

## India in 2019

### *A New One-Party Hegemony?*

#### ABSTRACT

The major development in India in 2019 was the national election which returned Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party to power with a larger majority and which, along with post-election ideological assertiveness, poses the question of whether India's party system is a new one-party hegemony, this time of the Bharatiya Janata.

**KEYWORDS:** BJP, Modi, nationalism, minorities, citizenship

IN 2019 INDIA EXPERIENCED the reinforcement of trends that began in 2014 and which could lead to fundamental shifts in the country's politics and society, although not necessarily its international alignments. The major event during the year was the national election, the country's 17th since the first election in 1952, after independence in 1947. The ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP), was re-elected with a larger majority than in 2014, with the BJP alone again winning a simple majority of seats (303) in the 545-member Lok Sabha (the popularly elected lower house of parliament), compared to its narrower majority of 282 in 2014.<sup>1</sup>

The year began in an election-campaign atmosphere, as the Lok Sabha's five-year term would end in May. In December 2018 the opposition Congress party had won three major state elections, displacing the BJP from power in

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1. All electoral data in this article are from the Election Commission of India (<www.eci.gov.in>).

the North Indian Hindi-speaking states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh, and thus seeming to pose a more credible challenge nationally than it had earlier in Modi's first term. The Congress had been India's dominant umbrella party, ruling the country with majority governments from 1947 to 1989, except for two years (1977–79), and as a minority government from 1991 to 1996 and a minority coalition from 2004 to 2014. After its humbling defeat in 2014, when it was reduced to 44 seats (less than 10% of the Lok Sabha) and a 19.3% vote share (the first time it had ever dipped below 20%), it had seemed in terminal decline, with a lack of clear ideological positioning and a leadership in crisis. Party president Rahul Gandhi was regularly lampooned by the BJP and the (largely pro-BJP) television channels and on social media. The three state elections of 2018 were a boost for the party facing a BJP that still looked dominant and seemed to be setting the agenda, politically and ideologically, despite an economic slowdown and evidence of slow job growth.

However, over the next five months, the opposition's challenge to the BJP did not crystallize into a credible alternative. Over several months, from 2018 onward, the opposition parties tried to craft a grand alliance so as to have one-on-one contests against the NDA, pooling opposition votes state by state. This strategy failed for several reasons. The result was a fractured opposition in several major states (Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh), opposition alliances only in some major states (Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka), and no agreement on a prime ministerial candidate to run against Modi.

The campaign took a strongly nationalist turn at the end of February 2019, a development that favored the ruling BJP, just before the formal announcement of the election schedule on March 10. Armed separatists attacked a convoy of paramilitary forces in Pulwama, in the Kashmir Valley. The Modi government blamed Pakistani sponsorship, and on February 26 launched a bold airstrike, targeting a terrorist training camp in Balakot, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly Northwest Frontier) Province, in Pakistan proper. This was a departure from restraints that had been observed until then and was publicized nationally as a major retaliation by a government and party strong on nationalism and national security. Although an Indian pilot in a MiG-21 fighter was shot down, captured, and then returned without conditions by Pakistan (a development in which the Trump administration might have played a discreet role), the BJP government won the media battle

in the election campaign on this issue, putting the opposition on the defensive. The campaign then pivoted away from economic issues like jobs and the agrarian crisis, to the advantage of the BJP, which successfully pitched itself as the most nationalist party.

The BJP won a decisive victory for the second time in five years, winning just over 37% of the vote, compared to 31% in 2014. The BJP-led NDA won 45% of the vote and 353 seats, not far from a two-thirds majority. The principal opposition party, the Congress, maintained its vote share at 19.5% but increased its seats only marginally from 44 to 52, still less than 10% of the Lok Sabha. And it was overwhelmingly defeated even in the three states where it had won state assembly elections just six months earlier. Voters appeared to be distinguishing between state elections, based on state and local issues, and national elections, in which national issues like national security and the overall political stability of a majority government with strong leadership seemed to be preferred to a possibly (indeed probably) fractious coalition.

