
Post-Indian Elections Scenario: Challenges and Policy Options for Pakistan

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Abstract

The pyrrhic victory of Narendra Modi and his assumption of office as the Prime Minister of India for the third time reflects how vulnerable the BJP will be while in power. Why Narendra Modi failed to achieve a simple majority in the 2024 general elections needs to be examined from a pragmatic perspective. Depriving BJP of securing a two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha tends to salvage India from further polarisation which was witnessed when Modi remained in power for 10 years with a two-thirds majority and implemented the most controversial acts like revoking the autonomy of the Indian-administered Kashmir, building the Ram temple in Ayodhya, and implementing the citizenship law. Implementing laws tightening regulations on interfaith marriages were also implemented in many BJP-run states. Modi's assertion during his election campaign against religious minorities and Pakistan failed to yield positive results as the majority of Indian voters refused to adhere to such rhetoric. India is the only eastern neighbour of Pakistan and issues influencing the country are bound to have implications on Islamabad, particularly when the track record of the Modi regime has been hostile towards its neighbour. As compared to the 2014 and 2019 elections when Pakistan was projected as a major so-called actor involved in alleged cross-border terrorism, during the 2024 elections, despite BJP's efforts to malign Pakistan, Indian voters by and large, overlooked Modi's rhetoric against Islamabad.

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Introduction

With 543 seats of Lok Sabha (the lower house) of the Indian parliament and 640 million voters, general elections in India began on April 19 and concluded on June 1, 2024. Elections in 28 states and 8 union territories for the 18th Lok Sabha in seven phases were termed the world's biggest polls. Two alliances, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Inclusive National Democratic India Alliance (INDIA) led by Congress, stood against each other in one million polling stations.

The results of the Indian elections were announced by the Election Commission on June 4, 2024, according to which the NDA got 295 and INDIA secured 240 seats. The BJP, which in the 2019 general elections got 303 seats managed to get 240 seats which compelled Narendra Modi to seek support from other coalition parties to get to the majority number of 272 out of the assembly of 543.¹ Contrary to various exit polls in which it was predicted that the BJP on its own would get 400 seats, the results reflected the declining popularity of Modi as his party performed badly in its bastion of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and elsewhere.

The pyrrhic victory of Narendra Modi and his win as Prime Minister of India for the third time reflects how vulnerable the BJP will be while in power.² Why Narendra Modi failed to get a majority in the 2024 general elections needs to be examined pragmatically. According to the BBC, the results are a personal blow to Modi, who has always secured majorities in elections and dominated politics for over two decades as both, the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat and India's Prime Minister. The verdict marks a surprising revival for the Congress-led INDIA opposition alliance, defying earlier predictions of its decline, and sharply diverging from both exit polls and pre-election surveys.³ Furthermore, The BJP's significant drop in seats may be linked to joblessness, rising prices,

growing inequality, and a controversial army recruitment reform, among other factors. Modi's harsh and divisive campaign, particularly targeting Muslims, could also have alienated voters in some regions. His ambitious slogan *Ab ki baar 400 paar* (this time will cross 400) aiming for more than 400 seats for his NDA alliance, may have backfired, with such a massive majority raising fears of constitutional changes among the poor. The BJP faced its largest setback in UP, a state larger than the United Kingdom and three times as populous. With 80 parliamentary seats, UP holds significant sway in national politics, with many considering it the gateway to Delhi. Both Modi and Rahul Gandhi hold seats there.⁴

