



A 'democratic asteroid': India's elections

Standard Note: SN06735

Last updated: 19 May 2014

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Section: International Affairs and Defence Section

As so often in the past, India's electorate has sprung a surprise. After five weeks of voting involving 551 million voters, the count on 16 May gave the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its presidential candidate, 62 year-old Narendra Modi, a convincing victory in the elections to India's lower house, the *Lok Sabha*. On a 66.38% turnout, the BJP won a majority of the seats – the first party to do so since 1984. Author and academic Sunil Khilnani described the outcome as “a [democratic asteroid](#).”

The surprise lies mainly in the margin of its victory. Most expected the BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to form the next national government but it was widely presumed that the BJP would fall short of a majority itself and need those allies to do so. Having won 282 *Lok Sabha* seats out of a total of 545, it does not; it is doing so now purely in order to beef up its own majority. The NDA as a whole won 337 seats. Meanwhile, the ruling Indian National Congress and its allies in the United Progressive Alliance have suffered a humiliating defeat. Some are now declaring the end of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty as a political force.

The [four best performing parties](#) in the elections in terms of seats were:

Party	Share of vote	Seats
BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY	31.00%	282
INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS	19.30%	44
ALL INDIA ANNA DRAVIDA MUNNETRA KAZAHAGAM (ADMK)	3.30%	37
ALL INDIA TRINAMOOOL CONGRESS (AITC)	3.80%	34

The ADMK and AITC are regional parties in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal respectively.

While it is too early to give a definitive account of why the BJP triumphed so decisively, commentators are focusing on several important contributory factors:

- The BJP was able to win votes across social divides that many analysts had argued were now unbridgeable: caste, class, gender, urban/rural divides. The BJP also won strong support amongst the youth vote in what is an increasingly young electorate;
- Narendra Modi and his message proved a major electoral asset. He and the BJP campaign team constructed a narrative around his personal life (low-caste origins and frugal life-style) and political career (turning Gujarat into a 'development success

story' and promising the same for India) that many voters clearly found compelling. His controversial human rights record (see below) did little to damage him or the BJP;

- The 'open goal' presented to the BJP by the poor record of the incumbent UPA Government since 2009 (above all, the economic slow-down and high levels of corruption), compounded by the lack of conviction surrounding its campaign.

His business backers, some of whom view him as India's [Margaret Thatcher](#), hope that Modi will now push ahead with an ambitious programme for economic recovery. But many of India's economic troubles are deep-rooted and, well as he and the BJP did in the elections, India is a difficult country to drive from the centre. There could be conflict with state governments. India's diverse civil society groups and social movements will likely oppose some of his plans.

Some [commentators](#) worry that India has simply swapped one model of 'top-down' crony capitalism for another by voting Modi into power. [Questions](#) have long been asked about just how stellar Gujarat's economic and social performance really was under Modi's leadership, with some arguing that while he may not have been personally corrupt, many of those who surrounded him certainly were, and that he was a power-hungry and authoritarian leader.

It also remains to be seen just how biddable his own party will be. Elements of the BJP '[old guard](#)' clearly mistrust him. Modi brought into his campaign a group of dynamic, relatively young, supporters and now must decide how far to base his governing team around them. In addition, the campaign played down the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology; the Modi government may find itself under pressure to bring this aspect of its identity more to the fore. But if he does so, he could quickly lose a lot of the softer support he won in the elections.

Minorities in India – in particular, Muslims – remain nervous about their prospects under a Modi government. Modi's alleged failure to intervene as chief minister in Gujarat to prevent an estimated 2000 Muslims being massacred by Hindu mobs, with the complicity of the police, in 2002 riots, is still imprinted on many minds. Modi has always denied that he incited violence or influenced the police in any way and a 2012 Supreme Court investigation concluded that there was no "[prosecutable evidence](#)". But this finding is subject to [legal challenge](#) and many are not persuaded. Historically, the controversy over the 2002 riots has led Western governments to avoid dealing directly with him. But this is changing rapidly. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, [congratulated](#) Modi on his election victory, inviting him to visit the UK.

Also with apparent grounds for nervousness is neighbouring Pakistan. In opposition, the BJP accused the previous Congress-led Government of being too soft in its policy towards Pakistan. But the Pakistan Government too has responded positively to Modi's victory, perhaps recalling that, when the BJP was last in government, it launched a '[composite dialogue](#)' which has continued, on and off, to this day.

For Congress, it is back to the drawing-board. But at least one commentator has asserted that it is [too early](#) to write the party off. Another party with food for thought is the *Aam Admi* (Common Man's) Party. Its remarkable political emergence in 2013 has been followed by a [sobering Lok Sabha](#) election result, winning four seats with only 2% of the vote.

See also the following Library publications: SN05006, [India: recent developments](#) (July 2011); RP 07/40, [An economic introduction to India](#) (May 2007); RP 07/41) [A political introduction to India](#) (May 2007).