

ELECTIONS

India: Christians relieved by Modi's diminished victory

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On June 4, although Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi emerged triumphant in India's general election, the opposition, which resisted his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s attempts to push a pro-Hindu agenda at the expense of other religious

minorities like Christians, made several unexpected inroads. Thus, while the BJP is poised to lead India for a third term, it lost its **ten-year-long parliamentary majority** as of the time of reporting.

“Today’s victory is the victory of the world’s largest democracy,” Modi declared to the crowd at his party’s headquarters, as per a **report** by Associated Press (AP).

According to official figures from India’s Election Commission, the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) won 286 seats, more than the 272 seats required to secure a majority but far fewer than had been anticipated, the same AP report showed. The results also marked the first time the BJP did not secure a majority on its own, winning only 240 seats, since the party assumed power in 2014. Results from this recent re-election implies that Modi is scheduled to become **only the second Indian prime minister to win three terms** after Jawaharlal Nehru. In contrast, the party won a historic 303 it won during the 2019 election.

Consequently, Modi presently has to work towards setting up a coalition government, which could mitigate Hindu-first sentiments that have incited communal animosities between Hindus and other religious minorities. Strikingly, the BJP would most likely have to depend on major regional allies like the **Telugu Desam Party in southern Andhra Pradesh and Janata Dal (United) in Bihar** to set up a governing coalition.

Many non-Hindu Indians were concerned that granting Modi’s BJP an absolute majority would prompt Modi to amend the secular Indian Constitution to set the stage for a Hindu Rashtra (nation) from which religious minorities would be alienated, UCA News **reported**.

Hence, in light of the BJP’s hardline version of Hindu nationalism, many Indian Catholic prelates such as Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrão, archbishop of **Goa-Daman, formerly called on Indian Catholics** to vote against the BJP. Furthermore, the cardinal exhorted “eligible Catholic voters” to vote for candidates with secular credentials for the good of all people based on India’s constitutional values, reminding Catholics “about their duty to pray for our country which we do on every Sunday at Mass.”

Besides, Bishop Bala Udumala, presently the chairman of the Telugu Catholic Bishops’ Council’s Commission on Theology and Doctrine, **urged Indian Catholics** to serve Indian society as executives, legislators, judges and public servants. “We need to ask ourselves as we choose whom to vote for,” the bishop counseled, calling on Catholic voters to elect candidates who would uphold the country’s secular Constitution, while referencing the **plight of Christians** in Manipur, a state in northeast India.

As the counting of votes was underway, Fr Babu Joseph, former spokesperson of the Bishops' Conference of India was **cited** by AsiaNews as saying:

“As the counting progresses, there is one thing that is becoming increasingly clear: the Indian people have given up the divisive and hateful politics of some political parties, and have resoundingly opted for a more socially inclusive and politically transparent system of government. The results are local, not a landslide victory by one party. The results released so far put to rest all the exaggerations and anticipations predicted by the exit polls.”

Since May 2023, Manipur has been swarmed with ethno-religious violence between Hindu majority Meiteis and Christian-dominated Kuki-Zo communities. Around 200 people have lost their lives in the violence, while thousands have been displaced.

In BJP-dominated India, twelve of India's 28 states have **outlawed** religious conversions, including voluntary ones. Such laws have given rise to the arrests of clergy and acts of violence against Christians. Thus, in wake of the situation, Indian Catholics were **hopeful** when the country's Supreme Court pointed out that India's draconian anti-conversion law may breach the Indian Constitution. The Supreme Court declared in a May 16 hearing in northern Uttar Pradesh state, that “some parts [of the law] may seem to be violative of the fundamental right to religion guaranteed under Article 25 of the Constitution.”

“This Supreme Court observation gives us great hope,” Archbishop Peter Machado of Bangalore in southern Karnataka state **posited** in statements to Catholic News Agency (CNA). “The bid for a ‘national anti-conversion law’ was made in 1978 with a bill introduced by Om Prakash Tyagi, a Hindu nationalist member, in the national Parliament in 1978. ... However, strong protests led to the rejection of this bill in Parliament,” **explained** Father Mark Nediakalayil who had staged the largest protest at Indore, in Madhya Pradesh. “As the Hindu nationalists rose to power under the BJP, several states passed anti-conversion laws,” added Father Nediakalayil, who led the Association of Catholic Enquiry Centers-India for twenty years.

“I am happy that democracy is flourishing in India,” Mumbai Cardinal Msgr. Oswald Gracias remarked, as **quoted** by AsiaNews. “It shows that people are politically aware and voting rightly. Whatever government comes to power, the Church will certainly cooperate,” the prelate elaborated. “It gives us joy to think that the whole process took place in a peaceful and orderly manner, this shows that there will also be

healthy opposition. I think this is good for the country, for democracy and for the future.”

Arguably, political campaigning led by Rahul Gandhi, son of the slain former premier Rajiv Gandhi of the Indian National Congress (INC), comprising a coalition of south Indian Dravida parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam that governs Tamil Nadu, the Marathas of western Maharashtra state, and north Indian parties, managed to dampen the influence of the BJP.

For several years, Rahul Gandhi **spoke out against** Modi, lambasting the leader's contempt of India's secular constitution and civil liberties. Eventually, Gandhi won the two seats he contested, one from Wayanad in Kerala and the other, Raebareli, from Uttar Pradesh. In general, the **INC** is slated to feature most prominently in a much stronger opposition to the BJP, with Rahul Gandhi at its forefront.