The major question the election poses is whether after 25 years of minority governments, mostly minority coalitions, from 1989 to 2014, the Indian party system has entered a new phase of one-party dominance like that enjoyed by the Congress from 1947 to 1989, except that the hegemon is now the BJP. Before attempting to answer this question, let us look at the factors behind the BJP's victory and the possible attitudinal changes on a range of key issues among the electorate, as indicated by the best available survey data, from the post-election survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti.<sup>2</sup>

The survey responses suggest that questions of leadership and nationalism overshadowed economic issues in the mind of the electorate. Seventy-six percent of the respondents had heard of the Balakot airstrike, and 70% approved of it. While 43% listed one economic issue or another as of greatest concern, 39% said that issues other than economic ones were of greatest concern. Modi's leadership and persona seemed to have influenced voting decisively. One-third of those who voted for the BJP said they would not have, if Modi had not been the prime ministerial candidate; 47% said they preferred Modi as prime minister, compared to only 23% for Congress leader Rahul Gandhi; and 39% agreed with the proposition that the country should

2. All survey data in this article are from the 2019 CSDS-Lokniti post-election survey, for which I thank CSDS for access.

be governed by a strong leader who does not have to worry about winning elections. It appeared that the BJP's campaign had successfully made the election into a quasi-presidential one, in which voters chose the candidate (in their electoral district) of the party whose leader they would like to see become prime minister.

On the economy, the Modi government's implementation of several welfare programs appears to have made it popular, or at least diluted possible discontent. A fifth of the respondents had received some government funds in the month before the election, and 13%–34% had received benefits from one or another of nine major welfare programs over Modi's first term. While there has been debate since mid-2019 over the growth rate, with Modi's former chief economic adviser saying that official figures have overestimated it, the economy has grown rapidly by world standards: even if not in the 7% range, it had credibly been in the 5%–6% range. And while that might not have been enough to absorb the entrants into the labor force, the welfare programs would have taken care of some of the possible disenchantment.

Has the BJP become a new dominant or hegemonic party, like the Congress in its heyday? At first glance it would appear so. The victory in 2019 was the second consecutive majority win, and with an additional 6% vote swing on top of the 12% swing in 2014, giving it 56% of Lok Sabha seats on the basis of 37% of votes, for a conversion ratio of 1.49, which is the bonus usually enjoyed by the first party in a first-past-the-post electoral system. The BJP won a majority of the Lok Sabha seats in 17 out of the 29 states, either on its own or as the senior coalition partner. The largest opposition party, the Congress, won less than 10% of the seats and less than a fifth of the vote, making the BJP look hegemonic. While it is entirely possible that the Indian party system has entered an extended period of one-party dominance, with only fragmented opposition, on closer examination its hegemony is not quite like that of the Congress of old, at least so far.

The Congress in its heyday never fell below 40% vote share until 1989 (except for in the post-Emergency election of 1977), and never below 300 seats (except in 1967 and 1977). It also enjoyed a greater geographical spread than the BJP has achieved until now, being the hegemonic party in all states except Jammu and Kashmir and Kerala till 1967, and till 1989 either that or one of the two leading parties in all states except Tamil Nadu. The BJP's presence across states is not quite what the Congress once enjoyed, as it is not one of the two leading parties in three major states in South India in Lok

Sabha elections (except in Karnataka and Telangana) or in Punjab. Furthermore, the BJP remains dependent on allies for its majority of 303, in that 42 of these seats were won in the three states of Maharashtra, Bihar, and Punjab, where its victories were dependent to some extent on vote transfer by the voters of its state-level coalition partner parties. Unlike the Congress in its heyday it still needs the NDA coalition, despite being the dominant partner with a majority on its own. Without these alliances it might not have gotten to a majority (over 272 seats) on its own.

On the more difficult-to-define question of ideological hegemony, the survey responses to questions concerning nationalism and minorities give us some clues. The BJP and its allied organizations, including its parent organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers Organization, RSS), and others the RSS has spawned, have taken stands on various issues that are opposed, directly or indirectly, to minorities, particularly Muslims. And though they formally accept the Indian constitution, they consider the Indian practice of secularism as pandering to minorities. Thus, public opinion on attitudes to minorities can be taken as an indicator of the spread of the BJP ideology of *Hindutva*, literally Hindu-ness, or majoritarian Hindu nationalism. The RSS maintains that India is a Hindu *rashtra* (nation). Let us look at the findings of the CSDS-Lokniti survey on these issues.

