

# Modi set to lose majority in Indian election shock

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**Hannah Ellis-Petersen**

*Delhi*

Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata party looks likely to lose its parliamentary majority, dealing an unexpected blow to the prime minister and forcing him to negotiate with

coalition partners in order to return to power.

Although not all votes had been counted, by last night it was clear that the predicted BJP landslide would not materialise and instead there had been a pushback against the prime minister and his Hindu nationalist politics in swathes of the country.

The party appeared to have lost more than 60 seats, bringing its total to about 240, below the 272 required for a parliamentary majority.

It is the first time since Modi was elected in 2014 that the BJP has not won a majority on its own. Nonetheless, together with its political allies, known as the national democratic alliance (NDA), its win amounts to about 292 seats, which is enough to form a majority government to rule for the next five years and return Modi to office for a third term.

Meanwhile, the opposition alliance, which goes by the initialism

INDIA, far outperformed expectations, collectively winning more than 230 seats. The alliance, formed of more than 20 national and regional opposition parties, had come together for the first time in this election with the aim of defeating Modi.

Despite the tight race, Modi insisted he had been given a mandate to lead again. Declaring himself "very, very happy today" in an address to voters at the BJP headquarters in Delhi, Modi said: "I would like to bow down before the people of the country. Today is an emotional moment for me





# 'Voters have not delivered a Modi wave ... this is a loss for the BJP'

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personally as well. This was my first election after I lost my mother."

"The blessings of the people for the third time after 10 years boosts our morale, gives new strength."

BJP officials insisted it would form the next government and denied any setback, emphasising that their party had won more seats than any other.

"The NDA will form the government for the third time. Prime minister Modi will be sworn in for the third time. Congress will sit in opposition for the third time," said Jaiveer Shergill, a spokesperson for the BJP. He said "introspection" would take place within the parties about losses.

The INDIA coalition proved more resilient and successful than many analysts had expected, despite grappling with state agencies freezing party funds and jailing opposition leaders in the build up to the polls.

They were particularly boosted by regional parties far outperforming the BJP, such as the Samajwadi party in Uttar Pradesh, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party in Tamil Nadu.

"We have to credit the opposition alliance for being more politically and electorally savvy than it might have been given credit for," said Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute.

"So many had left the opposition for dead and had not expected it to be able to capitalise on a number of BJP vulnerabilities in the last few years, whether that's economic stress or push back against Hindu

nationalism. But instead, they've done pretty well."

Analysts said the results would have significant implications for India's political landscape after the polls. Since he was elected a decade ago, Modi and his Hindu nationalist BJP have enjoyed a powerful mandate, while the opposition have been seen as weak and unable to stand up to the might of the party.

Modi is seen as a strongman who is accused of overseeing increased authoritarianism and a crackdown on dissent over his decade in office.

Maya Tudor, associate professor at Oxford University's Blavatnik School of Government, said: "Particularly in the Hindi heartland, which is the BJP's core base, voters have not delivered the expected Modi wave. So relative to expectations, you can read this as a loss for the BJP."

The results were a particular triumph for the beleaguered main opposition party and the BJP's main rival, Indian National Congress, which lost the previous two elections to Modi and was facing questions about its future as a party. This time it appeared the Congress party had more than doubled its seats.

Mallikarjun Kharge, president of the Congress party, said that Modi had faced a "moral and political defeat" and that the opposition coalition would meet today to discuss the next steps. "We focused our fight on the unemployed, the farmers and the poor of this country. The BJP, meanwhile, spread lies and hatred, running a vicious campaign. People have rejected that," said Kharge.

The BJP centred its campaign on

the cult of the prime minister, their party manifesto simply titled "Modi's guarantee". Many of his speeches initially focused on the BJP's mammoth infrastructure push, generous welfare programmes and elevation of India on the world stage over the past decade, as well as promises to turn the nation into a \$10tn economy.

However, in what some took as a sign of nervousness in the BJP camp, Modi later turned to more polarising religious rhetoric on the campaign trail, appearing to call Muslims "infiltrators" and "those who have more children" while in a flurry of interviews he proclaimed to have been chosen by God for the role. The BJP were also accused of harassing and intimidating political opponents and suppressing Muslim votes.

Analysts said results indicated that the "Modi wave" has been dented by high unemployment and inflation. The BJP's ability to continue with its more hardline nationalist policies could also be impeded as it is forced to rely on its coalition partners.



## Analysis

Hannah Ellis-Petersen



*Strongman leader loses his aura of invincibility after expected landslide fails to materialise*

India's elections may return Narendra Modi to power for a third term, but yesterday's results did not have the flavour of victory for the strongman prime minister. Indeed, as the early counts of the votes began to roll in, it was clear this was going to be one of the most humbling moments for Modi and his Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) in over a decade.

The BJP went into this election with a confident swagger and the slogan "ab ki baar, 400 paar", a target to win 400 seats - more than two-thirds of parliament, a feat only achieved once before. Modi's return to power, with the same if not a stronger majority, was referred to by analysts and pundits as almost an inevitability, given the carefully curated cult of personality that has built up around the leader and his centralisation of power over the past decade. As late as this past weekend, exit polls projected a BJP landslide.

Yet that sweeping majority has not materialised, and instead a more complicated and diverse picture of India's political landscape appeared. The BJP as a singular party looks set to lose more than 60 seats, bringing its predicted total down to about 240 - not enough to form a majority on its own. While the BJP's alliance as a whole has likely won just under 300

seats, enough to form a majority government under Modi, it is with a far more weakened mandate. Many of its political partners have a far less hardline Hindu nationalist agenda than the BJP and several court support from Muslim voters.

It is likely to make it far harder for Modi to move forward with his more radical Hindu-first policies, particularly involving citizenship registration and laws accused of directly discriminating against Muslims. There is also now little

chance of the BJP having the parliamentary votes needed to change India's secular constitution, which had been a potent fear among many.

Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute, described the results as "one of its biggest political blows for the BJP over the decade that it's been in power".

"Modi is still clearly a very popular leader but he is no longer the politically invincible figure that many had assumed he was," said Kugelman. "The question moving forward is: how will this new reality impact his governance and his way of going about things?"

The results were a surprisingly sweet outcome for India's battered and bruised political opposition, particularly the BJP's main rival, the Indian National Congress. The coalition of two dozen parties, who referred to themselves under the acronym INDIA, came together late in the day simply to oust Modi. But after initial ego clashes, they proved more resilient and politically savvy than many gave them credit for.

Returning for a historic third term in power - a feat only achieved before by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru - Modi faces a galvanised and more powerful opposition.

"For over two decades, Modi always had a very large majority to carry out his agenda without consultation," said Subir Sinha, director of the Soas South Asia Institute. "But now, Modi's hands will likely be tied by coalition partners and it will be much harder to push through his big ticket reforms. It will be a rocky road for him ahead."

*His weakened political mandate is likely to make it far harder for Modi to move forward with his more radical Hindu-first policies*

▲ Adulation in Delhi after the election for Narendra Modi, who is expected to remain as PM despite his BJP losing out to parties such as the Trinamool Congress, below

PHOTOGRAPH: ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS