



Unlike the past two Lok Sabha elections, where Narendra Modi's BJP won enough seats to form the government alone, the party has fallen short of a clear majority this time and is dependent on the coalition NDA. PHOTO: REUTERS

India's election opens the door to the past



BLACK, WHITE & GREY
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Defying predictions of pundits proffered for almost a year, opinion polls of the past months and exit polls over the past six weeks, the opposition alliance INDIA has done so well that the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has fallen short of a clear majority, although the incumbent alliance NDA is holding on to more than 272 seats to form a government. The results and trend are evident that no single party has been able to secure a majority. As Modi's return to power for a third consecutive term breaks a record set six decades ago, it is also a return to a coalition era after a decade. In the previous two elections in 2014 and 2019, BJP had enough seats to form the government alone.

The conventional wisdom is that alliances are formed to be together to go to and stay in power. The NDA is no exception; the members of the alliance have remained together since 1998 and have been in power on several occasions since. In the past decade, despite BJP's enormous support among voters, its extraordinary mobilisation capacity, and the rise of Narendra Modi, NDA remained a key element in Indian politics. As the poll results started to come in, what has become a matter of speculation is whether some alliance members will ditch the NDA and join the opposition. In India, as elsewhere, that's not without precedence. Alliances, especially when a government's survival is dependent on it, tend to be more fragile. Horse-trading has been part and parcel of Indian politics; besides, as the BJP seems to have done poorly and voters have expressed a dismay regarding its politics, it is not out of the realm of possibility that some parties will try their fortune elsewhere. Two parties are being watched closely at the time of the writing of this commentary: Telugu Desam Party of Andhra Pradesh led by Chandrababu Naidu, and Janata Dal United of Bihar led by Nitish Kumar. While publicly the leaders have reaffirmed their allegiance to the NDA, politics is a game of unpredictability; tomorrow is another day.

If the opposition alliance INDIA

can cobble together 272 seats, a coalition of disparate parties will end up in power. Press reports suggest that the alliance leaders are reaching out to parties who can only be described as "strange bedfellows." While it is speculation, or in some ways wishful thinking, such a scenario will be *deja vu*—a return to the 1990s. India witnessed a tumultuous time between May 1996 and October 1999 when coalition governments came and left in quick succession. The period is referred

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to as "the era of fragile coalition." In the context of a long history of stable Indian democracy, the instability during the 1990s was seen as deeply concerning. This period ended with the emergence of the BJP as a dominant party. It offered stability but over the past decade, such stability only contributed to serious democratic erosion and deep entrenchment of authoritarianism. It produced a leader who claimed that he had been chosen by God. It is in this context that if India returns to the 1990s' pluralistic political instability, that will be progress. Indeed, it sounds outlandish to suggest that going backwards is progress, but in the battle against authoritarianism, returning to a flawed democracy is a step forward. The election has created an opportunity.

Speculations aside, the unanticipated better results of the alliance INDIA has a message insofar as reversal of autocratization around the world. In a democratic

society, each political party has its own ideology, vision, strategy, and tactics; they compete, but when the democracy itself is at stake, they might have to compromise and build a wall of resistance. Waiting for a perfect solution to the democracy crisis and the emergence of a democratic force free of stains of past deeds will not only help authoritarianism to sustain, but will increasingly make citizens depoliticised. The Congress-led alliance INDIA is not an ideology-driven cohesive alliance. Some of the differences among these parties are significant; the past of some parties is chequered, to say the least. The partners of the alliance INDIA set their eyes on a goal: to stop autocratization by offering an alternative to Modi's divisive policies.

While the alliance has not succeeded in winning the majority, it has emerged as a roadblock to the politics of divisiveness and hate.

Faizabad's result is telling in this regard. The place, which became the symbol of BJP and ilk's rise due to the demolition of the mosque and the pompous inauguration of the Ram Mandir in January, has now delivered a defeat to the BJP. As for the alliance INDIA, bringing the parties together was a difficult task, holding each other together through the election was harder, but keeping the alliance intact in the coming days to fight for democracy will be the hardest.