Depriving the BJP of securing a two-thirds majority in Lok Sabha tends to salvage India from further polarisation which was witnessed when Modi remained in power for 10 years with a two-thirds majority and implemented the most controversial acts like revoking the autonomy of Indian-Occupied Kashmir, building the Ram temple in Ayodhya and implementing citizenship law. Laws tightening regulations on interfaith marriages were also implemented in many BJP-run states along with strict bans on cow slaughter. Modi's assertion during his election campaign against religious minorities and Pakistan failed to yield positive results as the majority of Indian voters refused to adhere to such rhetoric.⁵ This paper examines critical questions surrounding the outcome and implications of the Indian elections. It delves into why and how the BJP's calculations to secure a two-thirds majority fell short, analysing the underlying factors contributing to this electoral setback. Additionally, it explores the ramifications of Prime Minister Modi's pyrrhic victory, shedding light on how this outcome could intensify the BJP government's vulnerabilities, particularly concerning the growing challenge posed by the INDIA alliance. Finally, the paper assesses the broader implications of these elections for Pakistan, offering insights into the potential regional and bilateral consequences. Lastly, the paper also critically analyses the future of Indian

democracy and reversing the process of Hindu nationalism because of the BJP's fragile strength in Lok Sabha.

Miscalculations of the BJP

The slogan 'this time with 400 seats' propagated by the BJP was fraught with miscalculations. When the BJP learnt of slow voter turnout in the middle of the election process, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS); the patron organization of the BJP, tried to play its role in preventing the decline in voting. According to Rajiv Tuli, an official of the RSS, "... the decline in voting has been a cause of concern in recent weeks and we have been working to bring a shift in the numbers." Meetings, outreach campaigns, and even a renewed push to remind voters about ensuring a full majority government coming to power became critical after the first phase of voting.⁶ Despite claims of the Modi regime that in the last 10 years of its rule, the country's economy boomed and India emerged as the fifth largest economy in the world, domestic fault-lines negated assertions of the BJP because of the widening gap between the rich and the poor, reflecting distinct class stratification.

Reuters rightly pointed out how the BJP's failure to look into internal issues had an impact on the election process. For instance, bread-and-butter issues seemed to be replacing religious fervour in many parts of the country. Jobless youth in the north-western state of Haryana held street protests against the BJP during the campaign. In western Maharashtra, farmers incensed over a ban on onion exports canvassed support for an opposition candidate.⁷ Another miscalculation of the Modi regime was to arrest the Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, who was detained under criminal investigation on corruption charges but released on the orders of the Supreme Court by 2 June. As a fierce opponent of Narendra Modi, his Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a member of the INDIA alliance, was perceived by the BJP as a major threat, particularly in the Hindi belt of northern India.

Addressing his party supporters after his release, Kejriwal asserted that when power becomes a dictatorship, jail becomes a responsibility.⁸ In

a press conference, he stated, "I have come to beg 1.4 billion people to save my country. Save my country from this dictatorship. Modi has started a very dangerous mission. Modi will send all opposition leaders to jail. They sent me to jail and the PM says he is fighting against corruption."⁹ During his election campaign, Kejriwal lambasted the BJP and claimed that "Modi will lose the elections. Should he win by any chance he would have stolen a leaf from President Vladimir Putin, who jailed his opponents to win a huge margin. In case of a win, Modi will jail Udhav Thackeray and Sarad Pawaramong, among others."¹⁰ During his election campaign in Punjab, Kejriwal asserted, "The dictatorship that is going on in our country is not acceptable. India has never seen such a period in the past 75 years, putting opposition leaders in jail. Modi government was harassing leaders of the Indian National Congress, Mamata Banerjee's TMC Party and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, MK Stalin's DMK, who are amongst the BJP's main political opponents."¹¹ By arresting opposition leaders like Kejriwal and Hemant Soren, former Chief Minister of Jharkhand and filing cases against Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, the BJP's popularity dwindled.

If the BJP had high hopes and miscalculations about a landslide victory, the INDIA alliance was also not lagging. For instance, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge told reporters after a meeting with INDIA partners in New Delhi on 1 June that they expected to form the next government with over 295 seats.¹² INDIA secured 240 seats with Congress as the largest party in the alliance winning 99 seats. Both the BJP and INDIA miscalculated their projection of election results but accepted the election outcome with grace.

How INDIA Challenged the BJP?

