

COUNTRY FOCUS: INDIA

*As India approaches elections in many crucial states, Narendra Modi remains popular but the Hindu nationalist prime minister faces the challenge of delivering on his campaign promises. **Rekha Diwakar** reports on the world's most diverse and the largest democracy.*

The Indian political landscape continues to be in a state of flux. The 2014 national election marked a major change, where after three decades, a single party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority of seats. This victory catapulted Narendra Modi into national politics. New Prime Minister Modi had long been a controversial figure in Indian politics. As chief Minister of Gujarat he was in power when a massacre of Muslims took place in the state in 2002. Although courts have not found him guilty of responsible for the slaughter, Modi's opponents continued to attack him during the campaign. Despite this, Modi steered the BJP to a major victory, winning 282 of 543 seats in the *Lok Sabha*, the lower house of the parliament. Modi was able to project himself as a decisive and strong leader in contrast to the inexperienced Rahul Gandhi of the Congress, the other main national party. Although the BJP did not need to, it continued to work with its allies, and formed a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government in May 2014.

The BJP has consolidated its position further by winning subsequent assembly elections in many Indian states. Midway through his five-year term, Modi continues to be popular, but faces the challenge of delivering on his electoral promises. The once dominant Congress has continued to suffer electoral losses, and faces an existential crisis. Although regional parties remain influential in many parts of the country, there are no signs of them being able to form an alternative unified front at the national level. The fluid political situation has also provided opportunities for the emergence of a new anti-corruption Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which won the Delhi state assembly election in 2015 defeating both the BJP and the Congress.

Modi's initiatives

Modi came to power on a promise of decisive leadership in contrast with a decade of 'policy paralysis' under the previous Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. After taking over, he has sought to build an image as a doer and a visionary, and initiated many bold initiatives such as 'Make in India', 'Swachh Bharat' (clean India) mission, *Jan Dhan Yojana* (a financial inclusion scheme), a mission to build 'Smart cities' and *Beti bachao beti Padao Yojana* (save daughter, educate daughter scheme). He has also attempted to transform his image as a polarising leader to one above partisan politics by engaging in the politics of 'symbolism' relying on secular rather than religious symbols, and stressing the issue of economic development. To directly communicate with the citizens, Modi also started a monthly

radio programme, *Maan ki baat* (talk from the heart), in which he shares his views on a variety of issues.



Modi has been active in the domain of foreign policy, visiting a number of countries, and hosting many prominent world leaders. He took the initiative to normalise relations with Pakistan by inviting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to his swearing in ceremony, and later, made a surprise visit to Pakistan in December 2015. However, this initiative has not produced any concrete results, and the continuing spate of terrorist attacks in India led to what the Modi government called 'surgical strikes' on terrorist camps located in Pakistan in October 2016. These strikes have been cited by the BJP as evidence of Modi's strong leadership but have further weakened the relationship between the two countries.

On the economic front, Modi has introduced a nationwide 'Good and Services Tax' (GST), to replace a variety of complicated state and national levies. Although some details still need to be finalised, and the implementation has been delayed beyond the initial deadline of April 2017, to later in the year, the GST is a significant reform, which is likely to reduce corruption and boost GDP. Modi's most significant economic policy intervention so far has been the demonetisation of 1,000 and 500 Rupee currency notes with the aim of reducing unaccounted money and promoting a 'cashless economy'. Announced on 8 November 2016, this move led to extensive discomfort to millions of citizens who had to stand in long queues to deposit their old notes, and withdraw new ones. Most of the opposition parties criticised the decision, and there were heated exchanges in the parliament and political protests outside. Although the situation is slowly returning to normal, it has negatively affected India's

growth prospects, caused economic disruption, and could also affect BJP's electoral prospects.

During his 2014 election campaign, Modi promised to deliver rapid economic growth and development (*acche Din* or good days) while ensuring that the benefits percolated to all sections of society, and all communities felt represented (*sab ka sath, sab ka vikas* or inclusive growth). Growth, however, has been mixed, especially in light of the increasing unemployment and the likely negative effect of demonetisation. 'Make in India' is yet to have a discernible impact, and the effect of the 'Smart cities' initiative, which aims to modernise the country's infrastructure, will take many years to roll out. The government has claimed that its *Jan Dhan Yojana* financial inclusion scheme has been successful, and so far, over 270 million new bank accounts have been opened.

