**Return of Narendra Modi**

[Aijaz Zaka Syed](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/aijaz-zaka-syed)

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**The spectacular Narendra Modi show in the 2019 General Elections marks a new chapter in the history of Indian democracy. For the struggling opposition and religious minorities, especially nearly 200 million Muslims, this victory seems even more daunting and portentous than the outcome of 2014 Elections.**

In many ways, it is. The BJP’s victory in the battle for power in the world’s largest democracy has been most emphatic so far. The party couldn’t manage such numbers – in the range of 345 plus in a 542-member house – even at the height of the all-consuming Ayodhya agitation.

Doubtless, the credit for this overwhelming and landslide victory goes to Prime Minister Modi and his doppelganger Amit Shah, the BJP chief and fellow Gujarati. But does this represent a success of the facetious ‘sab ka saath, sab ka vikas’ (together with all, development for all) mantra? That is a different debate altogether.

In a way, the stunning outcome of these most bitterly-fought elections in the country’s history is hardly surprising given the incredible hubris and short-sightedness of the opposition to ensure unity in its ranks. Rahul Gandhi’s Congress Party is singularly responsible for, and criminally guilty of, failing to unite the opposition.

If Modi has won despite the long history of failures on the economic front, bad governance and the open war on religious minorities, it is because the opposition, especially the Congress, allowed him to.

If the BJP and Modi have won this election, they perhaps deserved to win. They put in a great deal of hard work and have had the hunger to win. While we cannot ignore the epic lies, obfuscation and jingoism and hate that the BJP brazenly used against Indian Muslims and Pakistan to win this election, you have to acknowledge that the opposition failed to call Modi’s bluff and expose his failures on every front. It failed to offer a positive, redeeming narrative to counter the BJP’s campaign of hate and toxicity. Other than the single point agenda of getting rid of Narendra Modi, the opposition did not offer anything else. The Congress’ promise of ‘nyay’ (justice for all) came very late in the day and was simply lost in the BJP’s propaganda blitz screaming about its various schemes and initiatives.

Rahul Gandhi remained fixated on Rafale and ‘Chowkidar Chor Hai’ without realising that the message is not hitting home. Also, many did not like their prime minister being described as a petty thief at every rally. If the opposition failed to unite to take on Modi and his fiercely, well-oiled war machine of a party, it was chiefly because of the political myopia and rigidity of the Congress Party, which spent most of its time fighting opposition parties, rather than the BJP.

While the BJP bent over backwards to keep old, cribbing allies and win new ones in every state, the Congress simply refused to come off its high horse and failed to accommodate allies like the Bahujan Samajwadi Party, Samajwadi Party, Trinamool Congress and Aam Aadmi Party despite sharing the same values and beliefs and the goal of getting rid of the BJP and Modi. Thanks to the selfishness and cussedness of its old guard, the grand old party lost sight of the more pressing and immediate goal of defeating the BJP.

Political scientist and activists Yogendra Yadav may have been a bit harsh when he said this week that the Congress must die so that a new opposition could emerge to confront the BJP and its divisive worldview. But he is accurately voicing the mounting frustration of progressive forces in the country over the pathetic state of the main opposition party that once led India to Independence.

Indeed, if the BJP and Modi owe their victory to a single factor, it is none other than the criminal failure of the main opposition party and its failure to see the big picture. Despite the series of devastating debacles the Congress has suffered over the past several years and the rout of the party in every state and constituency of the country, the grand old party simply refuses to part with its delusions of grandeur. No wonder then that the Indian voter has punished the Congress for it and handed Modi such a handsome mandate. In any case, the Congress and other opposition parties are no match against the BJP’s massive muscle power, money power and military-like organisation.

Successfully deploying the hundreds of front organisations of the RSS and millions of dedicated and driven workers at its disposal, the BJP ran an epic and flawless campaign. Using conspiracy theories and hateful propaganda that would make the Nazis proud, the saffron party stoked and tapped into the Hindu-Muslim divide, persuading the Hindu majority that despite their many failures, Modi and the BJP are best suited to deal with Pakistan and the wretched minority that is perceived as loyal to it. In this atmosphere of hate, secular forces stood no chance.

Yours truly and a number of other pundits have been predicting this outcome over the past year or so. Indeed, the writing on the wall had been there for all to see. Yet we had been hoping against hope that somehow things would turn out differently. We believed in the famous commonsense and reason of ordinary Indians. But clearly that was not to be. Preying on the Hindu angst about the minority as an existential threat, the BJP stitched together an extraordinary supra-caste coalition of various communities defying post-Mandal realities.

Its well-oiled machinery has been zealously working, using more than 20,000 WhatsApp groups, neighbourhood committees and network of temples, akharas and schools for the final push. The result has been spectacular. The BJP won, thanks to all its hard work and of course the clever messaging against the demonised Other. By unifying Hindu society and targeting its ire against Muslims, the BJP has not only swept the polls, it has also brought down the Muslim representation to a historic low.

Where do we go from here? What is the way ahead for India’s Muslims? One thing is for sure. With this massive mandate, the saffron party will certainly try to shape the republic, its constitution and its democratic institutions in its own image and hue. Already, no arm of the republic is beyond the overarching influence of the Parivar, be it the Election Commission, the judiciary, universities and administration. It is only going to expand in months and years ahead, further cowing down the Muslims and other minorities.

What we urgently and desperately need to do right now is to build bridges with our Hindu brethren whose majority remains reasonable. They are our biggest hope and allies in this war for an inclusive India. We pay much lip service to solidarity with fellow travellers like Dalits – but how many of us have actually taken such a step?

Wherever we are, we must reach out to our non-Muslim friends and neighbours to address their misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims. This is the key to many of our problems. This is something that Muslims who have lived in India for more than a thousand years should have done. We are paying for the indifference and apathy of our forebears. If we do not do our bit, our future generations will not forgive us.

Whatever the future has in store, we need to prepare for it. We cannot afford to lose hope. We cannot give in or give up. Indian Muslims need a new road map, a whole new approach to reinvent and empower themselves. Avoiding confrontational politics and emotive issues, we must focus all our energies on the real challenges and problems facing us – such as economic deprivation and educational backwardness. Election 2019 is not the end of the world, if we draw the right lessons from it.

The writer is an independent writer and former editor.

Email: Aijaz.syed@hotmail.com

Twitter: @AijazZaka