IS THERE A 'BJP SYSTEM' IN INDIAN POLITICS?

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ISAS Roundtable
Is There a 'BJP System' in Indian Politics?
27 May 2020
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Executive Summary

In the 2019 Indian general election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) returned to power with a larger mandate than in 2014. The party expanded its electoral reach in rural and 'rurban' areas and brought in new voters, 65 per cent of whom belonged to the Other Backward Castes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Tribes (STs), groups which had traditionally not voted for the BJP. It also made inroads into new areas like Odisha and West Bengal. Despite losses in subsequent state elections, such as Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Delhi, and a narrow win in Bihar, the BJP's dominance over the political system appears to be quite established. However, questions remain regarding how long this dominance will last, whether India's current system is indeed one dominated by a single party, akin to that of the Congress in the 1950s and 1960s, or whether the BJP is displaying its own set of mechanisms and characteristics reflecting the party's efforts to shape India in its own mould.

Despite losses in subsequent state elections, such as Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Delhi, and a narrow win in Bihar, the BJP's dominance over the political system appears to be quite established.

The Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore held a virtual roundtable on 27 May 2020, a year after the 2019 general election, to address some of these questions. This Special Report draws from the discussions to analyse characteristics of the party system, as it currently stands, to extrapolate medium-term trends. The report sets out to examine whether the 'BJP System' is in fact a dominant party system; how its dominance differs from that of the Congress during the first two decades after independence; and to assess the system's aims, tools and context by looking at the BJP's electoral and cultural dominance, including its ramifications for democratic institutions.

This report argues that the BJP seeks to become not just electorally dominant but also 'hegemonic' in transforming the very principles and values of Indian politics. Hence, one central inquiry of the report has been to explore how the BJP is expanding its influence across both electoral and ideological terrains. While recent indicators point to the BJP's continued political success, the party still faces external and

internal threats that could stifle its dominance. Externally, a national-level opposition may yet emerge, though now it is weak and chances of a successful coalition are unlikely. Internally, the BJP could face a crisis of leadership once Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the party's galvanising force, steps down. The BJP's future will also be predicated on its emphasis on Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism.

Introduction: A New Era in Indian Politics?

In 2014, the BJP won a slim majority in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) with 31 per cent of total vote share primarily on promises of bringing about 'development'. However, on the eve of the 2019 general election, when the economy was faltering and the BJP was facing criticism – for its failed demonetisation policies, nationwide farmers' protests and state-level losses in its strongholds in Hindi heartland states – questions about the party's dominance were raised. Analysts were thus surprised when the BJP won 303 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha and 38 per cent of the vote share, consolidating its control over Indian politics and establishing what some believe is India's 'second dominant party system'.

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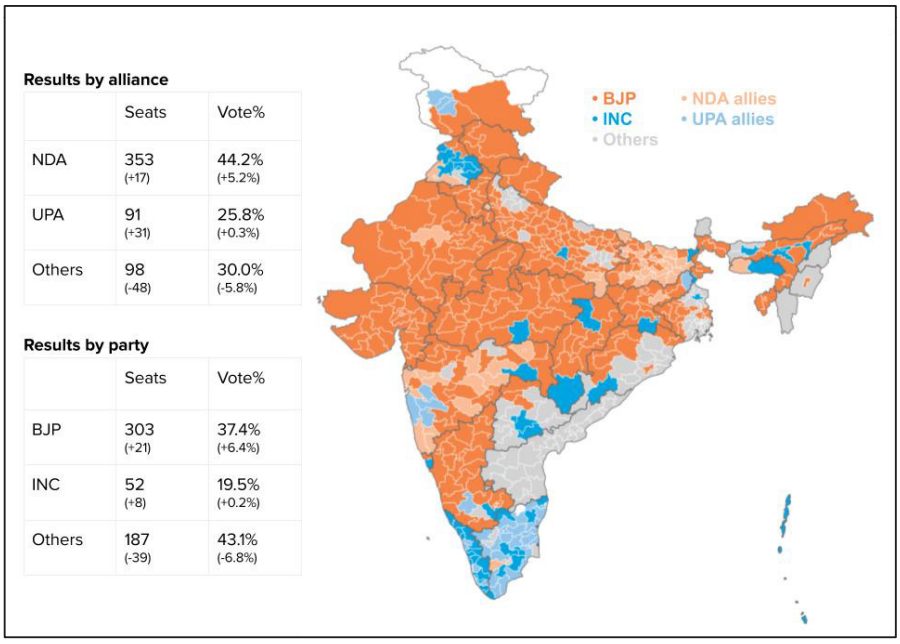
In 2019, the BJP managed to successfully shift attention away from jobs and the economy towards more emotive issues, such as national security, and made the election a referendum on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The success of Modi and the BJP in the election has been variously attributed to popular welfare schemes, India's strong response to Pakistan, a robust, multi-pronged media campaign as well as access to funds that were far larger than any other political party.[1] The Indian National Congress (INC), meanwhile, won only 52 seats in the 2019 general election, eight more than in 2014.