The numbers of the final election results will be dissected in many ways. A more nuanced picture will emerge, and analysts and political scientists will try to explain the messages from Indian citizens. In the meantime, it is evident that a strong opposition in the parliament has emerged, and voters have expressed their desire to see a pluralistic polity in India, a past that defined the Indian polity and made it worthwhile to call the country "the largest democracy of the world."

Trump, now a felon, presents a huge political challenge



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ASHFAQ SWAPAN

Say what you will about former US President Donald Trump, but give him his due.

Just when you thought there were no norms of political etiquette left to destroy, Trump comes up with a sledgehammer, creating history by achieving the dubious distinction of becoming the first US president ever to be convicted as a felon.

This follows a whole slew of firsts: the first president in US history who refused to concede defeat; the first president to incite a mob to attack the US Capitol (the last time the Capitol was attacked was by the British in 1814); and the first president to defend insurrectionists. During his presidency, Trump lied with such abandon that the US media,

his party had plummeted, they told him, and Nixon was likely to be impeached. The next day, Nixon resigned. In a bit of gallows humour, erstwhile Republican Senator Bob Dole quipped that at least they had the burglar vote, referring to the break-in at Democratic headquarters in Washington, DC that snowballed into the scandal that felled Nixon.

Today, it is impossible to imagine any Republican lawmaker standing up to Trump, and for good reason. Some have tried before and have had to kiss their political careers goodbye. Contrast the Republican leaders of the Nixon era with today's Republican lawmakers, who are falling all over themselves

Trump, he didn't miss this occasion to make a quick buck. His campaign reports that it raised over \$58 million in 24 hours of the verdict. No surprise there: here is a guy who made money off his mugshot after he was booked in Georgia.)

Thanks to Trump, American politics is in uncharted territory. We have an unprecedented situation where the US Secret Service has to figure out how to provide the former president security if he does become a jailbird.

Meanwhile, the upcoming presidential election in November is still up in the air. Trump is like the proverbial tail wagging the dog—he holds a significant part of the Republican electorate in Svengali-like thrall. So now, it is he who decides what the Republican Party stands for, not vice versa.

The effect of Trump's conviction on his support is hard to gauge, given mixed response to recent polls. While he has lost some support, about half of the respondents say they are more likely to vote for him, Axios



Could Donald Trump be the first felon elected to be US president?

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

usually deferential to the office, were forced to explicitly say so—and keeping track of Trump's lies became a real journalistic exercise.

These dubious "firsts" are leavened generously with political misdemeanours of a bewildering variety and number. Just a random sampling: Trump forced his press aide to falsely claim that he had a larger crowd than Obama at the inauguration. He suggested bleach as a cure for Covid. To this day, he claims the 2020 presidential elections were rigged, despite the fact that all his campaign's lawsuits were thrown out of court by judges, including many appointed by him.

The extraordinary thing is not just how outrageous Trump's actions are. It is the fact that he keeps getting away with it. This has turned US politics on its head and has political analysts scratching their heads in despair.

Let's take a quick trip down the memory lane to see what happened to another disgraced US president, and you will get an idea of how the guardrails have completely come off.

On August 7, 1974, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, and House Representative John Rhodes of Arizona—the top Congressional Republican leaders—gave erstwhile President Richard Nixon a warning: support within

to ingratiate themselves to the former president.

Yet, the fact remains that Trump has been found guilty on 34 felony counts by a jury of his peers. It is noteworthy that Trump's family members were conspicuous by their absence—only his son Eric showed up in court.