A year ago, it seemed that the BJP and the Modi regime were unassailable and that the opposition was fragmented. However, things changed when opposition parties decided to challenge the BJP's confidence to secure a third term with a two-thirds majority. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), formed in 1998 as a conglomeration of 38 political parties led by the BJP; and INDIA

consisting of 24 political parties fought against each other. INDIA went to the election with a single-point agenda to deny Narendra Modi a third term in office. Formed in July 2023 and composed of Congress, regional parties like Aam Admi Party which governs Delhi and Punjab and Trinamool Congress which governs West Bengal, INDIA intended to contest elections on a one-on-one basis against the BJP hoping to win elections provided it maintained its unity; presented a workable manifesto and played a leadership role in competing against the charismatic personality of Prime Minister Modi.

The BJP which got only 2 seats during the 8th Lok Sabha general elections in November 1984¹³ managed to enhance its vote bank and emerged as a major political party by winning the 1999, 2014, and 2019 elections. In the 17th Lok Sabha elections held in April/May 2019, the BJP won a landslide victory by securing 303 seats.¹⁴ Whereas, Congress, which ruled India for 50 years since 1947, was facing a formidable challenge to its survival and had been out of power for the last 10 years.

Examining the formation of INDIA and its hope to effectively take on the BJP in the 2024 elections, it was argued that while the new alliance held a lot of promise, especially for India's minorities as well as other downtrodden communities that had been crucial, the ten years of BJP's rule reflected the transformation of both the Indian state and society. While communal schism existed in India during the Congress era, it was unlike today when under the patronage of the state, Hindu nationalists target religious minorities, particularly Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. If Narendra Modi gets a third term with a two-thirds majority, one can expect the exclusion of secular characteristics in the Indian Constitution and the declaration of India as a Hindu state. When Prime Minister Narendra Modi could pass the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act from the Indian parliament during his second term and target the Muslim minority, his ambitions if he got a third term need to be contemplated. Is there any force in India which can save

the country from the onslaught of Hindu nationalism and prevent the ideology of 'Modism' from taking deep roots in the Indian state and society? In the past ten years, the Modi regime has managed to induct people into state institutions subscribing to the BJP mindset and it was feared that a third term could result in a transformation from a secular and democratic to a Hindu nationalist state. Enactment of the Uniform Civil Code, in essence doing away with religious personal law as applicable to minorities, should be seen in this perspective.¹⁵ Under the title, *Indian opposition parties form alliance called INDIA*, Reuters in its 26 July 2023 article stated that the BJP was assaulting the character of the republic and idea of India as enshrined in the Constitution.¹⁶ According to the same source, Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge said that the "main aim [of INDIA] is to stand together to safeguard democracy and the constitution."¹⁷ Why did it take Congress and other like-minded parties so long to unite and challenge the BJP's assault on democracy and secularism? From gaining 2 seats in 1984 to 303 seats in the 2019 general elections, the BJP's 'great leap forward' is a vivid example of transforming the Indian state and society with characteristics of Hindu nationalism, exclusion of religious minorities, and religious chauvinism with the patronage of the state.

According to Ram Punyani, the President of the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, Mumbai:

"The campaign began with calling the Congress manifesto an imprint of the Muslim League. Most other slogans and promises of Congress were turned into something anti-Hindu and intended solely for Muslims. Modi's propaganda reached a new low when he said Congress would do *mujra* (a dance which emerged during Mughal rule) for them. The system has been so tuned that the names of many Muslims did not find a place in electoral rolls and, on election day Muslims were turned away by the police. Muslims have been effectively tuned into second-class citizens and have been made

politically invisible. All this implies the prevalent hate against this hapless community.”¹⁸

The Indian election commission, which claimed to be independent and sovereign in its mandate, took no notice of the BJP’s anti-Muslim tirade. It is yet to be seen how the allies of the BJP would react if the Modi regime resumes its anti-Muslim policies.

Following the formation of INDIA, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided to revive the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) on its 25th anniversary. The NDA diminished as an alliance since Modi came to power in 2014 and was re-elected in 2019 as he led the BJP to decisive victories, reducing the influence of alliance partners. However, the BJP considered reviving the NDA as it did not want to leave anything to chance to win a third term. Modi stated at an NDA meeting.

“We unite the people of India. They divide the people of India. They underestimate the ordinary people of India. People are watching why they are coming together, what is the glue that is bringing them together. People have made up their mind to give the mandate to NDA a third time.”¹⁹

As quoted in *The Hindu* in its 25 July 2023 issue, speaking to BJP MPs at a meeting of the parliamentary party, Modi said that the current opposition was the most ‘directionless’ the country had ever seen and that even reviled organisations such as the East India Company and the Indian Mujahedeen had the word ‘India’ in their names, but that had not deceived anyone as to what their real purpose was.²⁰ On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi a leader of Congress who was convicted in a defamation case and disqualified from the parliament in March 2023 described the 2024 election as a “fight between Narendra Modi and INDIA.”

Talking to DW, a German TV channel, on 24 July 2023, Zoya Hasan, an Indian political scientist said that it was an extremely significant political development. The statement issued by the BJP’s

opposition offers an alternative narrative anchored in the constitutional idea of an India based on secular democracy, economic sovereignty, social justice, and federalism. It was presumed to be tough for the BJP to win a majority of seats in the parliament in the recent elections if the opposition parties sustained the momentum. INDIA cannot just limit the exercise to seat adjustment, it has to mobilise popular support for the alternative discourse on a one-on-one basis against the BJP.²¹ Furthermore, a prominent Congress leader told DW that, the principal opposition parties were likely to adopt a new template for Mission 2024 and focus on key national issues along with the state-specific ones to take on the BJP. The BJP has traditionally benefited in a triangular contest.²² The BJP national spokesperson Tom Vadakkan told DW, "INDIA alliance is a stillborn baby and even the doctors do not know how to save it. It is a desperate attempt to bring disparate groups on one platform and is compromised from the start. It will not work out. Its construct is flawed."²³ BJP's argument about the fizzling out of INDIA was based on its premise that the popularity of Narendra Modi because of his performance in the last 10 years could not be questioned. Yet, Congress got a political boost when it contested the 2024 general elections by uniting other opposition parties.

It was rightly perceived that the launch of INDIA in July 2023 would not have a formidable impact on the BJP's election campaign to re-elect Narendra Modi for a third time unless the alliance focused on issues which a billion plus people of India were grappling with like growing class asymmetry, surge of communal violence, and gradual mitigation of democracy, political pluralism, and secularism. Neerja Chowdhry, an Indian political analyst covering general elections for the last several years, said in an interview with DW that the INDIA versus the NDA battle had suddenly become lively because the BJP was pulling out all the stops and opposition in fighting back. The optics of opposition leaders on one platform have given a

psychological boost to the anti-BJP bloc.²⁴ Therefore, the opposition leaders remained guarded about who came up with the name first but, according to sources, a select group of leaders met after the dinner hosted by the Congress. Several names got tossed around among this group. Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi, during the *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (unify India march), stressed the growing chasm between 'two Indias' and the Congress wanted the name of the alliance to address this. Sources said the name resonated with the others in the group too, especially since many felt that it was time for the opposition to recapture the 'nationalism' plank, which the BJP had been monopolising. But keeping with the Congress's strategy of not being seen as an overt driver of the opposition grouping, the Trinamool Congress was encouraged to propose the name at the meeting.²⁵