On whether in a democracy the “will of the majority community should prevail,” 23% fully and 27% partly agreed with this statement, with 30% fully disagreeing. On whether the Muslim community had been victimized under the Modi government, opinion spanned the spectrum, with 14% fully agreeing and 24% fully disagreeing. On the polarizing issue of the Babri Mosque, a sixteenth-century mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya that was demolished by mobs mobilized by the BJP in 1992 (and which was allegedly built by the Moghul emperor and conqueror Babur after he demolished a Hindu temple to the god Rama), a third said the demolition of the mosque was justified, but most said it was not. Caste and class categories seem to make little difference in these responses. They need to be interpreted carefully, but they do seem to indicate that majoritarian Hindu nationalism has a considerable hold on public opinion.

On the other hand, responses to a range of other questions seem to indicate that an accommodative attitude to minorities still has majority support. Most survey respondents fully or somewhat agreed with, and only a small minority fully disagreed with, the following five propositions: that India belongs equally

to all its citizens, not just the Hindu majority; that minorities should be treated equally; that minorities have special rights; that the government should protect minority interests even if the majority is against it; and that minorities need not adopt the customs of the majority community.

One can make the cautious surmise from these responses, taken together, that while majoritarian Hindu sentiment has considerable support, majority opinion in India is still generally accommodative toward minorities. Regional disaggregation of responses shows that such accommodative attitudes are still held by most people, even in the BJP's stronghold regions of northern and western India. Hence, one can probably say that the "secular" consensus is still largely intact, though it has suffered some erosion. The BJP has yet to establish an ideological hegemony to match its electoral hegemony, or so it would seem. But that raises the question, why did the electorate endorse the BJP and Modi again, and in greater measure than in 2014?

In the absence of conclusive data, my speculation is that the re-endorsement of the BJP, and specifically Modi's leadership, is a complex combination of five phenomena. First is the BJP's successful projection of Modi as a strong, effective, and credible leader who has delivered and can deliver in the future. Second is the inability of the opposition to put together a coalition that can take on the NDA in one-on-one vote-pooling contests nationwide, and its inability to project Rahul Gandhi or anyone else as a credible challenger to Modi. Third is the gradual spread of Hindu majoritarian and strongly nationalist sentiment, aided by the change of atmosphere after the Balakot airstrike and the tensions with Pakistan over Kashmir. Fourth is the respectable economic growth (whatever the debates are over the exact figures), combined with the effective implementation of nine major welfare programs. And fifth is the growth of an aspirational and upwardly mobile and upwardly identifying middle class, as a side effect of the sustained high rate of economic growth. While Aslany estimates the middle class as 28% of the population, Kapur and Vaishnav found that as many as 49% *identify* as middle class,<sup>3</sup> indicating aspirational and upward identification with the attitudes of the better-off, both by class and caste.

3. M. Aslany, "The Indian Middle Class, Its Size, and Urban-Rural Variations," *Contemporary South Asia* 27:2 (2019): 196–213; D. Kapur and M. Vaishnav, "Being Middle Class in India," *The Hindu*, January 10, 2015.

Over the years, survey evidence has consistently shown the latter to be disproportionately pro-BJP in voting preferences. These five phenomena in complex interaction probably resulted in the 6% swing that catapulted the BJP and NDA to wider majorities.

Following that electoral victory, Modi formed an NDA cabinet dominated by the BJP, as in his earlier term. The noteworthy appointments were that of BJP president Amit Shah as home minister, informally the second-most powerful person in the government (like Modi himself, Shah is from Gujarat); former Home Minister Rajnath Singh as defense minister; Nirmala Sitharaman, former defense minister, as finance minister; and career diplomat and former foreign secretary (and earlier, ambassador to the United States and China) Subrahmanyam Jaishankar as foreign minister.

#### POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

The major developments since the election have been the federal government's budget, presented in July, and a series of signature bills passed in the monsoon session of parliament. The budget, targeting a reduction of the fiscal deficit to 3.3% of GDP, was not an economically liberalizing one: it raised taxes on the rich and added some protectionist measures on imports to those that had been added since late 2017. And while continuing the policy of divesting government stock in public enterprises without losing control, essentially for revenue generation, it did not initiate any privatization of public enterprises. In all these points it was of a piece with the trajectory of economic policy over the first term. When Modi was elected in 2014 there was widespread anticipation in the business and economic policy communities that India would see a new round of structural reforms, perhaps gradual rather than of a big-bang kind, toward a more market-driven and globalized economy. While there have been modernizing infrastructural investments and an improvement in the ease of doing business, amid the introduction of a value-added tax called the Goods and Services Tax and an Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code to ease the exit for loss-making firms, there has been no real rollback of government control of the economy, either in privatizing government-owned enterprises and banks (which dominate the banking system) or in opening up the economy to freer international trade. (India's weighted average tariff of about 17% makes it a relatively protectionist economy, compared not only to developed countries but also to its East and Southeast Asian neighbors.)

