

Modi and B.J.P. Make History in India. Gandhi Concedes.  
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By The New York Times

(New York Times) -- [Read about how Narendra Modi scored a historic election victory.]

Modi declares his win a victory for ordinary Indians.

In a thundering speech to party workers outside the B.J.P.'s headquarters in New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi struck a humble tone. "I bow to the 1.3 billion people of India," he said.

"If someone is victorious, it is India," he said. "If someone is victorious, it is democracy. If someone is victorious, it is the electorate."

Striking a populist tone and evoking mythical Hindu figures engaged in war, Mr. Modi framed the elections as a victory by and for ordinary Indians, over those who write off the poor and downtrodden. At the end of the battle, he said, was "the guarantee of a bright future for India."

"Some are saying, 'Modi, Modi, Modi.'" he said. "This is not Modi's victory. This is the victory of the expectations of the honest citizen of this country."

"This is the victory of the mother who was longing for a toilet," he continued. "This victory is of the farmers who sweat to fill the stomachs of others. This is the victory of the 400 million unorganized laborers."

Exceeding all predictions, Modi's party is winning a majority of seats.

Mr. Modi, one of the most powerful and divisive leaders India has produced in decades, appeared easily headed for another five-year term, according to election returns.

With most votes counted, the Election Commission reported that Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P., was ahead in about 299 parliamentary districts, far beyond the 272 seats it would need for a majority in the 543-seat Parliament. At this pace, the party would actually expand on its current majority — a development no one was predicting in recent months. And its actual majority will be larger, as its established coalition partners have won at least a few dozen more seats.

The main opposition Congress Party was ahead in 49 seats, according to Election Commission data.

Before the election, most analysts predicted that the B.J.P. would lose seats

overall, mostly because of dissatisfaction with the economy.

But that was before tensions with Pakistan handed Mr. Modi an issue he could command. He campaigned heavily on national security and on a forceful foreign policy, and it's now clear that played well among India's 900 million registered voters.

"We concede in this election," Gandhi says.

Rahul Gandhi, leader of the opposition Congress Party, conceded defeat on Thursday after it was clear that Mr. Modi's party had swept the election.

"I said during the campaign that the people were the masters, and today they have given their verdict," Mr. Gandhi said at a brief news conference from Congress headquarters in New Delhi. "We concede in this election that Narendra Modi and the B.J.P. have won."

So crushing was the defeat of Congress that even Mr. Gandhi, the scion of India's most famous political dynasty, lost his seat in Amethi in Uttar Pradesh.

Mr. Gandhi said it was not the right time to discuss why Congress had lost.

"Today is the day that a new prime minister has been elected, and today is the day to wish him the best, and hopefully he will look after the interests of the country," he said.

The grandson and great-grandson of two Indian prime ministers, Mr. Gandhi lost the seat in Amethi that his family had held for decades.

"She has won," he said of Smriti Irani, the B.J.P. minister who defeated him.

(Mr. Gandhi will remain in Parliament, having won a second seat he contested in Wayanad, Kerala.)

Mr. Gandhi, whom many criticized as too soft to lead India, said he responded to attacks on him during the campaign with love. "Love never loses," he said.

Behind Modi's victory is a Hindu hard-liner on the move.

In Prime Minister Narendra Modi's small inner circle, the B.J.P.'s president, Amit Shah, is perhaps his closest confidante. And outside of Mr. Modi himself, Mr. Shah is the party operative whom most credit with helping to engineer this victory.

For much of the election campaign, Mr. Shah, 54, a Hindu hard-liner who is projected to win a parliamentary seat in the state of Gujarat, focused his attention on the state of West Bengal, home to many of India's Muslims. And

his rhetoric has been bluntly anti-Muslim.

In countless speeches there, he painted his rivals as soft on illegal immigration from Muslim-majority Bangladesh, which borders West Bengal. He accused opposition politicians of funding Islamic schools that jeopardized India's Hindus.

Mr. Shah, who some analysts believe is in line to become home minister, vowed to remove every "single infiltrator from the country, except Buddhists, Hindus and Sikhs." In another apparent swipe at Muslims, he called immigrants "termites."

Mr. Shah also mocked Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, for running in a Muslim-dominated part of the southern state of Kerala. "When a procession is taken out there, it is difficult to make out whether it is an Indian or a Pakistani procession," he said, suggesting that Muslims were not Indian citizens.

The B.J.P. won big in a few battleground states.

The Bharatiya Janata Party gained ground in some states that have been hostile to the party, according to the results released so far.

For example, in West Bengal, where politics is dominated by the Trinamool Congress party and its chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, the B.J.P. appears to have won 18 seats. That's nearly half the total seats in the state, where it won just two last election.

Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah, the head of the B.J.P., visited the state several times. They accused Ms. Banerjee of corruption and "appeasement" of the state's Muslims, who make up about a quarter of the population.

Mr. Modi's party also made big gains in Karnataka, home to the technology hub of Bangalore, where it narrowly lost the state assembly elections last year to a coalition of the Congress Party and the local J.D.S. The B.J.P. captured nearly all of the parliamentary seats, a result that could lead to the collapse of the current state government.

