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‘The result is a big surprise’

Christoph Mohr in India on the world’s largest democratic exercise, Prime Minister Modi’s relatively poor performance and the opposition’s successes

Narendra Modi and his BJP have suffered a major setback in the Indian elections and lost their absolute majority. What is the reason for the relatively poor performance of the prime minister and his ruling party?

A few days after the election, any in-depth analysis of the motives of the almost 645 million Indians who cast their votes is difficult. One thing is certain: the result is a big surprise and unexpected for almost all national and international observers. So far, there have been various interpretations that have focussed their analysis on the strong economic inequality, problems with social justice and different economic developments. This seems quite convincing if you look at the losses of the ruling coalition in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Haryana, which, as so-called Hindi heartlands, were firmly in the hands of the BJP for a long time and are characterised by rural structures. India, a country that wants to build up to 71 new airports, landed on the moon last year and has impressive IT hubs and a dynamic start-up scene, is still a developing country in large regions outside the large urban centres of Delhi, Mumbai and Bengaluru, with a gross domestic product per person of around $2 500. In an international comparison, India ranks between Angola and the Republic of Congo. India’s economy may have grown by around eight per cent in the last financial year – one of the fastest rates among the major economies – nevertheless, voters have used their electoral decision to highlight the inequalities and rising unemployment locally, something that is still a reality for many people.

The 800 million people who still receive food rations despite the Indian government’s success in combating poverty probably also wanted to use their vote to emphasise that social justice and a fairer India should be a higher priority. The opposition focussed its election campaign primarily on this still large section of the population and was thus able to achieve unexpected successes in some parts of the

country. Although the talk here was still about classic handout politics and less about structural, systemic changes, the strategic orientation was probably correct, as India's political economy continues to create social fault lines along economic opportunities, complex identity logics and social power hierarchies that disadvantage – or favour – people in multiple dimensions. Although the government has been able to report successes here in recent years and lift many Indians out of poverty and into the Indian middle class, the development policy challenges in the world's most populous country remain great.

Despite everything, Modi's BJP has nevertheless become the strongest force by a large margin. The prime minister seems assured that he will have another term in office, but he is dependent on alliance partners. What does this mean for the new government?

The BJP's alliance partners have played a rather subordinate role in the past. This will now change and will probably mean that particular and regional interests will have to be negotiated at the cabinet table. Parties such as the Janata Dal from Bihar will now demand more attention and focus on the development of India's poorest state for their twelve seats in the coalition. The BJP and Narendra Modi will have to negotiate - hitherto unfamiliar - compromises. As a result, this may well be positive for the development of the country, because if one shares the above analysis, then broader regional development, combating unemployment, fairer distribution policies and focussing on poorer regions are valid policy approaches for reaching out to voters.

The opposition Indian National Congress (INC) almost doubled its number of seats compared to the last election. A good sign for Indian democracy?

Just under 645 of the approximately 970 million eligible voters in India cast their votes in seven rounds and almost 90 days.

None of the losing candidates subsequently challenged the election results, not even those who lost by a small margin. The election was conducted without any major irregularities and, with almost 310 million female voters, had the highest female voter turnout in Indian history. India thus impressively demonstrates that the world's largest democratic exercise was conducted with integrity, professionalism and respect for the voters. As with every democratic election, changes in power or changes in the number of seats, majorities or coalition structures are good signs for the vitality of the respective democracy. This is also the case in India.

The INC was able to almost double its seats and will therefore start

the 18th Lok Sabha with more self-confidence. The so-called Bharat Jodo Yatra, a kind of mass movement in which leading politicians of the largest opposition party, led by Rahul Gandhi, marched across India and were accompanied by thousands of people, was successful for the INC. The idea behind it was to engage directly with the electorate and to establish direct communication between policy makers and people of all backgrounds and from all parts of the country. The Yatra generated a lot of media coverage and was a success also because it allowed Rahul Gandhi to change his public image from being a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family to someone who cares about the concerns of ordinary people. This kind of 'direct democracy' seems to be one reason for the INC's relatively good performance.

India's global clout has grown significantly in recent years. What impact has the election result had on the country's international orientation?

Foreign policy was not, as expected, a decisive factor in the election: before the election, experts and analysts shared the view that foreign policy successes – which culminated in the successful G20 summit in 2023 – would be a significant election issue for a growing group of Indians. India's new relevance and political importance in various Western and non-Western institutions was impressive evidence of its foreign policy success in recent years. Although India gained influence and importance in international politics under Prime Minister Modi and Foreign Minister Jaishankar, the group of voters for whom this new role was of decisive importance for the election still seems to be small in relation. However, the election will not bring any changes to international relations, the foreign, security and trade policy agenda or the country's behaviour on the major international stages. India will continue to pursue a course of multi-alignment and endeavour to pursue its own strategic interests in a multi-vectoral manner.

The many Indo-German projects will also remain unaffected by the election. It should be noted that this would also have been the case with a change of power in New Delhi, as there is a great deal of continuity in Indian foreign policy.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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