Prime Minister Modi's stupendous victory in the age of the enlightened voter

It became all too apparent on 23 May, when the results of India's General Elections were declared, that the centre of gravity of the country's political dynamics had been turned firmly, possibly irreversibly, on its head. The grand old Congress party, which had fought valiantly and emerged victorious against a powerful imperial power to earn India its independence in the last century, and which has been the party around which the political discourse in India has revolved predominantly ever since, found itself relegated to the verge of insignificance by a rampant Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and party President Amit Shah. Despite a visibly tireless and brave campaign by Rahul Gandhi, the President of the Congress party, it recorded only a marginal improvement on its worst-ever performance in the 2014 elections. This has dealt the party a blow so severe that it is left not nursing its wounds, as would be the case after any ordinary electoral debacle, but rather confronting a real threat of incrementally petering out.

While the responsibility for the unenviable situation that the Congress finds itself in lies in no small measure on its own glaring shortcomings and blunders, both past and present, in the final analysis it was the irrepressible Modi who effectively drove in the final nail. Modi proactively and relentlessly capitalized on the opportunity to demolish the Congress' image in the eyes of the electorate ever since the party's repute took a severe beating due to what was widely perceived as a policy paralysis, coupled with a series of alleged financial scams involving representatives of the government, during the last few years that it had been at the helm in New Delhi heading the United Progressive Alliance – II (UPA-II) government. Unlike earlier similar instances in Indian political history when allegations of scams and corruption were allowed to die a natural death by an ineffective opposition, thereby enabling the tainted party to storm back into power the next time around, Modi ensured that the issue remained alive and burning. The Congress had no real answers, and it was not afforded any opportunity to recover.

Modi, as the handsome majority that the BJP won in the 2019 elections proved, has virtually laid siege over the imagination and aspirations of a sizeable section of India's population, most significantly of the youth. Rarely in recent Indian political history has a leader commanded the level of acceptability that Modi does today. Modi's personal integrity contrasts vividly against the permissiveness of corruption that had appeared to hold sway under his preceding Congress dispensation. Modi's handling of governance with an iron grip also shone bright in comparison to the *laissez faire* witnessed during the last leg of UPA-II.

Despite Modi's charisma and energy, his victory at the 2019 elections had not appeared to be as foregone a conclusion as it eventually and phenomenally turned out to be. Prior to the elections, most analysts predicted the return of Modi as Prime Minister, but with a much smaller number of seats as compared to 2014, which would compel him to seek the support of allied and other parties to make up the numbers. Modi would, therefore, be forced to cede space to these allies, who would demand a greater and more substantial share in governance, and would also face constraints in formulating and implementing his preferred policies. Developments in the run-up to the 2019 elections also seemed to suggest the same. The *Mood of the Nation* survey conducted in December 2018 and January 2019 concluded that the BJP-led grouping the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would not win a majority in the 2019 General Elections. In December 2018, the BJP was defeated in three Indian

states in which it was the incumbent – Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan – by the Congress. These, and other similar signs, ignited the hope in parties across the wide spectrum of the opposition from the Congress at the centre to regional heavyweights such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, among others, that they would gain substantially at the BJP's expense. Bathed in this hope, the leaders of some of these parties even ventured to make nuanced statements that insinuated their desire to be the next Prime Minister. All such hopes were rudely quashed on 23 May.

In the end, as concluded in EFSAS Article of 06-05-2019, it was democracy and the Indian voter that emerged the winners at the 2019 General Elections. Despite some rumblings and allegations of doctoring of the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) prior to and during the elections, once the results were announced the opposition by and large overcame their deep dejection to accept the unambiguous verdict. The Indian electorate proved that it was discerning enough to recognize and embrace a strong and decisive leadership that was highly energetic yet scrupulously corruption-free. It also demonstrated that having found such a leader in Modi, it was willing to postpone individual economic comfort and gratification to a later stage in the larger national interest. It pronounced the hope and trust that Modi would be the one who would deliver prosperity to them in his new term.