Modi used the strong mandate to carry through a Hindu nationalist-inspired political and social agenda in the first six months of his second term. The BJP delivered on many long-standing promises of the Hindu nationalist movement, such as abrogating Article 370, which gave a special status to Jammu and Kashmir, building the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and passing the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in December 2019, which introduced religion as a discriminating factor to access Indian citizenship.

1 Diego Maiorano and Ronojoy Sen, *The 2019 Indian General Elections and its Implications*, South Asia Scan, Issue No. 6 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, February 2020). Also see Ronojoy Sen, Katharina Naumann and Vani Swarupa Murali, *The Impact of Digital Media on the 2019 Indian General Election*, Special Report Issue No. 4 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, October 2019).

Figure 1: Results of the 2019 Indian General Election



Results by alliance

	Seats	Vote%
NDA	353 (+17)	44.2% (+5.2%)
UPA	91 (+31)	25.8% (+0.3%)
Others	98 (-48)	30.0% (-5.8%)

Results by party

	Seats	Vote%
BJP	303 (+21)	37.4% (+6.4%)
INC	52 (+8)	19.5% (+0.2%)
Others	187 (-39)	43.1% (-6.8%)

Source: Lok.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

Since 2014, however, the party has made significant inroads among other sections of the population.

Throughout the 1990s, the BJP support base was largely limited to the urban middle class and upper castes. Since 2014, however, the party has made significant inroads among other sections of the population. This process culminated in 2019, when it penetrated successfully into rural India and gained the support of a very sizeable section of the OBCs, SCs and STs.[2] In fact, the average BJP voter "mirrored the larger demographic profile of Hindu society", excluding India's minorities.[3]

The new BJP voter is less affluent, more likely to come from a rural background, equally as likely to be female as male and is more exposed to social media.[4] Once an upper-caste party limited to North India, the BJP may now also have become truly pan-Indian, having expanded into the East and Northeast and attracted new voter groups and geographies.

2 Diego Maiorano, "The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralization of the BJP", *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2321023019874893.

3 Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, "The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP's New Social Coalition in 2019", *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2. (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019), p. 131.

4 Ibid., p. 139.

Table 1: Vote share of the BJP (National Democratic Alliance [NDA]) and the INC (United Progressive Alliance [UPA]) among Hindu castes and communities, 1996-2019 Lok Sabha elections

	1996 (%)	1998 (%)	1999 (%)	2004 (%)	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
SUPPORT FOR BJP (NDA)							
Upper Caste	35 (38)	47 (56)	40 (61)	35 (51)	28 (35)	47 (56)	52 (59)
Upper OBC	22 (26)	28 (39)	23 (44)	22 (40)	22 (26)	30 (39)	41 (52)
Lower OBC	15 (19)	27 (43)	22 (44)	24 (40)	22 (29)	42 (50)	48 (58)
SC	14 (15)	14 (18)	14 (25)	13 (23)	12 (15)	24 (30)	34 (41)
ST	21 (21)	21 (31)	22 (35)	28 (34)	24 (26)	37 (40)	44 (46)
SUPPORT FOR INC (UPA)							
Upper Caste	25 (25)	22 (24)	21 (21)	23 (30)	26 (35)	13 (16)	12 (18)
Upper OBC	24 (25)	25 (29)	25 (33)	24 (36)	23 (31)	15 (20)	15 (25)
Lower OBC	25 (27)	20 (24)	24 (33)	24 (36)	27 (31)	16 (17)	15 (19)
SC	34 (34)	28 (29)	30 (35)	26 (35)	27 (34)	18 (20)	20 (25)
ST	42 (42)	32 (44)	46 (46)	37 (44)	38 (46)	28 (31)	31 (37)

Source: National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti-CSDS

There has been speculation on whether the BJP's dominance resembles that of the Congress from the 1950s to 1980s. Where Pratap Bhanu Mehta argues that the BJP won "despite (Modi's) economic failures",[5] and has ushered in a new kind of political common sense regarding a coarsening of democratic values, Suhas Palshikar proposes the party has created a "supply-and-demand-style politics" predicated on insecurity in the electorate and majority dreams of dominance.[6] Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma stress demographic change and "structural shifts", arising from urbanisation and India's expanding middle class, which strengthen the BJP's appeal in society.[7] Alternatively, Adam Zeigfeld counters that though the BJP may be becoming dominant, such prognostications are premature as it lacks many of the structural advantages dominant parties in other parts of the world possess.[8]

There has been speculation on whether the BJP's dominance resembles that of the Congress from the 1950s to 1980s.

A rereading of Rajni Kothari's seminal essay, "The Congress System in India" (written in 1964), also inspires a second, more qualitative list of questions.[9] Is the BJP also a 'party of consensus' or an umbrella

5 Pratap Bhanu Mehta, "Staggering dominance: The only authentic analysis of this election is two words – Narendra Modi", *The Indian Express*, 24 May 2019. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-lok-sabha-elections-2019-results-bjp-congress-rahul-gandhi-5745371/.

