

India: Modi Stands Defeated But He's Not Giving Up His Destructive Plan for a 1000-Year-Reich

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Indians who love and value their Constitution - their rights, their civilisation and their fraternity - will have to steel themselves for a more decisive round which is sure to be just around the corner.

Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty

Voters in India have done for Indian democracy what the country's Election Commission and judiciary failed to do: discipline and rebuke Prime Minister Narendra Modi for seeking to pit Hindus and Muslims against each other and for his cosy nexus with big business - whose dubious donations have fuelled government policies that have increased inequality and distress.

After 10 years in power, Modi has lost the parliamentary majority his Bharatiya Janata Party enjoyed and will now run a minority government with the backing of coalition partners, some of whom are notoriously fickle. It does not help that he himself has never run an actual - rather than a notional - coalition. Three years ago, when the [Shiromani Akali Dal challenged him](#) over his controversial farm laws, he remained unmoved and it was the Akalis who had to exit. But the allies India's voters have now dealt him will not quietly pick up their *jhola* and walk away. They will have the ability to topple his government.

Putting on a brave face, Modi hailed the fact that he has returned to power for the third time as a "historic feat". The truth is that the result represents a stunning personal setback for a man so convinced of his invincibility that he had begun to claim divine origins. "As long as my mother was alive", [he told an interviewer in the midst of the election campaign](#), "I used to feel that perhaps I have been born biologically. But after her death, looking at all my experiences, I have become convinced... that God has sent me. The energy [I have] has not come from a biological body." The electorate has brought this self-proclaimed messenger of god down to earth with a thud.

Modi's claim to divinity came, incidentally, in the same interview where he lied about an election speech he had made at the start of the campaign. At Banswara, he had unambiguously referred to India's Muslims as "infiltrators" and as people who have "more children". Modi was not simply abusing Muslims but attempting to stoke irrational anxieties in India's Hindu voters about how he was the only leader capable of stopping the Opposition from seizing their property and assets and handing them over to Muslims.

Modi went on to repeat this accusation, with minor variations, at rally after rally. His party created [nasty animated videos](#) aimed at scaring Hindus into believing this absurd claim. In another interview, he distorted the dubious findings of a widely publicised study by researchers in his own

office - released to coincide with the anti-Muslim election narrative he was pushing - in order to convince Hindus that India's Muslim population is growing so fast that they would soon be swamped.

Why is Modi so obsessed with Muslims? For one, it is part of his political DNA. His career began in the BJP's parent organisation - the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh - and has been built around the RSS's belief that India is a Hindu nation which was enslaved by Muslims for 800 years. Modi believes that Indian Muslims today - statistically one of the poorest cohorts in the country - are actually 'privileged' and enjoy more rights and benefits than Hindus, and that India cannot attain true glory as long as the 'appeasement' of Muslims continues.

But there is a second reason for the recent uptick in his anti-Muslim pronouncements. When you go into an election with nothing much to show by way of actual accomplishments - unemployment and rural despair are widespread and 800 million Indians subsist on free grain provided to them by the government - it helps to divert the attention of voters with large doses of Muslim bashing. This is what Modi and his party did.

It is an open secret that campaigning for votes on the basis of direct or indirect appeals to religion is illegal under our election law and can get a politician banned from contesting for six years. However, Modi correctly calculated that the three Election Commissioners who are meant to enforce this law (and whom he handpicked for the job) would not say anything. When some citizens approached the Delhi high court requesting that the EC be told to file a case against Modi for his hate speeches, they were sent packing with the advice that they must have faith in the EC. The latter, of course, did nothing, and when the Chief Election Commissioner was asked (after voting had ended) why he had not acted, [his answer was that](#) the courts had rejected petitions which had asked for the EC to take action.

The courts and the EC may have passed the buck between them and done nothing but unfortunately for Modi, enough Hindu voters saw through his game and decided they were not going to trade their concerns about the here and now for the civil strife that the prime minister was clearly pushing for. In Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, the BJP's vote share collapsed. Even Ayodhya - [assigned a special place in Modi's chauvinist politics](#) - decided to dump him. In Rajasthan and Haryana, rural voters angry at Modi's anti-farmer policies, backed the opposition. Across India, as many as 22 sitting ministers - roughly around a quarter of his ministerial council - lost their seats.

Thanks to an electoral battlefield skewed by the BJP's money power, however, the partisanship of big media and his own willingness to use state coercion against the Opposition, Modi has managed to limit his losses and limp across the finishing line with the help of a coalition.

On Sunday, June 9, he will be sworn in to office for a third time. The fact that he has been weakened is good news for India's democracy but to the extent to which he remains unchastened it is fair to ask what his priorities will be this time around.

Do his electoral losses mean he will no longer be able to pursue his Hindu chauvinist agenda? Will he now have to ease off on his attempts to stifle dissent and undermine press freedom? Will he decide it is time to be less indulgent towards big business? Or might he actually double down on his current agenda?

A Turkish friend reminds me that things can get especially dangerous when a strongman feels weaker. This has been the experience with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey and there is no reason to expect Modi to be any different. In his second term, Modi had begun to tighten the screws on India's feisty digital media - which has so far managed to function and reach millions of readers and viewers despite the threats and blandishments that have turned India's legacy media into a national

embarrassment. In his third term, Modi is likely to be more aggressive in his use of lawfare against the media. Similarly, he will attempt to once again use the government's enforcement agencies to stymie the opposition by going after individual leaders.

If Modi continues on the path he has taken so far, it will be up to his coalition partners and the judiciary to intervene. The fact that Modi is numerically vulnerable increases the likelihood that he will face some resistance from these quarters but there is no guarantee that this will be so.

In his first two terms, Modi used the support and goodwill of foreign powers, especially in the US and Europe, as a force multiplier to strengthen himself politically. That too is not necessarily going to change. Back in power, he is sure to leverage the bait of lucrative business opportunities for Western companies and the sharpening rift between the US and China to allay any squeamishness generated by his open Islamophobia and authoritarian tendencies.

Indians are breathing easier today, confident that they have managed to pull Indian democracy back from the brink. They also know it will not take long for Modi to return to his divinely programmed factory settings. Support for the BJP's anti-Muslim politics may have peaked in the north and the west of India, but he is keen to extend its reach in the south and east. This is a man who boasts of having a [1000-year plan for India](#) - a techno-corporate variant of the RSS's destructive vision - and he is not going to abandon it so easily. The last world leader who dreamt of a millennium for his Reich ended up destroying his country and much more.

India's voters have delivered a body blow to Modi's 'vision' but the truth is that he's back. Indians who love and value their Constitution - their rights, their civilisation and their fraternity - will have to steel themselves for a more decisive round which is sure to be just around the corner. *Chale chalo*, as Faiz wrote about the search for a new dawn, *ki woh manzil abhi nahin aayi*. A safe harbour is still some distance away.

Siddharth Varadarajan

Read all of *The Wire's* reporting on and analysis of the 2024 election results [here](#).

P.S.

- The Wire. 06/Jun/2024:
<https://thewire.in/politics/modi-stands-defeated-but-hes-not-giving-up-his-destructive-plan-for-a-thous-and-year-raj>

- *In an earlier version, the date of Narendra Modi's swearing in was wrongly mentioned as June 8. It is in fact June 9.*