The electorate demonstrated its evolution into a conscious, perceptive entity by not limiting its choice on effective governance to Modi alone. It also rewarded politicians like Navin Patnaik, the leader of the incumbent Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha, by reelecting him in the state elections held simultaneously with the General Elections in deference to the Patnaik's excellent performance over the last five years.

The results – how India voted

All exit polls released after voting had concluded on 19 May, barring one outlier, had predicted a massive victory for the BJP and the NDA, and an overall rout of the Congress and most other regional parties. Basing their hopes on how wrong exit polls had been in the 2004 General Elections, and ignoring the fact that other than that specific aberration exit polls have generally got it correct on all other occasions, the opposition parties and sections of the media could not bring themselves around to accept the dissonant numbers being churned out by the pollsters. Opposition leaders and analysts of a liberal bent alike spoke of grand surprises that lay in store when the ballot boxes were finally opened on 23 May. A sheer sense of disbelief was palpable amongst them. The BJP camp, on the other hand, rejoiced at what the exit polls revealed and began preparing for celebrations on a massive scale on 23 May.

Within a short while of counting commencing on the morning of 23 May, it became absolutely clear that even the much targeted exit polls had been rather conservative in their estimation of the scale of the BJP's victory. By the end of the day the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced that the BJP alone had secured 303 seats, an increase of 22 over the number that it won in the 2014 elections. The party required a simple majority of 272 seats out of the total of 543 in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house of parliament, to form the government. The BJP's allies in the NDA won a further 48 seats, bringing the coalition's tally to 351. The other NDA constituents that performed admirably were the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra which won 18 seats and the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar that won 16.

The Congress party which was expected to present the most serious pan-India challenge to the BJP could muster a paltry 54 seats. While this was 8 more than the party had won in its worst ever poll debacle in 2014, even this was not enough for it to claim the Leader of the Opposition post as that requires at least 10% of the seats. The Congress-led UPA won a total of 87 seats, with the Dravida

Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in the southern state of Tamil Nadu being the only other major contributor with 23 seats.

The scale of the BJP victory is put into perspective by the astounding fact that the once rampant Congress could not win even a single seat in as many as 17 of India's 29 states, while the BJP made a clean sweep of all the seats in as many as 8 states. It won all the 26 seats in Gujarat, 25 in Rajasthan, 10 in Haryana, 7 in Delhi, 5 in Uttarakhand, 4 in Himachal Pradesh, and 2 each in Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.

The BJP engaged in a particularly high octane battle in the two states of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP had been jolted awake by the losses it suffered in the 2018 by-election to the three Lok Sabha seats of Gorakhpur, Phulpur and Kairana at the hands of an unlikely, necessity-dictated, and queer political alliance between two parties that had been at loggerheads in the state for the last quarter of a century. The Samajwadi Party (SP) – BSP combination, buoyed by its unexpected success in these by-elections, dreamt up rosy results that involved the decimation of the BJP in the state and a return of the two parties to their earlier held positions of prominence in the corridors of power in New Delhi. Their dreams came crashing down abruptly when the BJP, displaying spectacular political acumen, won as many as 62 of the 80 seats in the state. BJP allies won another 2 seats. The combined strength of the SP and the BSP, both erstwhile heavyweights in the state, could only bag 15 seats. So forceful was the BJP campaign in the state that even Congress President Rahul Gandhi lost the Amethi seat that he had nurtured over three terms, to the BJP's Smriti Irani.

In West Bengal, the BJP made significant inroads at the expense of Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, which over the last decade had entrenched itself deeply in the state's political fabric. The BJP was a marginal player in the state, having won just 2 seats in the 2014 General Elections. In 2019, the 18 seats won by the BJP in the state as against only 22 by the Trinamool Congress, down from 34 in 2014, represented a result that very few had anticipated. It has caused seasoned analysts to describe the 2019 General Elections as the death-knell of the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal.