Whatever happened to former First Lady Melania? Melania, it must be said, is an oddity. Whether it's Republican first ladies like Pat Nixon, Barbara or Laura Bush, or Democratic first ladies like Rosalynn Carter, Hillary Clinton or Michelle Obama—US first ladies have a reputation for warmth and engagement. Much of it is stage-managed, to be sure, but all nonetheless command some degree of respect and affection. Melania is an exception. It isn't that she is widely loathed. The curious thing about her is that she is a bit of a cypher—one doesn't quite know what to make of her.

That said, one can't be too harsh. It can't be much fun playing the loyal wife in a case where your husband is accused of giving hush money to cover up a liaison with a porn star. Marital loyalty has its limits.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party is quite clearly stuck with Trump, felon or not. Trump's reaction has been his usual bluster: it's all rigged, everybody is out to get him. (Trump being

reports.

It is a strange world indeed, where a felony conviction fails to undo a presidential candidacy, but these are indeed the strange political times we live in. In the recent past, US presidential elections have had nail biting finishes, with just some tens of thousands of votes in a handful of swing states determining the winner. Add to that the deepening polarisation where most voters are staunchly partisan, and you have a political tinderbox where every little thing matters.

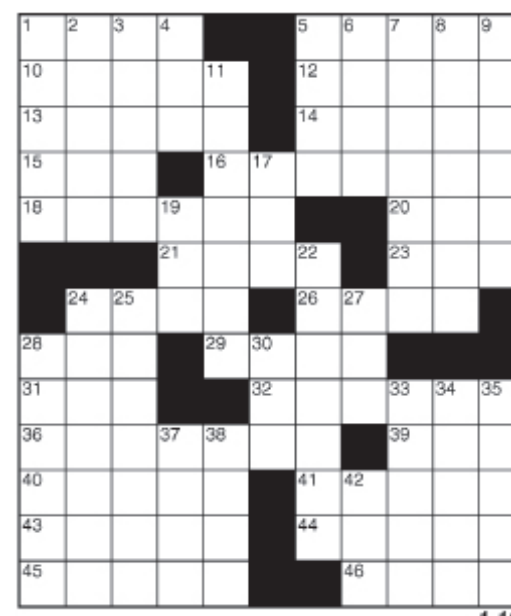
Trump's conviction may cast a shadow on his support, but then incumbent President Joe Biden isn't exciting the electorate all that much. Add to that Biden's stand on Israel's mass slaughter in Gaza, which has deeply antagonised two demographics Democrats desperately need to push Biden over the finish line: Black Americans and young people.

Former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson once observed, "A week is a long time in politics." November is months away. Obviously, a lot can change as the world waits to see if Trump is capable of another first: can he be the first felon elected to be US president?

We won't know the answer to that before November 5. In the meantime, fasten your seatbelts, because this is going to be one crazy political rollercoaster ride.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|-----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| ACROSS | 21 Aide: Abbr. | 41 John of music | 5 Checkout act | 25 Spring forth |
| 1 Writer Uris | 23 Some | 43 Quartet doubled | 6 — Kong | 27 Travel stop |
| 5 Musical symbol | 24 Posted | 44 Day in Hollywood | 7 Wakening | 28 Selects via finger |
| 10 Secret lingo | 26 Lose freshness | 45 Calls for | 8 Glowing | 30 Make a choice |
| 12 Pink shade | 28 Bob Cratchit's son | 46 Walk in water | 9 More than enough | 33 Aquarium fish |
| 13 Rice field | 29 Before long | | 11 Keyboard pros | 34 Steer clear of |
| 14 Battery end | 31 Imitating | DOWN | 17 Golfer Ernie | 35 Tightly packed |
| 15 Try out | 32 Group of five | 1 Accept eagerly | 19 Fire | 37 Imitated |
| 16 Bird with flippers | 36 Fine | 2 Make blank | 22 Like the jack of diamonds | 38 "Why don't we!" |
| 18 Solving tool | 39 Holiday lead-in | 3 Poet Nash | 24 Library request | 42 Depressed |
| 20 Plopped down | 40 Professor at Hogwarts | 4 Auction action | | |



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