6 Suhas Palshikar, "People's demand for a strong leader feeds into the BJP's majoritarian politics perfectly", *The Indian Express*, 26 June 2019. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-bjp-congress-rahul-gandhi-leadership-5799770/.

7 Chhibber and Verma, op. cit., p. 131.

8 Adam Ziegfeld, "A new dominant party in India? Putting the 2019 BJP victory into comparative and historical perspective", *India Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (March-April 2020), p. 142.

9 Rajni Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (December 1964), pp. 1161-1173.

Such a proposition would entail that the BJP is not only dominant electorally but has also attained ideological centrality.

organisation, capable of drawing support from all sections of society? Will opposition parties be willing to relegate themselves to the role of 'party of pressure', that is, parties that try to influence policy-making through pressure on the dominant party? And would the BJP be permeable to such pressures as the Congress was shortly after independence? Chhibber and Verma provocatively propose, "The BJP may have successfully created a consensus around the concept of ethno-political majoritarianism … relegating advocacy of political plurality to parties of pressure."[10] Such a proposition would entail that the BJP is not only dominant electorally but has also attained ideological centrality. Or is the BJP ushering in a different form of dominance by its own set of mechanisms – what we might call a 'BJP System'?

This report sketches key features of the existing BJP system and extrapolates medium-term trends. The report assesses whether the BJP has achieved one party dominance; whether the quality of this dominance is comparable to the Congress of old; and what the structure of the 'BJP System' might look like.

The participants in the ISAS roundtable argue that the BJP is shifting legitimacy away from traditional liberal-democratic values of pluralism and accommodation towards a different kind of legitimacy, based on a set of majoritarian attitudes that emphasise strong leadership and socio-cultural aspects. Through its actions in office, the BJP is also eroding the democratic frameworks that gained legitimacy under the Congress System and is replacing them with a more centralised, top-down structure of governance. The BJP's political dominance could also mark a potential change in its relationship with the Rashtriya Swayamseva Sangh (RSS). Though helping the BJP to dominate electorally, such a transition could sow seeds of intra-party struggle around leadership and succession in the future.

10 Chhibber and Verma, op. cit., p. 132.

The 'One Dominant Party System': Comparing the BJP and Congress

There is quite a bit of theorising on the nature of the current party system in India. Scholars have written on the rise, expansion and consolidation of the BJP in recent times and their impact on the party system. Some argue that 2014 marks the beginning of India's fourth party system – the earlier three being the dominant (Congress) party system (1950-77), the transitionary phase when the dominance of the Congress was challenged (1977-89) and the emergence of a bipolar party system in the 1990s.[11] The new phase is undoubtedly marked by the dominance of the BJP over the party system, although such dominance is much less clearly visible at the state level.

While there are some similarities among the party systems of the 1950s-1960s and post-2014, there are also differences that should be noted. For Kothari, who theorised the 'Congress System',[12] the early post-independence decades were firstly characterised by the presence of a 'party of consensus' (the Congress) at the centre and parties of pressure at the margins. The Congress had historically evolved and functioned through a vertical network of factions that provided the chief mechanism of Indian politics. These factions represented major sections and interests of society, competed for power within and also brought legitimacy to the system. Secondly, the opposition parties at the margins of the system sought to influence the Congress through the factions that operated within the party. They were more like pressure groups than political parties, as they had a slim chance of coming to power. Thirdly, the dominant party was characterised by pluralism, which made it more representative and provided flexibility. Through internal democratic elections, the party was able to absorb and co-opt groups and movements from outside and prevent other parties from gaining in strength. This set of characteristics allowed the Congress to dominate the party system.

The Congress had historically evolved and functioned through a vertical network of factions that provided the chief mechanism of Indian politics.

11 See, for instance, Yogendra Yadav, "Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989-99", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 August 1999, p. 2393.

12 Rajni Kothari, op. cit., pp. 1162-1166.

From this context, several questions arise. Is the BJP's dominance akin to that of the Congress? Do opposition parties have no hope of coming to power and only exist as parties of pressure at the margins of the party system? And is the BJP flexible and inclusive enough to accommodate changing power relations in society?

One theory put forward explaining the Congress' dominance was India's political culture of 'persistent centrism'.[13] For long, this became the predominant window to look at Indian national politics. It was unsurprisingly assumed that consensus was a prerequisite for a society as diverse as India's, where competing interests and factions converged at the centre. Political parties (and, in particular, the Congress) thus adopted policies that would steer clear of societal divides, rather than reifying them along lines of identity.[14]

The present party system under the BJP's dominance is very different from the Congress' 'consensual' model in this respect.