This has not changed in 2019. There is an ongoing attempt to shed government control over money-losing Air India, but other than that no serious privatization is in the cards. However, to deal with the acknowledged economic slowdown, in October the government slashed corporate taxes to boost domestic and foreign investment, and in December it announced further divestment of public-sector firms, including willingness to sell the majority stake in the profit-making Bharat Petroleum. Also, at the very end of the year, a commission was set up to re-examine the system of national statistics, following controversies earlier in the year about fudged figures and slowing growth. In late 2019 India opted out of a free trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which still includes the 10 ASEAN countries plus China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

This year also saw a ruthless use of tax agencies to investigate opposition politicians, and defections to the BJP, including by state legislators and party office-bearers, have been engineered in many states. The use of tax agencies to harass opponents is not new; it was used by earlier governments and ruling parties. But the perception is that it has been weaponized as never before.

As of the end of 2019, the BJP has a majority in the Lok Sabha but not a two-thirds majority (even with its NDA allies), and it does not enjoy a majority in the Rajya Sabha (even with its NDA allies), let alone a two-thirds majority. Amending the constitution requires in effect a two-thirds majority, assuming a full turnout in parliament (given the importance of constitutional amendments), while passing ordinary legislation other than money bills requires a simple majority in both houses. As of now, the NDA needs the cooperation of other parties to pass both ordinary legislation and constitutional amendments. There is a potential further hurdle for constitutionally dubious legislation: the Supreme Court has the power of judicial review.

However, since the election, the BJP has been quite successful in passing its bills in both houses. Four major pieces of legislation have been passed: the Right to Information (Amendment) Act, which in effect whittled down the autonomy of the Central and State Information Commissions, which respond to demands for information from the public, and thereby the level of transparency imposed on government by the law (in existence since 2005); the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, which expands the grounds on which organizations and now individuals can be labeled terrorists and arrested; the



National Investigation Agency (Amendment) Act, which gives additional powers to this federal police agency specializing in counter-terrorism; and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, which abolishes the practice of “triple talaq,” by which under traditional Muslim law men could divorce their wives very easily. On these four bills, the NDA had the support, variously, of one or more of four smaller regional parties (the regional parties of the states of Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (literally the Majority Community Party, based on the ex-untouchables or Scheduled Castes, primarily based in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh).

### THE KASHMIR REORGANIZATION

Momentously, on August 5, a presidential proclamation abolished Articles 370 and 35A of the constitution, which had granted a degree of autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, and split the state into two (directly federally administered) union territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. This is the first time since independence that a state has been downgraded to union territory status. A communications lockdown was imposed, including on Internet and mobile telecom services, as well as restrictions on movement and peaceful assembly. Several politicians, including three former chief ministers of the state, were placed under house arrest, and international and domestic human rights groups and even opposition members of parliament were not allowed to visit the Kashmir Valley. It was promised that normalcy would be restored soon, but at the end of the year the Internet lockdown and detention of politicians remained in place.

These legislative measures send three political signals. First, the BJP is going to implement its hard-line nationalist position on Kashmir and by implication on relations with Pakistan, not entertaining any dialogue on an autonomous domestic status, let alone with Pakistan. Ironically, the abolition of Article 370 appears to have led to Kashmir being raised as an issue in international forums much more than in past years, and not only by Pakistan and other Islamic countries but also by Western nations.

Second, the BJP is going to be tough on terror and crime, in line with its stated positions. Third, the core Hindu-nationalist agenda, which includes the promulgation of a Uniform Civil Code and by implication abolition of separate civil codes for different religious groups, is being planned to be

implemented. These positions, added to the RSS position that India is a Hindu *rashtra*, trouble opposition parties and civil liberties and minority rights organizations. The BJP is seen as trying to erode the autonomy of and exercise control over the autonomous institutions of “horizontal accountability” and democratic constraint, like the courts, the Election Commission, the Central Information Commission, and the National Human Rights Commission, although it formally accepts the constitution and likes to point out abuses by past Congress governments, particularly in the 1975–77 Emergency, when civil liberties were suspended.