Reuters reported on 25 August 2023 that Indian voters were growing unhappy with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government due to high inflation and unemployment but he was still on track to comfortably win a third term in elections due to his popularity. The *India Today* survey, conducted twice a year, revealed that 59 per cent of the more than 160,000 people polled between July 15 and August 14 said that they were satisfied with the performance of the Modi government, down from 67 per cent in the previous survey in January. Similarly, 63 per cent said that Modi's performance as Prime Minister was good, down from 72 per cent in January. And 22 per cent said his performance was poor, up from 16 per cent in January.²⁶ Congress party leader Rahul Gandhi, the survey said, got his highest approval rating in four years with 32 per cent saying he is best-suited to revive the fortunes of his party. It also said that Gandhi was the best-suited opposition leader to become Prime Minister with 24 per cent backing, up from 13 per cent in January when he was the third choice. Gandhi quit as Congress president after leading it to one of its worst performances in the 2019 elections. He is, however, seen to have

revived his image after a five-month-long *Bharat Jodo Yatra* across the country that he set out on in September last year. The INDIA alliance led by Congress includes powerful people, but in the case of Indian elections, one will need regional parties with a strong base in the south and east, where the BJP is weak.²⁷ India's sticky retail inflation hit a 15-month high of 7.44 per cent in July, pushed by soaring food price inflation which rose to 11.5 per cent, its highest in more than three-and-a-half years. India is the world's fastest growing large economy but an unemployment rate that has stayed around 8 per cent in recent months is considered a major challenge.²⁸ Opinion poll surveys do reflect the perceptions and give an idea about the win or loss of the BJP and INDIA in polls released two weeks before the elections.

According to Anjana Pasricha, a senior Indian journalist, "They feel that if they contest alone, they will not be able to put up a credible challenge to the BJP but coming together will help them in putting up a decent fight." According to Rahul Verma, a fellow at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, "A coalition like this will enable them to pool their resources."²⁹

The figures for 2019 showed that the BJP had about 37 per cent of the total vote and non-BJP parties accounted for 63 per cent. So, if they could consolidate a chunk of this through a one-on-one contest, the opposition vote would not get divided. That is the heart of their strategy to take on Modi. The INDIA alliance, whose name has been chosen to strike a chord of nationalism, had reaffirmed its goal as the protection of democracy. Pledging to safeguard the idea of India as enshrined in the Constitution, it said in a statement that, the character of the Indian republic was being severely assaulted systematically by the BJP. Critics have accused Modi's government of undermining democracy and press freedom, polarising the country along communal lines, and using federal investigative agencies to target opposition leaders; charges it strongly denies.³⁰

As commented in the editorial of a national daily, "While the new alliance holds a lot of promise, especially for India's minorities as well as other downtrodden communities that have been crushed by the Hindutva machine, the fact is that large ideologically diverse groupings can be notoriously unwieldy, and it will take the combined political wisdom of the RSS juggernaut will naturally pull out all the stops, particularly to its rabid voter base, and attract the increasingly chauvinistic Indian middle classes. Talk of forming a Uniform Civil Code, in essence, doing away with religious personal law as applicable to minorities should be seen in this perspective."³¹

The focus on INDIA's attack on the BJP was based on its 10 years of exclusive anti-minorities and anti-democracy policies. As narrated by a Pakistani analyst:

"The opposition's attack on Modi has principally focused on his authoritarian conduct and policies. Certainly backsliding during his 10 years in power has been substantial and far reaching. This, his critics say, has turned India into illiberal democracy. Judicial independence and media freedom have been undermined and civil liberties eroded. Modi's government has muffled dissent, intimidated the media, harassed and incarcerated journalists and mounted extraordinary pressure on the opposition. Two state leaders allied with Congress, Arvind Kejriwal and Hemant Soren have been jailed on dubious corruption charges in March, the Congress party's main bank accounts were frozen. Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi was expelled from parliament last year on charge of defamation for ridiculing Modi's name. Later, his jail sentence was suspended by the supreme court."³²

Furthermore, the writer argues that Modi has pledged to push ahead with his Hindutva agenda, for which the party points to several actions taken by the government, including the construction of the Ram temple, a citizenship law disadvantaging Muslims, and the revocation of Article 370 of the constitution, which gave Jammu and Kashmir special status. Modi has used toxic anti-Muslim rhetoric throughout his election campaign. He has called Muslims infiltrators and said they have too many children to scare Hindu voters into believing Muslims will eventually outnumber them. He has

repeatedly accused the Congress party of favouring Muslims and conspiring to transfer wealth looted from Hindus to Muslims. The BJP has also posted videos containing these allegations. This prompted the Congress party to petition the election commission to act against the violation of election laws.³³

By securing 240 seats in a house of 543, INDIA has been able to deprive the BJP of its projected two-third majority and as a strong opposition will keep up the pressure on Narendra Modi and other known Hindu nationalist leaders to refrain from steps aiming to sustain their previous 10-year exclusive mode of governance.