The present party system under the BJP's dominance is very different from the Congress' 'consensual' model in this respect. The BJP has been able to build its dominance doing exactly the opposite, that is, by making identity politics and Hindu nationalism one of the cornerstones of the government agenda.[15] Thus, on issues like the abrogation of the special status for Jammu and Kashmir and the building of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, none of the opposition parties have effectively challenged the BJP's narrative. This has, paradoxically, created some sort of a new 'consensus' in the party system about the relationship between majority and minority communities, which largely reflects the Hindu nationalists' view of the world. In fact, most political parties have come to adopt policies and language that do not depart significantly from that of the BJP. In other words, the BJP-led consensus on identity issues has moved markedly to the right.

13 The framework of 'persistent centrism' was pioneered by Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph. Their writings are analysed in Ujjwal Kumar Singh and Anupama Roy's "'Persistent Centrism' and Its Explanations", *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2016).

14 Sajjan Kumar, "Centrism holds in India", *The Hindu*, 18 December 2018. https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/centrism-holds-in-india/article25766431.ece.

15 Ronojoy Sen, "Everyone Thinks the Economy is Issue No. 1 for India's Modi. It's Not.", *Foreign Policy*, 21 September 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/21/everyone-thinks-the-economy-is-issue-no-1-for-indias-modi-its-not/.

A second way in which the BJP has been able to form a consensus among political parties is based on a prominent nationalist agenda. This is not very different from what underpinned the Congress' dominance in the 1950s and 1960s, when the party was extremely popular due also to its role in leading the independence struggle. While the BJP's nationalism is different – more confrontational towards India's neighbours (Pakistan and China in particular), with a marked religious tone, and highly centralised – the party's emphasis on pursuing a strong nationalist agenda has found a consensus among most political parties. As one analyst points out, "the BJP has successfully shifted the entire spectrum of political opinion towards its ideology."[16]

A third way in which the BJP has built a consensus is through its welfare policy. The government did not dismantle the welfare architecture inherited from the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), and in certain respects, expanded and strengthened it, thus avoiding confrontation and cementing the active role of the state in supporting the country's disadvantaged sections of society.

Modi's BJP is internally very different from Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress.

The similarities, however, end there. Modi's BJP is internally very different from Jawaharlal Nehru's Congress. While the latter functioned as a sophisticated patronage machine regulated by internal democratic elections, the BJP is dominated by Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, who hold a virtually monopolistic power over party appointments. In this sense, the role of opposition parties is much different from that of Kothari's parties of pressure: the only tangible way to influence policy-making is by reaching the top of the system directly, as the BJP's internal factions have limited influence themselves. In this sense, the BJP's dominance seems to be much more fragile, since the party's ability to adapt to changing power relations within society is limited by its overcentralised decision-making structure. Samuel Huntington would see this as a clear sign of impending 'political decay' of the BJP as a functioning institution.

16 Yogendra Yadav, quoted in Ramachandra Guha, https://thewire.in/books/making-sense-of-indian-democracy-yogendra-yadav-book-review-ramachandra-guha.

Yet another difference of the BJP with the Congress system is the role of the RSS, which not only is the intellectual mentor of the BJP but also plays a critical part during elections. While the participants in the roundtable felt that the BJP's dependence on the RSS during elections might have reduced due to the expansion of the BJP's organisation, the RSS' imprint on the BJP and the Modi government is quite visible. Several BJP members of parliament and ministers are members of the RSS[17] and the RSS' influence is felt in government policy, such as the 'Atmanirbhar' or self-reliance campaign.[18] There is, however, a need to rethink the RSS-BJP relationship at a time when the BJP's reach has increased considerably and the party has a popular and charismatic leader like Modi at the helm.

Modi's BJP, however, possibly dominates over a much more fragmented party system, as compared to the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s.

A second theme is whether the BJP is actually electorally dominant or not. The reasons why the BJP has been able to assert itself electorally have been widely analysed over the last few years. Key factors include the 'Modi Effect'; the BJP's adept use of media; invocations of nationalism and national security; organisational advantage (including unparalleled financial resources); and the party's successful branding of its welfare policies.[19] All of these factors have been crucial to the BJP winning a large majority in 2014 and then expand the tally further in 2019. Modi's BJP, however, possibly dominates over a much more fragmented party system, as compared to the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s. The degree of the BJP's 2019 victory, on the surface, would suggest that the BJP indeed dominates electorally. The party won 282 seats in the 2014 elections, which increased to 303 in 2019. The percentage of its vote share also improved significantly by seven

17 Neelam Pandey and Shankar Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi govt numbers – 3 of 4 ministers are rooted in Sangh", *The Print*, 27 January 2020. https://theprint.in/politics/rss-in-modi-govt-in-numbers-3-of-4-ministers-are-rooted-in-the-sangh/353942/.

18 Ronojoy Sen and John Vater, "Modi, the RSS and a Self-Reliant India", ISAS Insights No. 624, Institute of South Asian Studies, 24 June 2020.

