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The Current: What does PM Modi's landslide win mean for India?

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PITA: You're listening to "The Current" from the Brookings Podcast Network. With us today is Tanvi Madan, the fellow and director of The India Project here at Brookings. After six weeks of tallying more than 600 million votes, the results of the world's largest democratic elections for India's Parliament and prime minister have been released.

Tanvi, what can you tell us about the outcomes of those elections?

MADAN: The outcome was quite stunning in some ways and a little bit unexpected, not the direction of it, but the scale. The magic number in the Indian elections was 272. Those were the number of seats that a party had to get or a coalition had to get to get a majority in India's Parliament. The prime minister, Prime Minister Modi, and the Bharatiya Janata Party in the 2014 elections, got 282. This time they were expected to either kind of fall short of that somewhat or fall significantly short of that and need coalition partners to form a government. However, what we saw is not only did they match their 282, but they stunned everybody with an overwhelming, resounding victory with over 300 seats. At the moment, we have a tally of 303 and that's them alone. They will also have coalition partners, which will take their tally up close to about 350 seats.

PITA: Wow. So, Prime Minister Modi and the rest of the BJP party ran on a very strong nationalist platform and with promises of further economic development, even while India

faces one of its worst unemployment crises in about 45 years. How should we understand his continuing popularity and generally, the context of India's politics at this time?

MADAN: Sure, it's important to step back and understand why this victory is so significant. When he won in 2014, it was considered a fluke to a certain extent. If not a fluke, at least maybe a one-time thing. India hadn't had a single-party majority elected to parliament for about 20, 25 years. And this time we see now, this is the first government elected or a party elected with a single-party majority back-to-back since 1984. It is the first time in India's history, over 70 years of history as a democracy, that a party that is not the Indian National Congress -- Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi -- has actually achieved this feat.

And so, Prime Minister Modi really comes with the wind at his back. He ran a campaign that was quite different from the one he ran in 2014. That was all about aspiration, about to some extent anti-incumbency -- talking about the failures of the previous government. But he had a much more kind of hopeful, positive vision for kind of the economy -- talked a lot about jobs and implementation. This time he focused, as you said, he went to the polls talking of himself as India's watchman, its guardian across a range of issues, including on the nationalist front. That nationalist message was both in terms of Indian nationalism, talking about India's more significant role on the world stage, but also Hindu nationalism as well, which his base liked in terms of the message he was putting out. He did talk about the economy, they made a number of promises to farmers, to the middle class, et cetera because there has been kind of some rural-distressed concerns about the slowing economy. It's still above 6 percent, but economic growth has slowed, investment has kind of been sluggish, and consumption is also showing signs of sluggishness. So, these were some of the challenges facing him, that are facing him, and he ran on a platform not so much talking about an aspirational message on the economic front. He kind of dialed those down. But he did talk about nationalism to a fair degree. But the primary challenges that will be facing him in the days ahead are economic.

PITA: So right now, in these first couple days after the election results have come out, a lot of the focus is about what this landslide win will mean for the future of the National Congress Party. What are some of the more interesting, maybe less covered stories that you're picking up out of these results?

MADAN: I think one of the interesting things is turnout. We've been talking about kind of democratic decline everywhere in the world -- people not thinking that government has delivered, and so being kind of frustrated with democratic governments. One of the interesting things in this is people, in the first few phases -- India did this over seven phases of polling -- in the first few phases, people had some concern about turnout, but the overall turnout has actually been record-breaking. In 2014, it was already record-breaking at about 66 percent. The numbers we have so far, and this might increase, is that the turnout was over 67 percent this time.

And to me significant as well, was that the gender gap has shrunk in terms of the number of men who are showing up and the number of women. In 2009, that gap was 9 percent. 9 percent more men showed up than women in terms of eligible voters. This time, that gap has shrunk to 0.4 percent, and I think that's pretty significant because it also means that politicians will have to cater to that voter base in a way that they haven't in the past.

PITA: Alright. So, now that we know that Prime Minister Modi will be back in power, what does that mean going forward? What can we expect next?

MADAN: So, I think the two things to watch are policy and personnel. The people who kind of follow the inside baseball of Indian politics, we'll be looking at who he appoints to the next cabinet and what that might say about what he might do in terms of policies. Now, he's been a fairly centralizing figure where he has been the decider, so to speak. So, to some extent that might not matter as much, but I think people will still look to see in a Kremlinology sort of way and of who is appointed, what does that mean in terms of where they will be focusing.

But I think in terms of policy, and I think that will be the key aspect -- I think, for many, the focus will be on looking at what he does in the economy, are there a number of things that need to be done? The economy, as I said, is not doing significantly badly in terms of relative to other economies. But there are some serious challenges that he will need to address. So, will he kind of take on some of the big reforms? He was thought to be quite incremental in many ways, though he did do some big bang moves like de-monetization. But I think one of the things people will watch -- will he take some steps, like privatizing some major state-owned enterprises? Will he take on the politically tough tasks of land acquisition reform, labor reform?

Will he clean up the banks? They have a lot of non-performing assets on their books. And how will he actually get Indians to spend more investment, both private investment and foreign direct investment to get going?

I'll just briefly say something about foreign policy, which people will also be watching there. He's going to have a pretty full agenda over the next few months -- a visit from President Xi Jinping of China is expected, he will be at the G20 summit in Japan as well, and we'll see some things come out of that, but we'll also be watching quite carefully who he invites, any foreign leaders, to his swearing-in ceremony. The last time around, he invited all the South Asian leaders. This time around, we'll see if he actually does that and who will be on that stage.

That neighborhood, South Asia, will be a major priority. There are a number of issues at hand -- what to do about Pakistan, but also as a developing situation in Afghanistan unfolds, Iran sanctions, as well, and the recent attacks in Sri Lanka, which is a close Indian partner. But I think one of the things that will be challenging, and also full of opportunities for India in the next few months and the next year is its U.S. and China relationships, where I think there will be major focus for Prime Minister Modi.

PITA: All right, Tanvi. We thank you very much for being here today.

MADAN: Thank you.