Implications of Modi's Pyrrhic Victory

When the 'honeymoon' period of the BJP-led coalition government is over, internal fault lines in NDA will reappear. The pyrrhic victory of Modi in Indian general elections will, however, have short- and long-term implications. Had the BJP secured less than 240 seats, it would have been sitting in the opposition, but to expect INDIA, a conglomeration of political parties with diverse political agendas, to form the government would be wishful thinking. INDIA was formed with a one-point agenda to deny Narendra Modi a third term along with its resolve to ensure an inclusive instead of exclusive mode of governance by protecting the rights of minorities and providing democratic space.

One can figure out two short-term implications of Modi's pyrrhic victory. First, the ruling coalition will try to maintain its unity because a rift in its rank and file will benefit the INDIA-led opposition alliance. Challenges and opportunities both for the Modi regime and the INDIA alliance will shape the short-term implications of the Indian elections. On this account, this challenging scenario will oblige Modi 3.0 to focus a great deal of attention on domestic political consolidation. That will likely see him double down on his Hindutva ideology to reinforce his Hindu base, especially as the BJP was mostly unable to make inroads beyond its strongholds. Its hard-line policy towards Muslims is, therefore, likely to continue. Coalition partners are unlikely to restrain the BJP in that regard. To consolidate its Hindu

constituency, the Modi government might pursue with even greater vigour its Hindutva agenda, involving actions such as the Uniform Civil Code, ending reservations for Muslims, and seizing mosques in Varanasi and Mathura to claim them as old temples. All these are part of its manifesto.³⁴ Yet, it all depends on the allies of the BJP and to what extent they will allow anti-Muslim and anti-minorities measures to continue. In the 'honeymoon' period of the BJP-led coalition government, things may not take an extremist line because of the diminished support leading to the holding of fresh elections.

Second, there will be no tangible headway to ameliorate India-Pakistan relations which deteriorated following the revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution on 5 August 2019. One can expect the maintenance of the status quo in India-Pakistan relations till the time the political landscape of Pakistan is stable and the coalition government in India decides to reciprocate efforts for mending fences with Islamabad. Therefore, again, anti-Pakistan tirades were not just election politics but indicative of the combative approach that the BJP government may adopt towards Islamabad. Domestic political problems will create the temptation to ramp up anti-Pakistan rhetoric and for Modi to further harden his anti-Pakistan policy. Backchannel communication between them led in February 2021 to recommitment by both sides to observe a ceasefire on the Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir per the 2003 understanding. Another irritant was added last year to the long list of disputes between the two countries when India threatened to unilaterally modify the Indus Waters Treaty's dispute settlement provisions.³⁵ Pakistan-bashing is an integral part of the BJP's mindset but it failed to have any impact on election results. This time, Indian voters, unlike the BJP's exploitation of the Kargil episode in 1999, the attack on the Indian parliament in December 2001, or the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, did not take Pakistan-bashing of the BJP seriously. The Pulwama and Balakot episodes of February 2019 along with the so-called notion of cross-border terrorism which had an impact on the election results of 2019 did not work in 2024.

Long-term implications of Indian elections can be gauged from three possibilities. First, the BJP-led coalition government will survive for five years and it will try to implement its election manifesto by giving concessions to its allies and preventing their withdrawal of support during its term in office. Second, the INDIA alliance will keep up the pressure on the NDA because of its significant strength in the lower house. For that matter, INDIA will try to form a government in many Indian states where BJP is in power. Losing power in Indian states which have remained in its control like UP, Gujarat, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh will be a setback for Hindu nationalist groups. Third, Narendra Modi will be ousted from power through a vote of no-confidence to be moved by INDIA and the allies of BJP like the Janata Dal (United) which won 12 seats from Bihar and the Telugu Desam Party which secured 16 seats from Andhra Pradesh.³⁶ The Janata Dal (United) has a history of switching sides as it has ditched the INDIA alliance and sided with the BJP in the past.

