

India's 2024 Elections: Has Democratic Backsliding Come to a Halt?

by Diego Maiorano

On 4 June 2024, as the results of the Indian general elections consolidated, a political earthquake shook the country. Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) failed to get an absolute majority of the seats (272), winning just 240, 63 less than in 2019. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) barely passed the majority threshold, securing 294 seats, far short of the 400 seats it had declared it would get. The "victory" of the BJP, when put into the Indian political context, actually looked like a resounding defeat.

A few weeks after the electoral verdict – and relying on post-poll survey data – it is possible to look into the reasons behind this unexpected outcome and draw some implications for the future of India's politics.

It's the economy – or not?

Let's start with two widely reported reasons for the underwhelming

performance of the BJP: economic distress and a reaction against growing authoritarianism. Overall, it is now clear that both reasons, while playing a role, do not form an overarching explanation for the electoral outcome. On the one hand, it is certainly true that the country went to the polls against a backdrop of economic uncertainty. In a pre-poll survey, as many as 62 per cent of the respondents mentioned unemployment, rising prices or declining income as the main reason why the BJP should not get another chance in government.¹ Adding to this, agrarian distress – an enduring problem which has resulted in widespread and long-lasting protests – has marked much of Narendra Modi's terms in office. Finally, inequality has

¹ Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS), *Social and Political Barometer Prepoll Study 2024-Survey Findings*, March 2024, p. 11, https://www.lokniti.org/media/PDF-upload/1718270418_74355000_download_report.pdf.

Diego Maiorano is associate fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). He is Senior Assistant Professor of Contemporary Indian History at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and Visiting Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore.

skyrocketed over the last few years, accelerating a decades-long trend.²

However, states with similar economic problems – like much of the “Hindi belt” in the North of the country – responded very differently. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the BJP suffered a major decrease in its vote share (-8.3 percentage points), whereas in neighbouring states the shift was much more moderate (-3.1 percentage points in Bihar) or even positive (+1.3 percentage points in Madhya Pradesh). Overall, as shown by post-poll survey data, the BJP maintained its advantage among poor voters: as many as 37 per cent of the poor voted for the BJP,³ slightly above the 36 per cent who preferred the INDIA Alliance, a constellation of 26 parties which campaigned on a very progressive and markedly left-of-centre agenda. Farmers’ distress seems to have played a more significant role, as the BJP suffered heavy losses in the states which have seen major farmers’ protests (Rajasthan: -9.3 percentage points; Haryana: -11.9 percentage points). Moreover, Modi’s party lost ground among most farming castes across the country, except in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, where the party is virtually unchallenged.

² Nitin Kumar Bharti et al., “Income and Wealth Inequality in India 1922-2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj”, in *World Inequality Lab Working Papers*, No. 2024/09 (March 2024), <https://wid.world/document/income-and-wealth-inequality-in-india-1922-2023-the-rise-of-the-billionaire-raj-world-inequality-lab-working-paper-2024-09>.

³ Sanjay Kumar and Jenitta Sanjay Kumar, “The BJP Pro-Rich Skew Becomes Moderate”, in *The Hindu*, 7 June 2024, https://lokniti.org/media/upload_files/lokniti17.jpg.

Overall, the BJP’s national vote share declined only marginally (from 37.4 per cent to 36.6 per cent). However, the regional breakup of the vote share indicates that where the BJP was the dominant party – across most of the North and West of the country – its vote share declined quite dramatically (-4.6 percentage points), whereas in areas where the party was the challenger to regional parties (in the South and East) it made substantial gains (+5.9 percentage points), thus offsetting the losses in its core areas of support.⁴ In other words, it seems that anti-incumbency feelings – at least partly caused by economic distress – were one of the reasons why the BJP did not sweep the polls.

Putting a brake on the authoritarian drift (without rejecting it altogether)

A similar point could be made regarding the interpretation of the election results as a reaction against growing authoritarianism.⁵ One should not confuse the consequences of the verdict with its causes. There is very little evidence in post-poll survey data that voters strongly resented India’s democratic backsliding. If over two-thirds of the voters think that elected government should be kept in check by other constitutional bodies, a similar

⁴ Yogendra Yadav, Rahul Shastri and Shreyas Sardesai, “Two Different BJPs Competed in 2024. The Challenger Gained, the Establishment Lost”, in *ThePrint*, 11 June 2024, <https://theprint.in/opinion/two-different-bjps-competed-in-2024-the-challenger-gained-the-establishment-lost/2126328>.

⁵ Diego Maiorano, “How Democratic is the World’s Largest Democracy?”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 23|15 (March 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16781>.

proportion agrees with the statement that “we should have a strong leader who does not have to bother about elections”.⁶ These conflicting data points indicate, at the very least, that there was no strong reaction in defence of India’s democracy and liberal values, despite the fact that the opposition parties made the defence of the Constitution one of its main electoral planks.

However, there is at least one sense in which voters did defend Constitutional provisions. In fact, post-poll survey data show that there was a significant shift of Dalit voters – belonging to the so-called lower castes – away from the BJP. This is one of the few national trends which can be extrapolated from the data. The reason is most probably due to the anxiety among Dalit voters – inadvertently promoted by the BJP and fuelled by opposition parties – that the ruling party would have used its majority to change the Constitution to get away with those provisions that reserve seats for the lower castes in Parliament and in public sector employment. It is probably in this sense – fears against a reversal of affirmative action policies – that we should interpret the voters’ intention to defend the Constitution, rather than as a more general preoccupation with the erosion of liberal democracy.

⁶ Lokniti-CSDS, *Social and Political Barometer Postpoll Study 2024-Survey Findings*, June 2024, p. 13, https://lokniti.org/media/PDF-upload/1718435207_67606300_download_report.pdf; Yogendra Yadav, Shreyas Sardesai and Rahul Shastri, “2024 Not a Ringing Endorsement of Secularism, Democratic India”, in *ThePrint*, 17 June 2024, <https://theprint.in/opinion/2024-results-not-a-ringing-endorsement-of-secularism-democratic-india-heres-why/2134349>.

Data on whether voters approved Modi’s majoritarian twist to India’s polity are also mixed. On the one hand, an overwhelming majority of the voters believe that India does not belong only to the Hindus. Moreover, the proportion of voters who “fully agree” with the statement that “in a democracy, the will of the majority community should prevail” declined from 23 per cent to 19 per cent between 2019 and 2024⁷ – although it is still much higher than before Modi became Prime Minister. On the other hand, a majority of the respondents agree that minorities should adopt the customs of the majority. In other words, it is not possible to claim that Indian voters outright rejected the majoritarian logic which has underpinned a significant portion of Modi’s government action over the past decade. However, the overall decline of the BJP’s popularity – especially in North India, where the most blatant manifestations of majoritarianism have been on display – does signal that voters were not ready to endorse the ruling party to transform India into a *de jure* Hindu nation.

Opposition unit, fissures in Modi’s bloc

Two other factors, although not widely discussed in the media, played a key role in determining electoral outcomes, both of which might have important repercussions on the functioning of India’s political system. First, it is

⁷ Lokniti-CSDS, *All India Postpoll NES 2019-Survey Findings*, 2019, p. 48, https://lokniti.org/media/PDF-upload/1579771857_30685900_download_report.pdf; and *Social and Political Barometer Postpoll Study 2024-Survey Findings*, cit., p. 9.

clear that opposition parties proved to be much more aligned and willing to compromise than most observers (including this writer)⁸ had predicted. Opposition unity, coordination and ability to agree on seat sharing were crucial in key states, especially Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous. Moving forward, it is plausible to expect that the trust-building mechanisms set in place during the electoral campaign might strengthen the opposition, which in turn could act as a moderating force on government action.

Second, anecdotal evidence suggests that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, the BJP's parent organisation) might have supported the BJP less enthusiastically than in the past two elections. The RSS, to which Modi belonged since he was very young, is India's largest Hindu nationalist organisation, with millions of volunteers throughout the country, who have been the "foot soldiers" of the BJP in the past. It is a paramilitary organisation, explicitly modelled after the Italian *Balilla*, whose ultimate goal is to transform India into a Hindu state. However, the RSS has historically been wary of political leaders who acted too independently from itself. Shortly after the results were announced, leaders of the RSS blamed the BJP's arrogance for the poor electoral showing, a message widely interpreted as a critique to the Prime Minister. These comments are important because they might signal the opening of some breathing space for those opposing the Prime

Minister *within* the Hindu nationalism ecosystem, including the BJP. In fact, it is hardly a secret that many in the party resent the overcentralisation of power in the hands of the central leadership as well as the sidelining of senior party leaders over the last decade. This might act as a restraining force on government's action as well.

These two constraining forces might enlarge the room for manoeuvre in other institutions of the state, as well as in the media, a process which has been evident in the weeks following the elections. Compounded with the compulsions stemming from the need to run a coalition government together with parties (such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal or the Telugu Desam Party, the BJP's largest allies within the NDA) which rely on the support of religious minorities, this new situation might make the expectation of most analysts – that the election has halted or at least significantly slowed down India's democratic backsliding – a reality.

Looking ahead

However, one should not expect a complete reversal of the trend. Especially in states where the BJP is in power, majoritarianism will continue to be the order of the day. In the weeks since the election results were announced, demolitions of Muslims' homes continued, cow vigilantes attacked minorities and opponents continued to be the target of police action, including Delhi's Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal (who is still in jail) and Booker prize-winner writer Arundhati Roy, who is currently being prosecuted under anti-terrorism law for some

⁸ Diego Maiorano, "La democrazia indiana al vaglio delle elezioni", in *AffarInternazionali*, 8 April 2024, <https://www.affarinternazionali.it/?p=107604>.

14-year-old comments on Kashmir. Moreover, a potentially draconian new penal code (adopted by the previous Parliament) has just become operational.

One way to test the direction in which the country will head is to look at the bills that the government will table before Parliament. For instance, should the government decide to present a draft of the Uniform Civil Code – a very controversial item that would replace religion-based personal laws with standardised rules on issues such as marriage, divorce and inheritance and is thus seen by religious minorities as a potential encroachment on their rights –, this would be a clear signal that the BJP is willing to test the limits of coalition politics to realise its ideological project. On the other hand, the government might decide to focus on economic issues and employment. This would be indicative of a “wait and see” approach by the BJP, possibly postponing more controversial issues until the party obtains a clearer mandate during one of the many state-level elections over the next few months (the first one being Maharashtra in October).

In other words, for the time being, India's fate as a democracy remains somewhat of a question mark.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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