Even before the final results were announced, congratulatory messages from across the world began pouring in for Modi. US President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed were among the scores of leaders that congratulated Modi. Modi responded by underlining that the General Elections embodied the strength of Indian democracy, and he also expressed the desire to continue to work with these leaders to foster even stronger ties. Modi's response to Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's tweet that read *"I congratulate Prime Minister Modi on the electoral victory of BJP and allies. Look forward to working with him for peace, progress and prosperity in South Asia"*, was more nuanced. Modi retorted, *"Thank you PM @ImranKhanPTI. I warmly express my gratitude for your good wishes. I have always given primacy to peace and development in our region"*.

Reasons for Modi's victory
A number of factors were at play in earning the BJP a decisive victory. However, these factors merely served to complement Modi's personal appeal and popularity, which more than anything else ensured that despite floundering economic growth, unemployment being at a record high, farm distress, the hastily implemented demonetization scheme that dealt a severe blow to the unorganized sector of the economy, the flawed rolling out of the otherwise commendable Goods and Service Tax (GST), which adversely affected small traders, and allegations of an ambiguous attitude towards religious minorities, the BJP catapulted back into power even stronger than it had been before.

The BJP evolved over the last five years under the potent combination of Modi and Amit Shah, both stalwarts who emerged from state-level politics in Gujarat, into a committed, aggressive, sharp-witted and effective political juggernaut. Under the indelible spell of these two leaders, who radiated the unmistakable impression of operating in perfect sync with each other, the party morphed from being a scantly supported Hindi heartland entity that could win a mere 2 seats in the 1984 General Elections to a pan-India phenomenon, one that is today the undisputed ruler of New Delhi. The rapid geographical expansion of the BJP into regions alien, and in some cases even hostile, has been nothing short of spectacular. The political map of India, barring small aberrant spots of other hues, is completely shaded in the saffron of the BJP. Even while this outreach into virgin territory for the BJP was yielding rich dividends for it, the party did not lapse into complacence in the states that had given it its massive mandate in 2014 in the first place. The fact that the party succeeded in sustaining a continuous political campaign mode throughout the last five years, whether there were elections around the corner or not, played a big role in this.

Some of the poor-oriented schemes successfully launched and implemented by the Modi government, including the *Ayushman Bharat Yojana* (National Health Protection Scheme)*,* the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Mission) that includes the goal of toilets for all by 2 October 2019, the launch of housing schemes for the lower income groups, provision of cooking gas to underprivileged households, and an annual payment out of the exchequer to small farmers, were all well received by their beneficiaries. Another critical factor was the BJP's ability, aided by low oil prices, to keep inflation in rein. Rising prices has been the bane of many an Indian government in the past.

It was, above all, the persona of Narendra Modi that won the BJP the 2019 General Elections. The larger-than-life image of him projected by the BJP in 2014, and ever since, achieved the desired effect. Modi assiduously maintained and garnished the image of the patriotic, strong, decisive, hard-working and incorruptible leader who broke through the barriers of his humble origins to rub shoulders with, and comfortably outwit, those in the highest league who were born with silver spoons. His elevation of the country's profile in the international arena and his decisive and robust response to Pakistan-sponsored terrorism won Modi the respect of a large section of the electorate, and consequently, their votes. As per a survey conducted by Delhi-based think tank the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), one third of BJP voters said that they would have supported another party if Modi was not the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. Such was the singular impact of Modi upon the elections.

Challenges before the new government
Recently released data suggests that there is truth in the chorus of cries by domain experts that the Indian economy was facing a slowdown, and it was, potentially, staring at a crisis. Economists forecast that economic growth would taper to 6.5% in the three months leading up to March 2019, which would be the slowest pace since mid-2017. Recently revealed official data confirmed the rumours that unemployment was at a 40-year high. Consumer spending is tepid and investments have slowed. Quite clearly, the economy is crying out for stimulus.