Challenges and Policy Options for Pakistan

India is the only eastern neighbour of Pakistan and issues influencing the country are bound to have implications for Islamabad, particularly when Modi's track record has been hostile towards its neighbour. As compared to the 2014 and 2019 elections when Pakistan was projected as a major so-called actor involved in alleged cross-border terrorism, during the 2024 elections, despite the BJP's efforts to malign Pakistan, Indian voters by and large overlooked Modi's rhetoric against Islamabad.

As the dust is settling down following the Indian elections, one can figure out three major challenges for Pakistan. First, the suspension of trade and travel and the downgrading of diplomatic relations with India. It was expected that with a change in New Delhi following the Indian elections, mitigation in hostility may be possible. But, with the assumption of power by Narendra Modi for a third time as prime minister, there is little likelihood of positive transformation in the mindset of BJP vis-à-vis Pakistan. Islamabad is interested in

mending fences with New Delhi provided its gestures are properly reciprocated. While India is in no mood to reverse its 5 August 2019 steps to revoke Article 370 and absorb the Indian-Occupied Jammu and Kashmir in its fold, how can the India-Pakistan relations in the foreseeable future thaw?

Second, the fragility of Pakistan's politics and economy tends to weaken its bargaining position vis-à-vis its eastern neighbour. With the strengthening of the economy and political stability, Pakistan will be in a better position to negotiate with India on issues which cause hostility in their relations. Henceforth, the domestic predicament of Pakistan is a major challenge in the way of having normal relations with India because the Modi regime will not take Islamabad seriously unless its eastern neighbour can effectively deal with its domestic quandary. Third, the Modi regime after re-consolidating its grip on power will turn towards Pakistan and resume its ambition of absorbing Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir. In Modi's coalition government, the key ministries of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, and Defence are with BJP stalwarts who are known for their bias and hard-line position against Pakistan. Raj Nath Singh as the Defence Minister, Amit Shah as the Home Minister, and S. Jaishankar as the External Affairs Minister are not known for having any soft corners for Pakistan. Retaining all three men in key ministries by Narendra Modi gives an avowed message to the opposition INDIA alliance and Pakistan of a hard-line stance in the days to come.

Policy Options for Pakistan

Will the Modi regime continue to sustain an indifferent posture vis-à-vis Pakistan? Will the coalition partners of the BJP prevail over Narendra Modi to reciprocate this gesture towards Pakistan? Will SAARC remain in limbo for another five years because of Modi's 10-year stance to isolate Pakistan in the South Asian region and not to attend the SAARC summit which was supposed to take place in Islamabad in November 2016? These are questions that are raised in

the concerned circles of Islamabad with an apprehension that the status quo in India-Pakistan relations would remain.

What are the policy options for Pakistan in the post-Indian election scenario? Will Pakistan drop its conditions for normalising relations with India in the aftermath of the 5 August 2019 revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution which symbolically gave a special status to the occupied state of Jammu and Kashmir within the fold of the Indian union? Given domestic and foreign policy challenges, Pakistan has four policy options to deal with the post-Indian election landscape. First, not to insist on normalisation of relations with India if the Modi regime is not receptive and continues to sustain antagonistic rhetoric towards its western neighbour. By not attending the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, the Pakistan side delivered a message to New Delhi that it should not take Islamabad's conciliatory posture for granted. Second, Pakistan should try to approach the international community and other members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to communicate to the Indian leadership that its intransigent position over the normalisation of relations with Islamabad will be counter-productive and is detrimental to regional cooperation, peace, and stability in South Asia.

