

OPINION

Election setback will not sway Modi from agenda of change

Despite new dependence on allies, Indian PM unlikely to dilute leadership approach



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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi claims victory on June 4: While the BJP's glass may look half empty, it won more seats than the 37 INDIA parties combined. (Photo by Suzu Takahashi)

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In his reelection campaign, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi often invoked his goal of making India a developed nation by 2047. With his coalition's parliamentary majority unexpectedly and dramatically reduced, however, Modi's horizons will have to shrink somewhat.

In 2014, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party won a majority of seats on its own, something no Indian party had done in 30 years. The BJP expanded its majority further in the 2019 election, allowing the Modi administration to pursue its agenda with few checks on its power.

The final vote count on Wednesday shows that the **BJP has lost its solo majority**. The challenge for Modi will now be to consult, coordinate and share power with smaller regional parties while still pursuing his ambitions of transforming India economically and making it a leading power in world politics. A key test will be the degree to which his government can ensure that national priorities and national interests prevail over parochial interests.

Before the election results began to emerge, Modi had vowed to turbocharge reforms, not just of the economy but "in every aspect of life ... [to] create a strong foundation for the coming generations and the coming centuries."

His planned agenda includes reforms of land and labor markets to spur sustained economic growth, an overhaul of government administration and bureaucracy to reduce barriers to achieving the country's full national potential, changes in trade and investment policies to maximize the benefits of dealing with the outside world and a remaking of public values and attitudes to unleash productive and creative energies.

In becoming the first prime minister since Indian independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru to lead a third consecutive government, Modi will not necessarily mellow or dilute his approach since the BJP was not booted out of power entirely.

His strategy of combining cultural nationalism, efficient delivery of welfare benefits to the poor and business-friendly capitalist growth is not going to be watered down given his track record of relentless political success and the ideology of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP's parent organization.

Modi is likely to seek to reinforce his core tenets and try to further improve on their implementation, while accommodating the concerns and interests of partners. The political animal in Modi will want to use this election disappointment as a steppingstone for renewed BJP success in years to come. In a defiant victory speech on Tuesday night, Modi vowed to use his third term to "write a chapter of big decisions" for the country.

How skillfully Modi can navigate the constraints of his National Democratic Alliance coalition and a reenergized opposition to stay the course on his reform project will define the final phase of his political legacy.

The BJP will remain the predominant player in parliament and hold the reins of policy initiatives in the forthcoming coalition government.



An election tally outside a BJP office in Bengaluru on June 4: Some party insiders are calling for a return to a more ideologically pure program. © Reuters

While the BJP's glass may look half empty, it has ended up with 141 more seats than its main opponent, the Indian National Congress party. Indeed, the BJP alone won more seats than Congress and its 36 partners in the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance coalition combined.

For a party that has been in power since 2014 in a competitive multiparty democracy, these are not bad takeaways. Analysts are blaming the BJP's setbacks on tactical errors in the selection of candidates, misjudgment of caste and other identity-based factors, and a sense among some sectors of society that high economic growth has not benefited them.

Some BJP insiders are calling moves by party leaders to allow politicians of all shades and hues into the BJP fold a strategic blunder that cost the party votes. They are calling for a return to a more ideologically pure strategy centered on the distinct set of values that the BJP has long embraced.

Notwithstanding intraparty finger-pointing, for much of the world, there will be relief that there has been no regime change in India which might have caused policy reversals or changes of outlook. Congratulatory messages for Modi have begun pouring in from many countries. In the current volatile world order, Modi has become synonymous with India's steady rise as a new power center.

World capitals will gladly accept him remaining in the saddle, even as they open channels to other players in the more fragmented Indian polity. The personal friendships and trust that Modi has built with fellow world leaders over the past decade, his willingness to align with strategic partners to counterbalance adversaries, his distinct style of leadership to steer global governance forums and his eagerness to project homegrown innovations as solutions to the problems of the Global South will remain intact.

The outcome of this election is not going to change India wholesale. Its mixed message indicates a path of continuity with change. While its unclear outcome has enthused Modi's opponents and given them reasons to question his invulnerability, his new coalition government is likely to have little trouble holding on to power until its full term runs out in 2029.

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