Prime Minister Modi is aware of the concerns over the flagging economy. The BJP's election manifesto, therefore, projected a massive capital investment of $1.44 trillion in infrastructure by 2024. Other election promises included promoting entrepreneurship through collateral-free loans and easing regulations for start-ups as a means to reduce joblessness. Boosting manufacturing, doubling of exports, and tax cuts for the middle class also figured amongst its pledges. To the country's farmers, Modi pledged to double their income by 2022. The challenge for the government would be to generate the huge funds that would be required to fulfil these pledges. The budget deficit has already risen steadily to 3.4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and any further increase would adversely impact upon the country's credit rating. The risk of macroeconomic indicators turning unstable exists.

The new government would also need to contend with volatility in oil prices, as this has in the past been a major driver of inflation and trade deficits.

In the external sphere, Modi's primary challenge would be in dealing with Pakistan. In response to Pakistan-linked terrorist attacks in India, the Modi government over the last couple of years had embarked on a policy of eschewing any engagement with Pakistan, while proactively lobbying to isolate the country internationally over its use of terrorism as a State policy. Modi continued to adopt a hard and aggressive outlook towards Pakistan in his campaign speeches in the run up to the 2019 elections. A volte-face post his resounding electoral victory runs the risk of being interpreted as weakness by sections of Modi's supporters. The imperative of engaging Pakistan in the quest to find a lasting solution to the Jammu & Kashmir issue would, however, not be lost on Modi and his key advisers as he embarks on his second term. Filling the political vacuum in Jammu & Kashmir by holding state elections, and winning the trust of the people of the state who are jittery over the BJP's pledges made during the election campaign to annul Article 35-A and Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which accord a special status to Jammu & Kashmir, should also figure among the new government's priorities.

Just two days after his electoral success, Modi acknowledged another major challenge that confronts his new government and indicated his preferred method for overcoming it. The religious minorities in India comprising Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and Buddhists, among several others, would have found comfort and reassurance in Modi's address on 25 May to the NDA's newly-elected lawmakers in the central hall of the Indian Parliament. Modi said, *"Minorities have been made to live in fear by those who believe in vote-bank politics… We have to end this deception and take everyone along. Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas (together with all, development for all) and now, Sabka Vishwas (trust for all) is our mantra"*.

Conclusion

Modi's victory in the 2019 General Elections had not appeared to be assured when campaigning began in April. However, the overwhelming mandate for Modi that was unveiled when the ballots were counted on 23 May suggests that Indian politics has been changed irrevocably. In what was essentially a referendum on Modi and his vision, the Indian electorate has unambiguously declared its preference for a strong and decisive leadership, as personified in Modi and his policy of muscular nationalism. Other issues, whether economic or social, that in any other Indian election could have moved votes into the opposition camp, were pushed into the background and ignored by voters as there simply did not appear to be a leader on the political horizon who could match Modi's appeal and zeal.

The socio-cultural undercurrents at the 2019 General Elections contributed significantly to establishing where India stands today. The BJP versus the Congress in 2019 represented a battle between Indian conservatives and liberals, in which the former emerged as the undisputed winner. Of the 188 seats in which the BJP confronted the Congress in head to head contests, it won as many as 174. Modi's win was equally a reflection of the social churning and realignment of equations in India. The overpowering influence of the English-educated liberals, overall a small minority in terms of numbers but nevertheless commanding a disproportionately copious amount of power, seems to have been brushed away by the predominantly Hindi-educated, religiously inclined and culturally-conscious majority. Modi's repeated attacks targeting Rahul Gandhi as an entitled dynast, who owed his position solely to his family lineage, was aimed at branding him as the emblem of the entitled class that Modi alleged was responsible for all the ills that were plaguing the country. Modi cleverly contrasted this with his own humble beginnings as a tea seller, thereby immediately and automatically creating a strong psychological affinity with the bulk of India's less privileged masses.

The people of India have chosen the path that they wish to tread on. It is now Modi's turn to steer the vehicle in this direction by ensuring a strong but inclusive, reforms-oriented and yet welfare conscious, regime. Modi's second term will be the one that will decide his legacy, and his actions and statements over the past week seem to suggest that he is acutely conscious of this.