Particularly, Pakistan should try to convince SAARC member countries that the policy of the Modi regime to put the South Asian association in limbo will only harm the region and damage the prospects of meaningful regional cooperation. Ironically, heads of state and government from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka who participated in Modi's oath-taking ceremony should have taken the opportunity to remind the Indian Prime Minister of resuming the stalled SAARC process by attending the much-awaited Islamabad summit. Third, Pakistan needs to seek economic and political stability by focusing on good governance and the rule of law along with investment in rendering quality education and health facilities. If

Pakistan is domestically stable and strong not only will the world take the country seriously but also the arrogant and indifferent attitude of the Modi regime vis-à-vis its western neighbour will positively transform.

Finally, Pakistan needs to use its diplomatic clout with China, Russia, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to communicate to the Modi regime that, in the coming five years, it should reciprocate gestures from Islamabad for normalisation in relations. The resumption of trade and travel after five years of standoff is the need of the hour. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the grouping initiated by Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) can also play a useful role in this regard. Taking advantage of the weak position of the Modi regime and its dependence on coalition partners, Pakistan can convince the aforementioned countries and organisations to prevail over the Modi regime for abandoning its intransigent position on mending fences with Islamabad. The resumption of dialogue between India and Pakistan can go a long way in unleashing the normalisation process in their relations.

Pakistan's policy options can only materialise when its leadership is focused on strengthening the country economically and politically with good governance and the rule of law. By effectively dealing with its fault lines, particularly under the paradigm of human security, Pakistan can hope to meet challenges from its eastern neighbour, India, and come up with better policy options to deal with the scenario emanating from recent Indian general elections. If all the stakeholders including those wielding state power are on one page about how to respond to challenges emanating from Indian elections and how to normalise relations with New Delhi without compromising on vital national security interests, one can expect a better policy formulation in Islamabad on mending fences with its eastern neighbour.

Both India and Pakistan face significant common challenges, ranging from poverty to environmental issues such as global warming and water scarcity. Despite these shared challenges, historical baggage, mistrust, and strident political narratives will impede the progress of both countries towards a constructive dialogue for the resumption of a trade and diplomatic relationship.

Given the existing hostility between the two countries, rapprochement remains a distant possibility. Instead, a tense standoff between New Delhi and Islamabad will likely continue to undermine the peace and stability of South Asia.³⁷ Furthermore, Sharat Sabharwal, a former Indian High Commissioner to Pakistan, said that he did not foresee any major change in the foreign policy of the new Modi government compared to the previous one. He stated, "I think India would respond positively to improve relations with Pakistan provided it sees a constructive and pragmatic approach from the Pakistani side. While it is a given that better relations will help benefit both countries, holding an antagonistic stance exacts more of a cost on Pakistan. Pakistan's adversarial posture towards India, a country with an economy 10 times bigger, imposes a heavy burden on its economy. Suspension of trade with India also hurts Pakistan's economy much more than the Indian economy." India, with a population of more than 1.4 billion people, is the world's fifth-largest economy. It is becoming an increasingly assertive voice on the global front, hosting G20 summits, and joining various multilateral forums like the QUAD. Modi's first overseas trip after taking oath was to attend the G7 leadership meeting in Italy. Meanwhile, Pakistan, a country with 241 million people, is seeking its 24th loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1958, to shore up its faltering economy amid a volatile political and security landscape.³⁸

A policy of constructive engagement between India and Pakistan in the post-election scenario of the two countries is only possible when there is political will and determination on the part of

leadership in New Delhi and Islamabad to transform challenges into opportunities. A strong Pakistan with a vibrant economy and stable political system will give the right kind of message not only to the Modi regime but also to the international community at large. Implications of Indian elections for Pakistan must be seen from that perspective.

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The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticised the opposition parties as opportunists and the corrupt who defamed India globally but were now trying to save their existence and their families. According him, such political alliances "built on negativity" never succeeded. We unite the people of India, they divide the people of India, they underestimate the ordinary people of India," he said, referring to opposition parties."
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