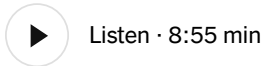


Modi's Hindu Nationalists Conquer a Bastion of India's Opposition

The party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi took control of West Bengal for the first time and made gains around the country. Its defeated opponents accused it of cheating.



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The Hindu nationalist party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India broke new ground Monday in its decades-long campaign to remake the world's largest democracy, winning legislative elections in one of the country's most populous states, where it has never before come close to ruling.

The Bharatiya Janata Party's landmark achievement in West Bengal, home to more than 100 million people, brings to an end 15 years of rule by Mamata Banerjee, one of Mr. Modi's most outspoken critics. The B.J.P. looked set to win 208 seats out of 294, compared to just three seats a decade ago — a stunning change in fortunes as support for Ms. Banerjee's party, the Trinamool Congress, collapsed.

The win is a boost for the expansionist Hindu-first politics of Mr. Modi's party, which has held the reins of national government in New Delhi since 2014. It added to the B.J.P.'s winning streak in state elections, after Mr. Modi's serious setback in 2024, the last time India voted as a whole, when the B.J.P. lost its majority in Parliament.

Since then, the B.J.P. has won in every state election where it devoted significant resources, securing control of the powerful regional parliaments that are in charge of social programs and law enforcement within their borders. The streak has included wins for the B.J.P. from Haryana to Maharashtra to Bihar.



Mamata Banerjee, who has been the chief minister of West Bengal since 2011, campaigning in Kolkata last week. Dibyangshu Sarkar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But none shook the earth the way that victory in West Bengal did Monday.

“We have created a new history today,” Mr. Modi said in a celebratory speech to party workers in New Delhi. “Our constitutional institutions have won, our democratic processes have won.”

The election was not without controversy, in particular around those same constitutional institutions.

Nine million names, many of them Muslim, were struck from the voter rolls in an audit by the Election Commission ahead of the election. Ms. Banerjee, who will be replaced by a chief minister of Mr. Modi’s choosing, took to social media to claim that Mr. Modi’s win was fraudulent, telling the Press Trust of India, a nonprofit news agency, that he manipulated the commission and “looted votes in more than 100 seats.”

The Election Commission had rejected earlier versions of similar complaints. The commission, a formally independent body, is currently led by an official with close ties to Mr. Modi.

Ms. Banerjee had been “one of the pillars of opposition politics with her stress on federalism, and strident anti-B.J.P. politics,” said Arati Radhika Jerath, a political analyst in New Delhi. Her defeat, said Ms. Jerath, “marks the beginning of the end for regional

politics and regional political parties.”

Ms. Banerjee even lost her own seat, in the Bhabanipur neighborhood of Kolkata, to Suwendu Adhikari, a former ally who joined the B.J.P. in 2020. Mr. Adhikari is expected to be Mr. Modi's first choice to lead the state's new government.

Across India, more than 154 million Indians voted in elections over the past month in four states and one territory. The other states that voted offered up other successes for Mr. Modi's B.J.P. Already strong in Assam, they gained seats there, and they won a few even in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where the B.J.P. has made few inroads. Opposition groups now hold power in just seven of India's 28 states.

One of the biggest surprises of the day was in Tamil Nadu, where the party of a political novice, the actor Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar, did better than either of the established parties in the state.

West Bengal was seen as a litmus test of how far the Hindu right can reach. Turnout was record-breaking for the state, with more than 92 percent of eligible voters participating, after the audit removed the nine million names from the list.

As results trickled in, young men on motorbikes painted their faces in the B.J.P.'s colors and shouted a Hindu nationalist slogan for victory. “People wanted change in Bengal,” said Pradeep Mandal, a 25-year-old driver. “This is a vote for change, from people facing corruption.”



B.J.P. supporters outside the party's regional office in Kolkata on Monday. Sahiba Chawdhary/Reuters

Anil Sikdar, a leader at the Kolkata airport, was jubilant about the outcome. “Didi,” he said, using Ms. Banerjee’s nickname, which means elder sister, “is not bad, but her party is corrupt. They have driven industry out of Bengal.”

Just two years ago, such a win seemed fanciful. The electorate seemed to be tiring of Mr. Modi, after a decade that included the catastrophe of Covid-19 and the gradual disappointment of an economy that delivered too few jobs for too many ambitious young Indians.

The B.J.P. held onto power by corralling a couple of regional rivals into a coalition, but the shock was profound. Since the 2024 parliamentary election, it has been laser-focused on winning state elections across the country.

For most of its existence, Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal state, served as the capital of colonial India, when it was known as Calcutta. Its 16 million residents see themselves as inheritors of the entire country’s great traditions.

One of those is what Indians call secularism: the 19th-century principle that the state should not favor any religion. Bengalis also distinguished themselves as leaders of India’s struggle for independence from colonial rule, of literary and artistic pursuit, and of labor

activism. Communist parties ruled West Bengal for 34 years, until Ms. Banerjee displaced them in 2011.

Mr. Modi's B.J.P., by contrast, descends from a school of thinking that defines India as a Hindu nation and abhors the thousand-year presence of Islam. Some of the party's early leaders were Bengali, but by the time it emerged as a modern political force it was only strong in Mr. Modi's home state of Gujarat and the Hindi-speaking north; West Bengal stayed aloof.

Ms. Banerjee ran her state in many ways like the Communists before her, swinging against corporate interests while heralding welfare schemes and playing up her credentials as a secularist, which made her especially popular among Muslims and liberals. And, like the Communists', her government developed a reputation for corruption and even brutality.

Jawhar Sircar, a decorated former official, represented Ms. Banerjee's party in Parliament's upper house from 2021 to 2024. Watching the Trinamool Congress lose on Monday, he offered a bitter farewell. "You guys are secular, and God bless you for that. But you also became corrupt," he said.

There were many accusations of corruption against Ms. Banerjee's partners in government over the years. Perhaps the most damaging was when her education minister was arrested in 2022 on charges of helping to sell thousands of government teaching jobs for thousands of dollars each. He has denied the charges.

There was also national outrage after the rape and murder of a doctor at a Kolkata hospital last year, and the B.J.P. campaigned to women voters by promising better safety and bigger cash handouts. The party fielded the mother of the victim as a candidate, and she won.

In her campaigns, Ms. Banerjee positioned herself as defending the Bengali culture of West Bengal against the encroachment of a Hindu-first, Hindi-first government. But standing up for one Indian state against the national government is no longer a winning ticket, said Ms. Jerath, the analyst. "Cultural identity and politics around it is just not enough. People want jobs, they are aspirational, they want to get ahead."

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