

A PM like Indira Gandhi

Like her, Modi has established his dominance. But can he move beyond her legacy, to rule by persuasion?



PM Modi has become contemporary India's most dominant political figure. No politician since Indira Gandhi has had such cross-regional electoral appeal. (File Photo)

The BJP's monumental electoral triumph in Uttar Pradesh, especially after a massive victory in the state's parliamentary elections in 2014, invites reflection on two important political concepts: Dominance and hegemony. The BJP's political dominance is now a commonplace observation, but some of the most thoughtful political commentators have also started speaking of BJP's hegemony. The issue is not simply semantic. Real political matters are

involved. And the success of future political strategies might well depend on which concept best captures the realities of [Narendra Modi](#)'s India.

Let us start with the differences between [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) and [Indira Gandhi](#), viewed as the two most powerful leaders of India after Independence. What was the nature of their power and the polity they ruled? Which one does Modi resemble most? Where might a polity ruled by Modi be headed?

The basic question here is not about Modi's economics, which is fundamentally different from Nehru's and Indira Gandhi's, both of whom were on the left. While Modi is no free market proponent, he is best described as right of centre on economics. The question about hegemony and domination concentrates on politics, not economics.

The basic difference between hegemony and dominance is that the former represents power stemming from persuasion, the latter, power from coercion. In democracies, we don't get pure hegemony or pure dominance. Hegemony is often associated with totalitarian polities, like communism on the left and fascism on the right. The Soviet Union and Maoist China did exercise coercion, but most minds had been ideologically captured. Even the non-state citizen space, the so-called civil society, was inhabited by ideologically conforming and state-supporting organisations.

Democracies construct hegemony differently. They allow freedom to civil society; opposition parties also openly contest the government. They don't curtail freedom of speech. Even with such freedoms and adversarial opportunities, the power of the Congress party under Nehru spread to all parts of India, with the exception of Kashmir and parts of the Northeast. Only in 1957, 10 years into Nehru's tenure as PM, did one state, Kerala, acquire a non-Congress government. Opposition parties fought hard, but could not win

against him. Also, there was vigorous debate within the Congress. Nehru was sometimes defeated in intra-party debates. Finally, civil society was not repressed.

Yet, S. Gopal, Nehru's biographer, reports a famous mid-term assessment in 1956, published in the New York Times, that Nehru was one of the "unchallenged rulers of the world, perhaps the only one who ruled by love and not fear". Ruled by love, not fear? These words explain why Nehru came to be viewed as a democratically legitimated hegemon of India.

In political practice, despite genetic lineage, Indira Gandhi was anti-Nehru. The masses, on the whole, adored her. But intra-party dissent was crushed; civil society organisations were harassed; government interfered in universities, getting left-leaning academics in positions of power; disagreeing judges were afraid; state-level leaders came to be appointed by her, not by regional wings of the party. Regardless, based on her personal popularity, the Congress party kept winning power in most states (except for 1977), though not in as many as under Nehru. She was dominant, not hegemonic.

In his politics, Modi is more like Indira Gandhi than Nehru. Under his leadership, the BJP is ruling in many more states than ever before. But opposition within the BJP rarely raises its head. Marginalised by Modi's popularity, the seniors are fading away. An independent voice like Arun Shourie's could not be accommodated in power, whereas Patel, Nehru's adversary, was inside the cabinet. Hindu nationalist academics are being imposed on universities. Civil society organisations, opposed to Modi, fear retribution.

However, intolerance is popular at the mass level. It is extraordinarily hard to win 40 per cent or more of UP's vote twice in a row, as Modi did. To this, add winning Maharashtra, a Congress bastion; Haryana and Assam, where the

BJP was insignificant; increasing BJP vote share in Bengal, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana; and keeping Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh intact. Punjab, Bihar and Delhi are Modi's only notable electoral failures.

With this electoral record, Modi has become contemporary India's most dominant political figure. When Karnataka goes to polls next year, he might even win a southern state. His victorious arc will thus touch all parts of India. No politician since Indira Gandhi has had such cross-regional electoral appeal.

However, like Indira Gandhi, his functioning between elections also departs from democratic principles. He does not stop intolerant organisations from running amok and unleashing violence. Freedom of speech is not a principle he loves. Ideological conformity and/or loyalty shape his political functioning.

Can Modi move from dominance to hegemony? From electoral legitimacy to rule by persuasion? With an unrivalled political stature and its accompanying power, including vis-à-vis his own party, Modi could follow the idea made famous by Samuel Huntington: Namely, consolidation of power is often necessary before it can be dispersed. Would he pick power dispersal as a preferred strategy? And what will be his approach to groups that remain suspicious and fearful, especially Muslims (and Christians)?

It is unlikely Modi would pick power dispersal over further power consolidation. The former is not his style. It is also unclear whether he would embrace Muslims (and Christians). His election speech focusing on kabristan (grave yards) and shamshan (cremation grounds) was Hindu nationalist to the core. His victory speech later, however, was all-embracing. This duality has marked his politics since his rise as India's Prime Minister: An inclusive

speech at Wembley, London, was interspersed in close time with his Hindu nationalist twist in the Bihar election campaign.

If Modi wishes to rule by persuasion, there is a way out. He would have to seriously curtail his Hindu nationalist moorings, and focus on economic development for all, a promise he made in 2014. It is fanciful to believe that both pursuits, one exclusionary, the other inclusionary, are simultaneously realisable.

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