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New Hope for India's Democracy

Jun 10, 2024 | JAYATI GHOSH

NEW DELHI – Voters have pulled Indian democracy back from the brink. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a third consecutive term, the failure of his ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to secure a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, will force Modi to rely on several unpredictable allies to promote his legislative agenda.

To be sure, the results varied across the country. But the BJP lost key states – including Uttar Pradesh, long considered a party stronghold – after voters concerned about domestic economic issues rejected Modi's growing focus on extreme Hindu nationalism and hate-fueled rhetoric.

It is hard to overestimate the significance of this shift. For years, the BJP has maintained a stranglehold on national power, using its control in unprecedented and deeply undemocratic ways. It had three times the funding of all other parties combined, thanks to an opaque system of anonymous electoral bonds – recently declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court – that effectively institutionalized high-level corruption.

The BJP also relied on ostensibly independent law-enforcement agencies to suppress opposition parties, freezing their bank accounts and using draconian laws to penalize and jail dissidents, critics, and opposition leaders while coercing others to defect to the BJP. Even official statistics were not immune to political interference and manipulation.

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Moreover, India's mainstream media joined forces with the BJP, treating Modi's refusal to hold press conferences as normal and bolstering the prime minister's personality cult. As independent journalists were threatened and penalized, government-allied outlets were busy amplifying BJP-friendly falsehoods and undermining potential political alternatives.

Although the election was hardly free and fair, it offers several lessons. For starters, the government's ability to control the narrative, both within and outside the country, is clearly waning as the reality of today's India becomes too grim to ignore.

While domestic elites and external observers had bought into the BJP's claims of economic prosperity, India's supposed boom has benefited only a small segment of the population. Most Indians face declining job prospects, stagnant or falling real wages, and sharp increases in the prices of essential goods. Polls show that these issues were at the top of voters' – and more recently, business executives' – minds, despite efforts to distract them with divisive rhetoric.

The limits of the BJP's divisive political agenda are also becoming increasingly apparent. Throughout the election campaign, Modi and his party openly stoked Hindu fears and prejudices, claiming that the opposition Congress party would seize people's assets and distribute them to “infiltrators” and “those who have more children” – a dog-whistle for Muslims.

Notably, most constituencies where such speeches were delivered voted against the BJP. The party even lost Ayodhya, where it recently inaugurated a huge temple to the god Ram on the site of a centuries-old mosque demolished by a Hindu mob in 1992.

Despite winning the election, Modi's carefully constructed aura of invincibility has been shattered. His megalomania – reflected in his claim that God sent him to serve India, and enabled by sycophants who hailed his every mistake as a “masterstroke” – has failed him. Even in his own parliamentary constituency of Varanasi, his margin of victory shrank by nearly two-thirds.

It turns out that disseminating disinformation and propaganda through subservient news outlets and social-media platforms can take one only so far. Until recently, the BJP used its power to control television, radio, and print media, and its IT cell dominated social media through a vast network of WhatsApp groups and “armies” of online trolls. But despite these efforts, critical voices have gained traction on digital platforms, supported by independent media outlets, younger bloggers, and YouTubers with massive followings.

Over the past few years, Modi's government has tried to suppress criticism on social media, demanding that digital platforms remove content it disapproved of and proposing draconian digital media laws. But now that the BJP has lost its majority, its ability to silence online dissent may be impeded.

The implications of the election's outcome will of course be much broader. The BJP must now rely on coalition partners, which requires the ability to negotiate and compromise – skills that Modi and Amit Shah, his minister of home affairs and close confidant, are not known for. Moreover, the BJP's relationship with the other parties in the National Democratic Alliance is fundamentally transactional, with very little trust on either side due to a history of past betrayals. Given that his agenda is now dependent on these regional parties, Modi would have to address some of their concerns and demands, potentially curbing his efforts to consolidate power. In the long run, this could begin the process of recovering genuinely cooperative federalism.

Coincidentally, India's own economic history contradicts the claim that a coalition government would necessarily be bad for the economy. While coalitions may be more unstable, they enable more voices to be heard, making them more democratic and inclusive than one-party rule. Centralizing authoritarians, on the other hand, are more likely to make serious mistakes, such as Modi's disastrous 2016 demonetization or the harsh COVID-19 lockdowns, both imposed without consulting state governments or other political parties.

Perhaps the various institutions that succumbed to the BJP's demands will now rediscover their true roles and responsibilities and operate autonomously. This includes the law-enforcement agencies and tax authorities that the BJP has thoroughly weaponized, as well as the judiciary and the mainstream media. This shift may even lead to a government that is forced to address the many genuine problems plaguing India's economy and society, rather than relying on propaganda and fostering division.

But India's democracy is not out of the woods yet. Fighting the poison of religious hatred that the BJP has injected into Indian society could take a long time. Similarly, the agencies and institutions compromised by Modi's authoritarian tactics cannot easily revert to full autonomy. And the abuse of legal, regulatory, and administrative processes may continue and even intensify as Modi's rule becomes increasingly precarious.

Nevertheless, Indian politics is competitive (albeit chaotic) once again. Hundreds of millions of Indians have reason to feel relieved.

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