19 Several scholars explore these factors in *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, 2019). See Shreyas Sardesai, "The Religious Divide in Voting Preferences and Attitudes in the 2019 Election"; Sandeep Shastri, "The Modi Factor in the 2019 Lok Sabha Election: How Critical Was It to the BJP Victory?"; Rajeshwari Deshpande, Louise Tillin and K K Kailash, "The BJP's Welfare Schemes: Did they Make a Difference in the 2019 Elections?"; and Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma, "The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP's New Social Coalition in 2019". Also see Pranav Gupta and Dishil Shrimankar, "How nationalism helped the BJP", *Seminar*, No. 720, August 2019; and Diego Maiorano and Ronojoy Sen, *The 2019 Indian General Elections and its Implications*, South Asia Scan, Issue No. 6 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, 2019).

percentage points. With the help of its NDA allies, the BJP's vote share rises to almost 50 per cent.

In Adam Ziegfeld's study, "A New Dominant Party in India?", he lists three qualities that the BJP would need to possess in order to be considered dominant. These are size; cultivation of a deep and broad base of support; and competition with an opposition that is either fragmented or stigmatised.[20] Ziegfeld argues that the BJP does in fact possesses certain strengths, such as a relatively firm support base in its strongholds, a popular leader, a formidable campaign machine and success in "forging a new ideological consensus".[21] However, he also points to handicaps, including a relatively thin support base outside of its strongholds, a not-too fragmented opposition and its inability to count on allies to unequivocally keep it in power.[22] Additionally, he underscores how the electoral footprint of the BJP is actually not as large as that of the Congress at its height.

Although the BJP's inroads in East and Northeast India are noteworthy, the party remains mostly unrepresented in the South (it won no seats in Kerala and Andhra Pradesh and only one in Tamil Nadu in 2019), whereas in states like Bihar and Maharashtra, the BJP has depended on alliances for victory.[23]

At the state level, the dominance of the BJP appears even more shaky.

At the state level, the dominance of the BJP appears even more shaky. For instance, there are signs that some consolidation of the opposition is taking place in a number of states. Given the margin of the BJP's general election victory, the party was expected to win handily in the Haryana and Maharashtra state elections held soon after the 2019 general election. However, it succeeded in getting only a relative majority in Haryana (36.5 per cent of vote share), where it formed a coalition government. It also lost a significant portion of its majority in Maharashtra (44.5 per cent), where it was unable to form the government.[24] In Maharashtra, the Maha Vikas Aghadi (a coalition

20 Ziegfeld, op. cit., p. 136.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., pp. 136-137.

23 Ibid., p. 150.

24 Diego Maiorano, "Elections in Haryana and Maharashtra: The BJP in Decline or Business as Usual?" ISAS Brief No. 719, Institute of South Asian Studies, 12 November 2019.

National and potentially formidable national-level coalitions with the Congress party could yet emerge, although this presently seems like a remote possibility.

of the Shiv Sena, Nationalist Congress Party and Congress) managed to form the government despite the fact that the BJP was the single largest party at the 2019 state elections.[25] The defection of the Shiv Sena from the BJP-led NDA is significant since the Sena was one of the most steadfast allies of the BJP. Another ally, the Shiromani Akali Dal, also left the NDA in 2020 over the government's agricultural reforms. Consolidated state-level oppositions are not inconceivable in other states as well, such as in Bihar, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal. National and potentially formidable national-level coalitions with the Congress party could yet emerge, although this presently seems like a remote possibility. As Ziegfeld argues, though the Congress is enfeebled, it is not stigmatised or untouchable, and could thus band together with other regional parties to pose a challenge to the BJP in the future. Thus, though some may say the BJP may be on an upward electoral trajectory – big enough to win multiple elections – these factors alone are not yet enough to assure it of long-term dominance.[26]

Additionally, there has been a divergence in voter behaviour at the national and state level,[27] which has introduced a paradox: the BJP has been less successful in state elections while its ideology has become more widely accepted by the mainstream. For instance, in the 2020 Delhi Assembly elections, the Aam Aadmi Party, rather than challenging the BJP on national issues such as the CAA, ran and won on a report card of good governance. This signifies that hegemony may be more complicated than the divergence between state and national elections alone implies.

The promotion of a markedly majoritarian discourse is in fact a key element of the BJP system – and a key difference with the Congress one. Indeed, Chhibber and Verma state that if ethno-majoritarian politics has gone beyond the electoral arenas and has "penetrated social consciousness", then "India might witness an elongated period

25 Ronojoy Sen, "Maharashtra Chief Minister's Election: The Governor's Role under Scrutiny", ISAS Brief No. 776, Institute of South Asian Studies, 5 May 2020.

