

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

BJP in 2019: A More Militant Hindutva?

By Pravin Prakash

SYNOPSIS

As the BJP stumbles in recent Assembly elections and in the polls, it seems set to embrace a more militant Hindutva agenda as its core electoral strategy.

COMMENTARY

THE RECENT defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in three of its supposed stronghold states – Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh – points to a possible weakening of the electoral grip of the BJP after its resounding victory in 2014. The party roared into power on the back of three major platforms: Hindu Nationalism (Hindutva), a promise of economic growth and job creation, and its charismatic leader, Narendra Modi.

The centrality of Modi's personality rested on his ability to merge Hindutva – which aims for the hegemony of Hindu beliefs and practices -- with his track record of economic growth as chief minister of Gujarat. This culminated in a triumphant political movement in many ways resembling a "Make India Great Again" campaign. Since 2014, however, there have been strong indications that this movement, dubbed "Moditva" by several analysts, is beginning to falter. This suggests that the BJP will instead embrace a platform of an even more militant Hindutva agenda as its core electoral strategy.

Economic Setbacks

In 2014, the BJP with Modi at the helm, ran on a campaign slogan of '*Achhe din aane waale hain*' (Good days are coming) encapsulating the promise that a prosperous future was guaranteed if the BJP came into power. The legitimacy of this electoral promise lay in the persona of Modi, who as chief minister of Gujarat (2001-2014) was

heralded as the architect of the state's rapid economic growth and development. It was widely expected that under the stewardship of Modi, the BJP would usher in the rise of a prosperous and powerful Hindu rashtra or Hindu state.

Since the resounding victory of 2014 however the Modi government has largely failed to deliver on its pledge to provide economic prosperity. Job creation, which lay at the heart of the BJP's economic promises, has remained relatively stagnant since 2014 while India's real GDP growth has also failed to surpass previous growth levels.

In rural areas, there has been widespread discontent among farmers with regards to the BJP's ultra-urban bias that has seen their economic concerns and dire need for government support relegated in importance and largely ignored.

In 2016, the government announced its *demonetisation* initiative, which banned all currency notes of 500- and 1000-rupee denomination before replacing them with new 500- and 2000-rupee notes. The government assured the understandably worried public that this would curtail the shadow economy and stamp out India's circulation of black money, thereby hampering its use to fund illegal activity and terrorism.

The effects of this demonetisation initiative, opposed by impartial economists and analysts, has been negative with no indication that it has significantly crippled the black money plague. Instead, India's still largely cash-based informal economy suffered significant shock, with GDP growth dropping by two percent in the six months that followed. Millions of Indians, themselves largely disconnected from cashless technology also faced great hardship getting access to new currency.

Modi: Man Mountain or Myth?

Despite the economic setbacks faced by the incumbent BJP government, Narendra Modi remains the country's most popular political figure, a looming mountain of a presence over all rivals and even within his own party. Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress party, is currently enjoying a revival of sorts, given the faltering of the BJP in recent elections; but even the most optimistic of Congress supporters will struggle to make Gandhi's case in the presence of the Modi juggernaut.

Modi has also proved to be an extremely astute populist who is able to adroitly shed one political image for another. Senior journalist Prashant Jha has noted that since the debacle of demonetisation and the relative failure of the BJP's economic policies, Modi has somewhat seamlessly transitioned from an image of corporatist genius and harbinger of spectacular growth to a benefactor of the poor who will provide welfare.

This attempt to transition towards a base of the poorer classes is likely an indication that Modi understands his middle-class appeal has been somewhat damaged by the economic performance of his government.

Not being able to use his legacy of economic growth to position, the BJP in 2019 may drive Modi and the party firmly into the arms of the family of Hindutva organisations, the *Sangh Parivar* and a more hard-line Hindutva agenda.

Hindutva on Steroids

There are already strong indications that a more hardline Hindutva agenda is on the cards for 2019. In December last year, more than 50,000 supporters of the Hindu Right, particularly the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Shiv Sena, besieged the city of Ayodhya, reigniting the movement to build a Ram temple on the disputed Babri Masjid site. With tacit support from the BJP, the protestors have demanded that the BJP government pass an ordinance or executive order to start construction of the temple, despite an on-going stalemate in court.

Equally instructive is the BJP's determination to continue fanning communal politics through the Sabarimala Temple conflict in the southern state of Kerala. (On 28 September last year, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of allowing women of menstruating age to visit the shrine at Sabarimala.

The BJP has organised several debilitating strikes across the state and fanned the flames of religiosity, taking advantage of outrage amongst sections of the Hindu community in Kerala. The BJP's state chief has even publicly noted in glee that "Sabarimala is a golden opportunity for the BJP". The party clearly views the conflict as an opportunity to gain a foothold in the state which has traditionally rejected the politics of Hindutva.

Given recent electoral losses in key traditional strongholds coupled with the failure of its development agenda, the Modi brand of politics is increasingly under fire from the Hindu Right. As a result, both Modi and the BJP seem set to fight the 2019 elections by rallying the more hard-line Hindu factions to assert the Hindutva agenda.

Pravin Prakash is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS), a constituent unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg