

What the Indian election result means for Europe

JAYATI GHOSH 9th June 2024

The jolt for Narendra Modi, Jayati Ghosh writes, should also make western leaders look in the mirror.



Narendra Modi—can he accommodate the new political reality? (photosince/shutterstock.com)

Against all odds, in the elections to India's parliament, whose results were announced last week, the opposition I.N.D.I.A. alliance managed to prevent the rampaging ruling party, Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), from securing a majority on its own. In his own constituency, Modi's lead over his nearest rival fell by around two-

thirds, to significantly less than that secured by Rahul Gandhi of the Congress Party in the two constituencies he contested. And in the Hindi-speaking heartland, where Modi and the BJP sought to polarise along religious lines, spewing the most vitriolic hatred against Muslims, the party did particularly badly.

This was remarkable, and creditable, given the extremely unbalanced playing-field. Supposedly independent agencies of the state betrayed outright partisanship, with regulatory and investigative authorities used to throttle dissent in all sorts of ways. Opposition leaders were cajoled, bribed, threatened, arrested; they were denied funds, with bank accounts frozen, and much else.

The mainstream media were embarrassingly slavish and essentially repeated whatever the ruling party wanted. They gave endless space to the cult of Modi—to the point of disseminating his own perceptions of his **godlike qualities**—and barely reported on opposition parties, except to ridicule and undermine them.

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The judiciary was also largely quiescent, emerging only very intermittently to deliver a few judgments that could be seen as neutral, delaying for years or refusing to intervene on crucial issues that affect democratic functioning. In this context, even a slight cutting down to size of a leader and a party so drunk on power, and used to its abuse, was a major electoral achievement.

Geopolitical importance

The skewed media representation is one reason why the rest of the world was also fooled about the extent of Modi's popularity and the true economic condition of the bulk of the Indian people. But it is not the only one.

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Western media and political leaders also played into the cult of Modi for their own reasons. India is so geopolitically important, especially in the current conjuncture, that few western figures can afford to alienate it, even when the policies the government pursues are not in their interest. But in fact, in many areas, Modi's government gave G7 leaders much of what they wanted—whether on greater market access for trade and investment or the morally bankrupt shilly-shallying on Israel's devastation of Gaza.

In any case, India's people—much like those in most global-majority countries—recognise quite clearly that the western talk of a 'rules-based' international order and faith in democracy is deeply hypocritical: the geostrategic and economic interests of their governments, elites and big businesses mean they turn a blind eye to human-rights abuses, restrictions on freedom and oppression of citizens by the Indian government. And since India is seen as the major bulwark against China in Asia, there is great interest in talking up its economy and ignoring the **growing evidence** of staggering increases in inequality, stagnation in employment and wages, worsening conditions for women and so on.

Changed reality

But this election has changed the reality on the ground, in all sorts of ways. The BJP must now operate in a coalition, dependent for the government's survival on pragmatic allies which do not share its enthusiasm for Hindu majoritarianism.

Modi and his right-hand man, Amit Shah, are used to authoritarian, top-down functioning, within the party and the government, so it is yet to be seen how they will manage the inevitable negotiations and compromises. The BJP's instinct with political partners has been to undermine and then break them, using its much greater financial resources and state power to 'encourage' others to join it. So there is also deep mistrust along with the superficial bonhomie.

Furthermore, the basic economic concerns can no longer be ignored or shoved aside by the government, which has thus far relied on controlling and disseminating false narratives and distracting people by polarising them. There is a widespread myth within and outside India that the Modi government has relied on 'a new welfarism' to cement its popularity. But most of that is just very successful branding.

In fact, ten years under Modi have witnessed less spending on health, nutrition, education and social protection, as a share of gross domestic product, than in the previous decade under the United Progressive Alliance administration. The Modi government has basically renamed schemes and spent vast amounts on advertising whatever it does, to the point that vaccination certificates during the pandemic and bags of foodgrain distributed free (as against the prior nominal price of two rupees per kilogramme) had Modi's picture on them. Instead of rights-based public service delivery, the regime shifted back to a feudal notion of *labhartis* (beneficiaries) receiving these 'gifts' from the supreme leader.

Victory for democracy

It is now evident however that mere promotion will not be enough: there will have to be clear strategies to combat poverty and unemployment, inflation and insecurity. We do not yet know if the new National Democratic Alliance coalition has a vision for this—its main component, the BJP, has hitherto refused even to recognise the problem.

Western governments and the European Union must also adjust to the new reality. They must be more sceptical of hype about the economy and realise that pretending that things are better than they are, especially on bread-and-butter issues, rarely works for long. They must recognise too that many voices within India need to be heard—not just one—especially the regional leaders and others ignored by the mainstream, who will become increasingly relevant and important.

In the end, what just happened in India represents a victory for democracy, everywhere.

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