26 Ziegfeld, op. cit., pp. 149-151.

27 Diego Maiorano, "The BJP at the Centre and in the States: Divergence, Big Time", ISAS Brief No. 749, Institute of South Asian Studies, 20 February 2020.

of a BJP-dominant system".[28] When the BJP first came into power in the 1990s, the logic of coalitions required the BJP to present a 'moderate' face to the voters and partners. Since 2014, on the contrary, the BJP consolidated the vote on the right. Katharine Adeney[29] and Christophe Jaffrelot[30] argue that India is now effectively an ethnic democracy, where the minority is politically silenced and irrelevant. In fact, only eight per cent of Muslims voted for the BJP in the 2019 elections, which effectively allows the party to ignore them.

Table 2: Vote Share of the BJP (NDA) and INC (UPA) by religious identity, 1996-2019 Lok Sabha elections

	1996 (%)	1998 (%)	1999 (%)	2004 (%)	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
VOTE FOR BJP (NDA)							
Overall	20 (23)	26 (38)	24 (40)	21 (36)	19 (24)	31 (38)	37 (45)
Hindu	23 (26)	28 (41)	27 (45)	25 (40)	22 (27)	36 (43)	44 (52)
Muslim	2 (3)	6 (11)	7 (14)	7 (11)	4 (6)	8 (9)	8 (9)
Christian	2 (2)	7 (10)	11 (20)	6 (20)	6 (10)	7 (17)	11 (16)
Sikh	8 (10)	22 (34)	10 (44)	18 (47)	11 (46)	16 (49)	11 (31)
VOTE FOR INC (UPA)							
Overall	29 (29)	26 (30)	28 (34)	27 (37)	29 (36)	19 (23)	19 (27)
Hindu	28 (29)	24 (28)	26 (31)	25 (34)	27 (34)	16 (19)	17 (23)
Muslim	36 (37)	32 (38)	40 (54)	36 (51)	38 (47)	38 (45)	33 (45)
Christian	33 (34)	57 (78)	48 (53)	40 (54)	37 (48)	29 (31)	39 (45)
Sikh	8 (8)	32 (36)	23 (23)	25 (27)	43 (45)	21 (22)	38 (39)

Source: National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti-CSDS[31]

Demographically, urbanisation has also accelerated the fragmentation of old identities, which in turn is likely accelerating majoritarianism. According to a Lokniti survey, the number of BJP voters who agree with the statement that 'in a democracy, the will of the majority community should prevail' rose from under 40 per cent in 2004 to over 50 per cent in 2019.[32] Chhibber and Verma argue that this "mobilizational potential" signals the BJP's rise as a dominant party. The BJP's ideas are becoming acceptable to a far greater number of

Demographically, urbanisation has also accelerated the fragmentation of old identities, which in turn is likely accelerating majoritarianism.

28 Chhibber and Verma, op. cit., p. 132.

29 Katharine Adeney, "How can we model ethnic democracy? An application to contemporary India", *Nations and Nationalism*, 24 July 2020. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/nana.12654.

30 Christophe Jaffrelot, "A De Facto Ethnic Democracy? Obliterating and Targeting the Other, Hindu Vigilantes, and the Ethno-State", in Angana Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (eds.), *Majoritarian State. How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019), pp. 41-67. https://spire.sciencespo.fr/hdl:/2441/76c6a5423d93ooiiins33srhqc.

31 Figures in parentheses are vote shares of NDA and UPA; voting preferences of voters belonging to other religions are not given due to inadequate sample.

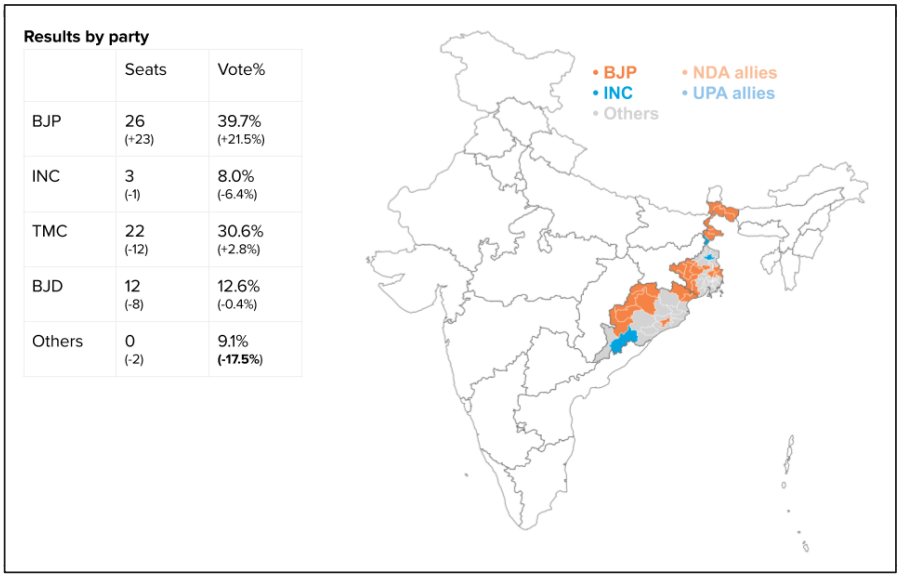
32 See Graph 1 based on Lokniti's National Election Studies (NES 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019) in Suhas Palshikar, "People's demand for a strong leader feeds into the BJP's majoritarian politics perfectly", *The Indian Express*, 26 June 2019. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-bjp-congress-rahul-gandhi-leadership-5799770/.

