

Modi's grip on power slips after vote

He takes third term, but party loses some seats

By Mujib Mashal,
Alex Travelli,
and Hari Kumar
NEW YORK TIMES

NEW DELHI — The aura of invincibility around Narendra Modi has been shattered.

In an Indian election in which his party's slogan had promised a landslide victory and Modi repeatedly referred to himself as sent by God, the results announced Tuesday were unexpectedly sobering.

Modi, 73, appeared to secure a third consecutive term as prime minister, a feat that only one other Indian leader has accomplished, and his Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, gained far more seats than any other party.

But the BJP lost dozens of seats. It now finds itself at the mercy of coalition partners — including one politician notorious for how often he has switched sides — to stay in power, a sharp reversal a decade into Modi's transformational tenure.

As the results came into view, the country's stock markets plunged. Opposition parties, newly unified in what they had called an effort to save the country's democracy, rejoiced. And India, while extending Modi's firm hold on power, learned there are limits to his political potency, even as he made the election, usually fought seat by seat, squarely about himself.

Modi took a more positive view in a statement on the social platform X, declaring that his coalition had won a third term. "This is a historical feat in India's history," he said.

For Modi, a generous reading of the outcome could be that only with his personal push could his party overcome its unpopularity at the local level and scrape by. Or it could be that his carefully cultivated brand has now peaked and he can no longer outrun the anti-incumbency sentiment that eventually catches up with politicians.

How Modi will react is uncertain — whether he will harden his effort to turn away any challenge to his power or be



ARUN SANKAR/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

India Prime Minister Narendra Modi celebrated the BJP party's win at its headquarters in New Delhi on Tuesday.

chastened by the voters' verdict and his need to work with coalition partners that do not share his Hindu-nationalist ideology.

"Modi is not known as a consensual figure. However, he is very pragmatic," said Arati Jerath, a political analyst based in New Delhi. "He will have to moderate his hard-line Hindu-nationalist approach to issues. Perhaps we can hope for more moderation from him."

Few doubt, however, that Modi will try to deepen his already considerable imprint on the country over the next five years.

On his watch, India, the world's most populous nation, has enjoyed newfound prominence on the global stage, overhauled its infrastructure for the needs of its 1.4 billion people, and been imbued with a new sense of ambition as it tries to shed the legacy of its long colo-

nial past.

At the same time, Modi has worked to turn a vastly diverse country held together by a secular democratic system into an overtly Hindu-first state, marginalizing the country's large Muslim minority.

His increasingly authoritarian turn — with a crackdown on dissent that has created a chilling environment of self-censorship — has pushed India's vociferous democracy closer to a one-party state, his critics say. And the country's economic growth, while rapid, has mostly enriched those at the top.

Modi rose from a humble background as the son of a tea seller, becoming India's most powerful and popular leader in decades by building a cult of personality, spending big on infrastructure and welfare, and tilting India's democratic institutions in his favor.

The ultimate goal was to cement his standing as one of the most consequential prime ministers in India's nearly 75 years as a republic and make the BJP the country's only plausible national governing force.

But the results Tuesday pointed to a turnaround for India's beleaguered main opposition party, the Indian National Congress, which had been seen by many as irrevocably weakened after big losses in the previous two elections.

The once-dominant Congress, long positioned at India's political center, struggled for years to find a direction and offer an ideological alternative to the BJP. But it and its coalition partners found traction in this election by attacking Modi's government over issues including unemployment, social justice, and the prime minister's ties to India's billionaires.

Last year, as Rahul Gandhi, 53, the public face of the Congress party, sought to burnish his standing by leading long marches across India, the BJP ensnared him in a court case that led to his expulsion from parliament. He was later returned to his seat by India's highest court and was set to win reelection Tuesday.

Exit polls released Saturday, after more than six weeks of voting in the world's largest democratic exercise, indicated that Modi's party was headed toward an easy victory. But there had been signs during the campaign that Modi was worried about the outcome.

He crisscrossed the country for more than 200 rallies over about two months and gave dozens of interviews, hoping to use his charismatic appeal to paper over any weaknesses in his party.