job creation and less social division.

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Scan this code for a video on the setback voters dealt Modi’s party.