Furthermore, it is not only voters that find majoritarian ideas more acceptable.

people, appealing not only to traditional Hindu nationalists but also to voters outside the fold. Palshikar argues that narratives of "Hindu victimhood" and ''dominance" resonate with the BJP's new, poorer support base, many of whom feel left behind by socialist promises and the illusory enticements of global capitalism.[33] Furthermore, it is not only voters that find majoritarian ideas more acceptable. Most political parties are in fact either actively espousing them or are wary of confronting them directly and speaking up for the values of secularism.

This is also reflected in the expanding social base of the party. In fact, the party's expansion has not only been numerical but also geographical, particularly in the East and Northeast of India, as well as social, particularly among the lower classes and castes that had traditionally voted for other parties. The last point is significant: similar to that of the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s, the BJP now attracts voters from most sections of society – urban and rural areas and across all caste groups – except religious minorities.

Figure 2: Results of the 2019 Indian General Election (East India)



Source: Lok.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

33 Ibid.

The potentially prolonged electoral dominance of the BJP might also result from the severe deterioration of India's democratic institutions that occurred over the last few years. This is important, as Kothari noted, because the dominance of a party also requires us to assess "the logic of (the system's) operation and its consequent impact on the framework in which political and institutional development is taking place."[34] This could also be applied to the BJP system's impact on Indian politics.

The potentially prolonged electoral dominance of the BJP might also result from the severe deterioration of India's democratic institutions that occurred over the last few years.

Nehru deliberately inscribed the values of pluralism and accommodation into government institutions as a means of giving those institutions legitimacy. His zeal was also reflective of the Congress' commitment to the democratic values publicly internalised during the Indian freedom movement. Such democratic processes, and the Congress' ability to speak for most Indians, helped the party shore up public trust and represent the 'historical' and 'present consensus'. Between the legitimacy of the independence struggle and legitimacy of government was a clear, unbroken 'right' to rule.[35]

One political commentator has spoken of how the country could no longer be considered a full liberal democracy, but should rather be seen as a hybrid regime or a 'competitive authoritarian system'.[36] Indeed, the BJP has operated on a number of fronts that resulted in a deterioration of the quality of India's democracy. For instance, before the 2014 elections, the Congress and the BJP had a similar amount of (self-reported) resources at their disposal. However, in 2017-18, the Congress' income was merely a fifth of that of the BJP and corporate donations were 20 times as high for the BJP than for the Congress in 2018. In an even more staggering figure, the BJP collected 95 per cent of the donations through the newly introduced electoral bonds.[37]

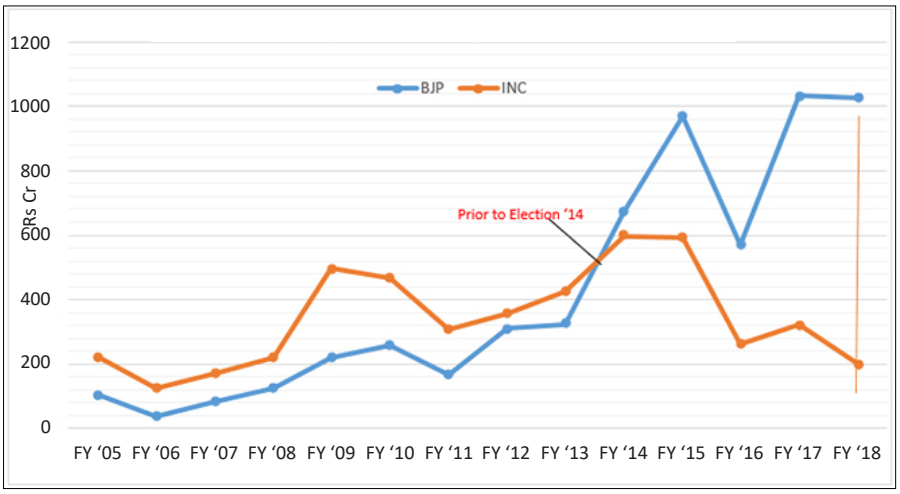
34 Kothari, op. cit., p. 1166.

35 Ibid., pp. 1165-1166.

36 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A Way, "The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, Number 2 (April 2002). https://scholar.harvard.edu/levitsky/files/SL_elections.pdf. They define competitive authoritarianism as the coexistence of meaningful democratic institutions with serious incumbent abuse, which yields electoral competition that is real but unfair.

37 BS Web Team, "Ruling BJP got 95% of funds: Why there's an uproar over electoral bonds", *Business Standard,* 5 April 2019. https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/ruling-bjp-bags-95-of-funds-why-there-s-an-uproar-over-electoral-bonds-119040500309_1.html.