One bright spot for Congress in an otherwise dismal showing was its performance in Kerala. Voters in the southern coastal state have long backed the Communists and allied parties, but a coalition led by the Congress captured nearly all of the seats this time. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, is running for a seat in Wayanad, Kerala, which he is expected to win even if he loses his current seat in Amethi, Uttar Pradesh.

Muslims fear B.J.P.'s rise will disempower them.

The number of Muslims in Parliament is expected to fall to a historic low, a

function of B.J.P's dominance and antipathy to running Muslim candidates.

Since Mr. Modi and his Hindu nationalist supporters rose to power, Indian Muslims say violence against them has risen.

Before Thursday's vote count, Muslims held just 24 seats in Parliament, about 4.4 percent of the total, and the fewest the community has held since 1952.

In Uttar Pradesh, the country's largest state and home to 43 million Muslims, not a single Muslim candidate was elected to the Indian Parliament. And the B.J.P. there did not field any Muslim candidates this year.

The party is led in the state by Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu nationalist who has been accused of organizing religious riots.

Aftab Syed, 33, a student at Aligarh Muslim University in Uttar Pradesh, said the election's outcome was troubling.

"The very idea of keeping Muslims out of Parliament means you want to disempower them," he said.

A terrorism suspect is on track to win a seat.

There were few candidates more divisive — or more talked about — than Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, a member of the B.J.P. who is likely to win a parliamentary seat in central India.

Ms. Thakur is awaiting trial in a 2008 terrorism attack. Prosecutors believe Ms. Thakur and other Hindu extremists blew up a motorcycle that killed six people in a Muslim-majority city in the state of Maharashtra.

On the campaign trail, Ms. Thakur, 49, who is running for a seat in the city of Bhopal, created waves. She claimed she beat breast cancer by drinking cows' urine, and called Mohandas Gandhi's assassin a "patriot."

Even Mr. Modi, a Hindu nationalist and the leader of B.J.P., distanced himself from Ms. Thakur's comments about the assassin, saying he would "never be able to forgive her fully."

Neelanjan Sircar, a senior visiting fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, said Ms. Thakur's candidacy was intended to send a message to the B.J.P.'s "very hard-core Hindu nationalist base."

"They want to say, 'We're still on your side,' " he said.

Modi supporters watch from the U.S. and cheer.

Hundreds of people with ties to India gathered in Edison, N. J., on Wednesday

night to watch the initial election results trickle in, and celebrate a potential win for Mr. Modi, a leader whom many see as strengthening India's image in the world.

The crowd, a mix of expatriates and American citizens, posed for selfies with a cardboard cutout of the prime minister, and cheered each time results favoring Mr. Modi's B.J.P. were announced.

"There's a more heightened interest this year," said Krishna Reddy Anugula, 50, president of Overseas Friends of the B.J.P. The organization has about 4,000 members across the United States.

"People saw that this is a leader who is doing good for the country," said Mr. Reddy, citing Mr. Modi's economic proposals and pledges to improve the lives of the poor.

Indian-Americans — a population of about 4 million — cannot vote in the election unless they still retain their Indian citizenship. Then, too, citizens must be in India to cast their ballots.

Yet many Indians in America have sought to participate by organizing rallies, and calling friends and family members in India to encourage them to vote.

"Let's elect them for five more years and see what they do," Mr. Reddy said of the B.J.P.

India's stock market hits a record as results come in.

As the early results suggested a strong victory for Mr. Modi and the B.J.P., India's stock market rose 2 percent to an all-time high.

Mr. Modi is viewed as good for business. He has simplified the tax system and cut down on corruption, and one of the signature achievements of his term was an overhaul of the country's corporate bankruptcy system.

India's stock market has been a bright spot in Asia, particularly as Chinese shares have suffered amid that country's escalating trade war with the United States.

"For the markets, it's like a vote of relief," Jyoti Jaipuria, founder of Valentis Advisors, an investment advisory firm in Mumbai, said earlier this week, when exit polls showed that Mr. Modi's party was likely to win again. "Politics is out of the way, and everybody can be back to fundamentals."

Pakistan test-fires a missile as Modi rises.

As news of Mr. Modi's impending win picked up in India, Pakistan's powerful military establishment announced on Thursday that it had successfully

test-fired a Shaheen II ballistic missile, which is capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

The two countries went to the brink of war this year after a terrorist attack killed Indian soldiers in the disputed territory of Kashmir — in a surge of tensions that many political analysts believe helped Mr. Modi's showing in the election.

But Pakistan is not the only one of the nuclear-armed neighbors to use missiles to make a point.

After the two countries' showdown over Kashmir — and just two weeks before Indian elections were to begin — Mr. Modi announced that India had successfully used a missile to shoot down an old satellite. That test made it just the fourth country in the world to have that kind of antisatellite capability.

— Reporting was contributed by Jeffrey Gettleman, Vindu Goel, Russell Goldman, Alisha Haridasani Gupta, Hari Kumar, Mujib Mashal, Suhasini Raj, Kai Schultz, Sameer Yasir, Ayesha Venkataraman, Shalini Venugopal, and Douglas Schorzman.

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