Due to BJP's majority and an absence of a strong opposition in *Lok Sabha*, there was a concern about the government becoming authoritarian and insular. Although there are no clear signs of Modi becoming an overtly dictatorial leader, there are murmurs about his centralised style of functioning. The government has clashed with the judiciary over the process to appointing judges. While Modi appears to have moved away from *Hindutva* agenda, many of his party colleagues have expressed anti-Muslim views, and he has not been particularly forthcoming in condemning such opinions.



Long queues seen outside a bank after demonetisation

BJP - not yet a dominant party

Since the 2014 national election, the BJP has also won state assembly elections - on its own or with allies - in Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Assam. It also formed a post-poll coalition government with Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Jammu & Kashmir. However, in Bihar BJP lost to a 'grand alliance' of opposition parties, and was defeated by new party – the AAP in Delhi. Further, it did not make much headway in state assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Meantime, Congress' decline has continued, and the party seems incapable of challenging the BJP at the national level. Although regional parties such as the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) and *Samajwadi Party* (SP) in UP, and *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (RJD) in Bihar, which had reshaped the landscape of Indian politics in the 1990s by mobilising around lower caste identities, fared poorly in the 2014 national election, identity politics is likely to remain an important factor in the future elections. Although the AAP is attempting to grow into a national party and fill the political space being vacated by the Congress, it is too early to tell whether this will prove successful.

While the BJP has emerged as the principal national party in India, it is not as yet a 'system-defining' or dominant party, which the Congress was in the 1950s and 1960s. This is mainly because the BJP has not been successful in many eastern and southern parts of the country due to the presence of influential regional parties. Further, BJP's growth is hampered by a lack of support by Muslims, which comprise a significant proportion of the population in many states, due to its image of being a Hindu nationalist party. It also continues to face hurdles in consolidating the Hindu vote due to the cross-cutting social cleavages of caste, language and region.

The results of the state assembly elections held during February – March 2017 in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Goa, Uttarakhand and Manipur will be announced on 11th March, and will set the scene for the 2019 national election, and signal the future trajectory of the Indian party system. If the BJP performs well in these elections, it will indicate a further consolidation of its position, and a possible move towards a BJP dominated party system.

It is clear that Modi's 2014 election campaign revitalised the BJP's organisation and cadre, and through his highly effective oratory and messaging, he has successfully expanded the party's reach beyond the traditional support base of urban upper caste voters. After taking over as Prime Minister, Modi has announced a plethora of initiative and schemes, and is the country's most visible leader in and outside India. That said, he continues to face the challenge of straddling between pursuing a Hindu nationalist agenda with an aim to consolidate the Hindu vote overriding the cleavages of caste, language and region and taking a more centrist position to reach out to a wider section of the electorate.

Indian party system and democracy today

India currently has a multi-party system, which includes the BJP as the principal national party, and the Congress, the other main national party, which faces decline; and many regional parties, with concentrated bases of support in specific parts of the country. Although the Congress can still recover from electoral setbacks, as it has done on few previous occasions, the main challenge to the BJP at the national level in this fluid landscape, is more likely to arise from a coalition of regional parties or a coalition of regional parties plus the Congress.

BJP's victory in the 2014 national election was achieved on the basis of a relatively small 31 per cent vote share, and to that extent its majority in *Lok Sabha* is tenuous in the context of India's first past the post electoral system. However, it remains improbable that a single party will be able to dislodge Modi, and the emergence of a national coalition of regional parties with or without the Congress also remains doubtful. And therefore, Modi appears to be well positioned to get another term in power. In light of the electoral arithmetic, the BJP under Modi is unlikely to revert to a fundamentalist *Hindutva* agenda. However, mere rhetoric and symbolism may not

help the Modi to win another term in power, and he would need to demonstrate a clear progress towards delivering on the promise of *acche din* for the average Indian.

At the time of India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947, doubts were raised regarding the survival of democracy in such a diverse and relatively poor country. Seventy years on, although politics in the country has become increasingly acrimonious and populist, and governance chaotic, Indian democracy has been able to adapt to accommodate divergent views and changes in the political environment, and remains a unique experiment.

Selected further readings:

Diwakar, R (2017) Change and continuity in Indian politics and the Indian party system: Revisiting the results of the 2014 Indian general election. *Asian Journal of comparative politics*. Epub head of print 25 November 2016. DOI: 10.1177/2057891116679309.

Palshikar, S, Suri, KC and Yadav, Y (2014) Normalization of the 'Post-Congress Polity. Palshikar S, Suri KC and Yadav Y (eds) In *Party competition in Indian states: electoral politics in post-congress polity*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp 1-61.

Sen, R (2016) Narendra Modi's makeover and the politics of symbolism. *Journal of Asian Public Policy* 9(2): 98-111.