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The Prospects for Modi's Prime Ministerial Ambitions

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What does the rise and rise of Narendra Modi mean for India? The question consumes vast amounts of Indian newsprint and electricity as it rockets around the newspaper-reading, all-a-tweeting public.

There are at least three views of Modi, the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. One is that he is India's best hope for substantial economic and political change. A second is that he is an ardent communalist and the tool of the worst sorts of global capitalism. A third view is agnostic about how good or bad he is, but holds that his reputation makes him too divisive to win a national election.

On 9 June, the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) appointed Modi as chairman of its national election committee to prepare for next year's general elections. This move suggested that the BJP would later project Modi as its prime ministerial candidate.

Modi's Success and Failures

The known details of Modi's life have been widely publicised. From a lower caste (Ghanchi) though by no means the lowest, he had a formal marriage at an early age but seems never to have lived with his wife. He joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu-chauvinist organisation with roots in the 1920s inspired by the fascist movements of Europe.

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He became Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001 after the huge earthquake in the state. In 2002, he presided over one of the worst inter-religious killings in independent India. After Hindus returning from a pilgrimage were murdered at a wayside railway station, Hindu mobs attacked Muslims throughout Gujarat. For three days, Modi's government was ineffectual in halting the murders. Critics allege - and court cases over these allegations continue - that the government encouraged the murderers.

Muslims are only 10 per cent of Gujarat's population, and Modi led his party to the first of three whopping victories in state elections at the end of 2002. In the 2012 Gujarat assembly elections, his party did not field a single Muslim candidate.

His popularity in Gujarat is undeniable. He has claimed credit for the state's impressive economic achievements and its reputation as the place where business can be done, the roads are good and electricity works. The state's record in education and primary health is not particularly impressive, but visible economic progress and Modi's reputation for honesty in money matters have stifled criticism of slow social progress.

India's next national elections are due within a year. The current government, led by the Congress Party, is in disarray and disgrace. Sections of the BJP see Modi as the answer to India's problems – and to getting them back to power. The RSS, which always plays a role in the BJP's decision-making, backed Modi to head the poll campaign panel despite earlier reservations about his larger-than-life persona. And Modi, there is no doubt, wants to be prime minister. His own party, however, is not united. Its elder statesman Lal Krishna Advani has publicly shown his displeasure at Modi's recent elevation. He resigned from all party posts on 10 June only to retract the next day.

The dream team, according to some BJP adherents, would be to have Modi and Sushma Swaraj, the leader of the party in the lower house of the national parliament, lead the party into the next election, rather as Advani and Atal Behari Vajpayee led it to victory in 1999. But neither Swaraj nor Modi looks like being good sharers.

Social and Economic Progress

Modi's critics point out that Gujarat's social record is no better than the average for India. The infant mortality rate² is officially around 44 per 1000, about the Indian average, ranking 10th among India's major states and far off the Kerala rate of 13. Gujarat stands at the same middling level for life expectancy (66 years against league-leader Kerala's 76). Rates for completion of primary and secondary education are also unimpressive, and Gujarat stands about eighth among the big states on the overall Human Development Index scale. Research completed in 2008 estimated that 45 per cent of children under 5 were underweight, more than double the rate in Kerala.

Against this, Modi's supporters point to rapid growth in the state's domestic product in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Indian and foreign businesses enthuse about reliable communications and power and administrative efficiency and probity.

² Babies who die in the first year, expressed out of 1,000 live births.

Critics downplay Modi's role in the good things in Gujarat. Gujarat, they say, has always been an economic leader. The pre-historic town-site of Lothal was a port city 3,000 years ago. Europeans set up their earliest trading posts on the Gujarat coast in the sixteenth century because that's where the commercial action was. And M K Gandhi, the father of the nation, went to South Africa as a young man because Gujaratis were already there and doing business. India's oldest still-publishing newspaper, *Mumbai Samachar* (1822), is in Gujarati, not English, Hindi or Urdu.

Modi, critics argue, is a product of skilful public relations. The celebrated keeper of India's left-wing conscience, the *Economic and Political Weekly*, told its readers that "Modi is telling India's dominant classes ... that he can successfully overcome the obstacles to higher economic growth ... by 'managing' democracy as he has done in Gujarat through a combination of communal terror and sops to some sections".³

Modi's admirers strike back by arguing that "most political pundits from academia ... hate Modi most of all because he has been articulating an economic vision for India that is the direct opposite of the one that the Congress Party has followed for most of its years in power".⁴ For his business supporters, Modi promises economic development as no other Indian politician. At the two-yearly 'Vibrant Gujarat' summit held in January 2013 India's most prominent captains of industry, including Ratan Tata, Mukesh Ambani and Anand Mahindra, were present.

The Muslim Vote

India's electoral system is simple – first-past-the-post territorial constituencies – but its electoral arithmetic is complex. In many areas, voters tend to vote for members of the same caste or religion. Analysts usually argue that Muslims are particularly likely to vote as a bloc. About 13 per cent of India's people are Muslim, but they are unevenly dispersed. In 73 of the 543 electoral seats in the lower house they constitute over 20 per cent of the vote and in 218 seats, they are more than 10 per cent of voters.

In an Indian election, 60 per cent voter turnout is good. If Modi's presence as a prime ministerial candidate galvanised Muslim voters, the BJP would run the risk of writing off 70-odd seats before the campaign even began. And another 140 or so seats, where the Muslim presence is between 10 and 20 per cent, would be at risk if Modi's aggressive appeal to a militant Hinduism was insufficient to unite Hindu voters as a bloc. Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 members to the lower house of parliament and has a Muslim population of around 18 per cent, is a good example of the risks run by the BJP. In the last state elections held in 2012, despite Modi hitting the campaign trail the BJP won only 47 seats in a 403-seat Assembly, which was down 4 seats from the 2007 polls. Though Assembly election results are not always a good indicator for national elections, the challenges before the BJP in its efforts to widen its support base are obvious.

³ *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 2013, p. 8.

⁴ Tavleen Singh, "Narendra Modi's march continues as Advani gets in his own way", June 16, 2013, <http://www.niticentral.com/2013/06/16/narendra-modis-march-continues-as-advani-gets-in-his-own-way-90416.html>

Coalition Politics

Modi's detractors point out that he has so far generated little enthusiasm outside of Gujarat, the BJP's committed supporters and corporate circles. Indeed, on 16 June one of the BJP's key allies, the Janata Dal (United), the leading party in the state of Bihar, ended a 17-year alliance because of Modi's rise to power in the national party. Other possible allies in the next election would be similarly wary.

What Modi does next is a hot issue for India's media, tea shops, bus stands and breakfast tables. It is hard, however, to imagine him in the Prime Minister's chair, partly because he has few national political allies and has a reputation for being a one-man band who keeps even his most senior ministers in Gujarat in tight harness. In an age of coalitions, this could be the biggest obstacle for Modi and the BJP. Indeed, there is much that he can learn from former Prime Minister Vajpayee who managed to keep a disparate governing coalition together from 1999-2004.

India has seen flurries over "new leaders" in the past. In the 1960s, the respected C Rajagopalachari founded a free-enterprise party called Swatantra, but in spite of his reputation as a freedom-fighter and state administrator, he and the party faded away. Similar were the stories of Jayaprakash Narayan's 1970s movement and the rapid rise and fall of V P Singh in the 1980s. The Modi for prime minister movement has a long way to run and a lot of hurdles to leap.

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