

Modi heads for victory in India vote, but no landslide

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Online Desk :

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his allies were heading for victory in the country's general election count on Tuesday, but with a reduced parliamentary majority as the opposition surpassed expectations. Commentators and exit polls had projected an overwhelming victory for Modi, whose campaign wooed the Hindu majority to the worry of the country's 200-million-plus Muslim community, deepening concerns over minority rights. But for the first time in a decade Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could fail to secure an overall majority of its own, figures from the election commission projected, meaning it would need to rely on its alliance partners.

The main opposition Congress party was set to nearly double its parliamentary seats, in a remarkable turnaround largely driven by deals to field single candidates against the BJP's electoral juggernaut. With 92 percent of votes counted, the BJP's vote share at 37.1 percent was marginally lower than it was in the last polls in 2019. Modi was re-elected to his constituency representing the Hindu holy city of Varanasi by a margin of 152,000 votes — compared to nearly half a million votes five years ago.

The election commission figures showed the BJP and its allies leading in at least 282 seats out of a total of 543, enough for a parliamentary majority. But the BJP itself was only leading in 239, well down on the 303 it won five years ago, while the Congress was ahead in 99, up from 52.

– ‘Moral defeat’ –

Celebrations had already begun at the headquarters of Modi's BJP before the full announcement of results. But the mood at the Congress headquarters in New Delhi was also one of jubilation. “BJP has failed to win a big majority on its own,” Congress lawmaker Rajeev Shukla told reporters. “It's a moral defeat for them.” Stocks slumped on speculation the reduced majority would hamper the BJP's ability to push through reforms.

Shares in the main listed unit of Adani Enterprises — owned by key Modi ally Gautam Adani — dropped 25 percent, before recovering. Modi's opponents have struggled to counter the BJP's well-oiled and well-funded campaign machine, and have been hamstrung by what they say are politically motivated criminal cases aimed at hobbling challengers. US think tank Freedom House said this year that the BJP had “increasingly used government institutions to target political opponents”.

Arvind Kejriwal, chief minister of the capital Delhi and a key leader in an alliance formed to compete against Modi, returned to jail on Sunday. Kejriwal, 55, was detained in March over a long-running corruption probe, but was later released and allowed to campaign as long as he returned to custody once voting ended. “When power becomes dictatorship, then jail becomes a responsibility,” Kejriwal said before surrendering himself, vowing to continue “fighting” from behind bars.

– ‘Strength of Indian democracy’ –

Many of India's Muslim minority are increasingly uneasy about their futures and their community's place in the constitutionally secular country. The polls were staggering in their size and logistical complexity, with 642 million voters casting their ballots — ranging from megacities New Delhi and Mumbai, as well as in sparsely populated forest areas and the high-altitude Himalayas.

“People should know about the strength of Indian democracy,” chief election commissioner Rajiv Kumar said Monday, calling the counting process “robust”. Based on the commission’s figure of an electorate of 968 million, turnout came to 66.3 percent, down roughly one percentage point from 67.4 percent in the last polls in 2019. Analysts have partly blamed the lower turnout on a searing heatwave across northern India, with temperatures over 45 degrees Celsius (113 degrees Fahrenheit).