

The remarkable recovery of Narendra Modi

Despite an electoral reverse in 2024, India's prime minister seems dominant

1月 22, 2026 07:04 上午 | DELHI



SIXTEEN MONTHS ago Narendra Modi looked chastened. Having just lost his majority in a national election, the chest-thumping Indian leader was forced to lean on regional parties. His coalition showed little appetite for difficult reform. Some commentators pronounced it "Peak Modi". Would-be successors began to plot.

Today things look rather different. Mr Modi's coalition has won a string of state elections and the opposition is in disarray. His

raising initiatives. Some had feared more plans to replace mosques with temples, as happened with Mr Modi's consecration of a temple in Ayodhya in January 2024.

Within the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a grassroots Hindu organisation, many want Mr Modi to make good on his promise to introduce a uniform civil code, a long-standing Hindu-nationalist goal that would in effect abolish Muslim family law. So far, Mr Modi has not gone down this path.

Instead, he has focused his movement on the idea of making India strong. He has been helped by a tough external environment. In May, following a gruesome terrorist attack in Kashmir, India fought a four-day air-and-missile conflict with Pakistan. That allowed the prime minister to play the patriotic strongman. Then in August Donald Trump slapped India with an additional 25% tariff (on top of an early 25%) as punishment for its use of Russian oil. Those levies are hurting Indian exporters, from diamond-cutters to garment-makers.

You might think Mr Modi would be blamed for mishandling India's biggest trading partner. Yet most Indians approve of the way he has stood up to Mr Trump. And he has used pressure from abroad as a pretext for reform. Freeing up labour and reducing the cost of power are urgent, he argues, if Indian manufacturers are to compete. So, too, is reducing trade barriers. At a summit this month India hopes a deal with the EU may at last be sealed.

In all this, Mr Modi's coalition has proved surprisingly stable. As small regional parties, his partners have largely been happy to offer loyalty in exchange for patronage. They may have curbed the BJP's instincts in some areas, such as on the uniform civil code. The weakness of the opposition has also made difficult economic reforms easier. Protests over the new labour codes have been muted.

When it comes to elections, the governing coalition has shown a ruthless edge. Weeks before state polls opened in Bihar, in November, 10,000 rupees (\$110) was transferred into the bank accounts of around 2.1m female voters under a scheme purporting to support entrepreneurs. While legal, such transactional vote-buying stretches electoral norms and will strain state budgets.

Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Congress party, offers a different explanation. He alleges that the government has committed “vote *chori*”, or voter fraud—and claims that the BJP is engineering elections nationwide. It is true that the government has undermined the independence of India’s electoral commission, and that election-watchers have reported some irregularities. Moreover, Mr Modi does have an authoritarian streak. Note the fourfold increase in criminal investigations into politicians since he took office; an investigation in 2022 found that some 95% were members of opposition parties. Yet Mr Gandhi has not presented evidence of widespread fraud, nor have analysts found a smoking gun.

The accusation risks becoming a crutch for Congress. By any standard Mr Modi remains a genuinely popular leader, approved of by some 70% of Indians. Mr Gandhi has failed to build on the result in 2024 by developing either a compelling critique or an economic and cultural platform of his own. He is “Modi’s best campaigner”, says Rahul Verma of Shiv Nadar University, Chennai.

Mr Modi’s dominance is not guaranteed. States including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal go to the polls this spring. Those contests will be trickier than the one in Bihar. Although inflation has abated, anger about a lack of jobs has not. Protests have flared over conditions for gig workers. A stronger opposition would help hold the government to account.

But for now Mr Modi is ascendant. The hope must be that the prime minister sees boosting the economy as the best way to secure his

legacy. If he does, his third term could do much to improve the lives of Indians by setting the country on a still faster road to growth. ■