Figure 3: Income comparison – BJP and INC, FY2005-FY2018



Source: Compiled from ADR data[38]

Additionally, Modi has consistently refused to submit to media scrutiny, and even went as far as requesting the public to distrust the media and solely place faith in the government.

Also, the government has successfully managed the media by using a combination of inducements (especially government advertisements) and threats (like selective tax raids). Additionally, Modi has consistently refused to submit to media scrutiny, and even went as far as requesting the public to distrust the media and solely place faith in the government. The BJP's 'Information Technology Army', 'Whatsapp Warriors' and 'Twitter Bhakts' also helped to entrench Hindu nationalist discourse as the focal point around which arguments revolved in public debate, while the prevalence of social media and fake news amplified narratives accentuating nationalism and identity.[39] Critics of the government, especially foreign non-governmental organisations like Amnesty International and Greenpeace, have been targeted with tax raids and an amendment to the rules governing their funding. All of these have altered the level playing field, making it difficult for the opposition to be competitive.

38 Niranjan Sahoo and Niraj Tiwari, "Political funding: How BJP and Congress compete for every piece of the pie", Observer Research Foundation, 25 April 2019. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/political-funding-how-bjp-and-congress-compete-for-every-piece-of-the-pie-50287/.

39 Ronojoy Sen, Katharina Naumann and Vani Swarupa Murali, *The Impact of Digital Media on the 2019 Indian General Election*, Special Report Issue No. 4 (Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, October 2019).

Conclusion

Is there a BJP system in place? The jury is still out. However, if one uses the term 'BJP System' in a loose sense to describe one-party dominance, it would apply to the current state of India's politics. The BJP has been singularly successful in ushering in a majoritarian discourse and getting most political parties to accept it.

The BJP has been singularly successful in ushering in a majoritarian discourse and getting most political parties to accept it.

However, the BJP's dominance does not yet match up to that of the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s. This is primarily for four reasons. Firstly, the party is ideologically grounded unlike the Congress and less flexible, especially when it comes to minority groups. Secondly, there are strong regional parties at the state level, which has meant that the BJP lost many elections in the states after it came to power at the Centre in 2014. Thirdly, the role of the Congress as a national alternative cannot be ruled out. For Kothari, the Congress system was characterised by the absence of a second consensus party. Even if we grant the BJP is a consensus party or has the potential of becoming one, we cannot dismiss the Congress as a second consensus party, which makes applying the 'BJP System' epithet to the present party system less sustainable. Finally, there is the question of leadership. Much of the BJP's electoral success can be ascribed to Modi. A test of the persistence of the BJP system will come when Modi steps down from power. Possible successors like Home Minister Shah and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath do not yet have the same kind of national popularity and acceptance that Modi does. The role of the RSS in the succession could also prove to be crucial.

Appendix 1
List of Participants

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Appendix 2
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Dr Diego Maiorano is a Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). His research focuses on India's politics and political economy and on political and economic change in developing countries, with special reference to the themes of poverty and inequality. He is currently leading a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council titled 'The Paradoxes of Empowerment – Women, Dalits and Employment Guarantee in India'.

Prior to joining ISAS, Dr Maiorano was a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. He has a PhD in Political Studies from the University of Torino, Italy.

Dr Maiorano is the author of *Autumn of the Matriarch – Indira Gandhi's Final Term in Office*, published by Hurst & Co./Oxford University Press/Harper Collins and several academic articles published in leading academic journals.

Dr Ronojoy Sen is a Senior Research Fellow (and Research Lead, Politics, Society and Governance) at ISAS and the South Asian Studies Programme at NUS. He has worked for over a decade with leading Indian newspapers, most recently, as an editor for *The Times of India*.

His latest book is *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (Columbia University Press/Penguin, 2015). He is also the author of *Articles of Faith: Religion, Secularism, and the Indian Supreme Court* (Oxford University Press, 2010, revised ed. 2019) and has edited several books, the latest being *Media at Work in China and India* (Sage, 2015). He has contributed to edited volumes and has published in several leading journals. He also writes regularly for newspapers.

Dr Sen has a PhD in political science from the University of Chicago and read History at Presidency College, Calcutta. He has held visiting fellowships at the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, DC, the East-West Center Washington and the International Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland.

Mr John Vater is a Research Associate at ISAS. Prior to joining ISAS, he worked as a Fulbright-Nehru Student Researcher in India in 2014.

He was selected as the 'Emerging Translator' from the United States in 2018 to attend the Banff International Literary Translation Centre residency in Banff, Canada and was an artist-in-residence and guest lecturer at the North East India Company in 2019 in Silchar, Assam. In 2020, he was a scholar at the India Foundation-hosted Kautilya Fellows Programme on foreign affairs and public policy.

Mr Vater's essays and translations have appeared in various outlets. He is co-translator of *The Play of Dolls* (Penguin Random House India, 2020) by Hindi author Kunwar Narain.

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