### FOREIGN POLICY AND DEFENSE

Lastly, on foreign policy and defense, 2019 saw more continuity than change. The major changes flowed from the Balakot airstrike in February and the abolition of Article 370 in August. The Modi government signaled that there would be no dialogue with Pakistan until support for armed militancy and terror was completely shut down, and even then the only thing to talk about would be the return to India of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. While this did make Kashmir a greater topic of conversation in international forums than in many years, India rode out the criticism and essentially had its say that Kashmir was purely an internal issue, with no major world power or world body, not the UN Security Council, UN General Assembly, or UN Human Rights Council, taking an anti-India stand.

On other foreign policy and defense issues, India continued to build relationships with a range of powers without any marked tilt, continuing the Modi government’s first-term policies, which in turn had built on the earlier Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government’s (2004–14) policies. Thus, while the key relationship with the US continued to grow, it was colored by at least two tensions: India’s perceived protectionism, with India being labeled a “tariff king” by President Donald Trump; and the uncertainty about whether the US would impose sanctions on India (though the Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act) for going ahead with the purchase of the Russian S-400 Triumph air defense system. However, on Asia there seemed to be greater harmony between the two countries, with the four-country Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (comprising the US, Japan, Australia, and India), a thinly veiled counter to China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, being elevated to foreign minister dialogue level. Arms purchase

policy continued to diversify away from Russia to France, Israel, and the US, as in earlier years.

However, India continued to pursue dialogue with China, holding an informal Modi–Xi Jinping summit in October at Mamallapuram, on the Tamil Nadu coast, while rejecting China’s support for Pakistan on Kashmir, and remaining outside the Belt and Road Initiative. India also communicates with China and Russia as a member of forums like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and the Russia-India-China summit. India has not pushed for the military containment of China, even in the Quad initiative promoted by the US. In its own neighborhood, India has essentially dumped the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which includes Pakistan, in favor of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation, which does not, but which includes Myanmar and Thailand. All these policies are carry-forwards from earlier years. India also elevated the relationship with Saudi Arabia to a strategic partnership, with a Saudi commitment of US\$ 100 billion of investments in India over the coming years.

#### **EMERGING CHALLENGES TO BJP DOMINANCE**

On the whole, post-election ideological assertiveness on Hindu-nationalist issues has characterized the BJP’s domestic and foreign policies, leading to the question of whether India now has not only a new one-party hegemonic party system but also a new ideological consensus that is in tension with a secular constitution. While some developments in the last two months of the year would seem to reinforce a view that there is a new ideological hegemony, such as the November Supreme Court judgment awarding the site of the demolished Babri Mosque to a Hindu temple to the god Rama, even while acknowledging the illegality of its demolition, there have been other indications that the BJP’s dominance can be challenged. The BJP failed to get a majority in the Haryana state election, where it had ruled with a majority for five years; but it formed a government in coalition with a small regional party. In the large state of Maharashtra, the BJP failed to form a government due to the defection of its former ally, the regional Shiv Sena party, which formed a government in coalition with another regional party and the Congress. Lastly, it lost the election in Jharkhand State, which it had ruled for five

years. This showed that the BJP could be challenged at the state level within six months of a major national election victory.

But the biggest challenge to the BJP's ideological assertiveness came in December in the form of mass protests across the country against the Citizen (Amendment) Act. The act grants citizenship to illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan who belong to religions other than Islam, on the grounds that they are persecuted minorities in officially Islamic states. It was widely seen as going against the secular constitution, as it linked granting of citizenship to religion. What was widely feared was the link between the act and the proposed National Register of Citizens, whose procedures are as yet undefined, but whereby all residents would be required to prove their citizenship with appropriate documents. It was feared that while non-Muslims unable to prove their citizenship would get relief under the act, Muslims without the right documentation who had known no country other than India would be declared non-citizens. As of end of the year, the mass protests appear to be countrywide and broad-based, not limited to Muslims. To sum up, it would appear that the BJP's national electoral victory seems to have inaugurated a new one-party system but that its dominance can be challenged electorally at the state level and ideologically at a broader level.