

## BIHAR BLOWBACK

# After biting the dust of the Gangetic plains, Modi needs to come home and stay home



Time to reinvent . (Reuters/BRICS/SCO Photohost/RIA Novosti)

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For prime minister Narendra Modi, 2015 has been an *annus horribilis*, brought about by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP's) humiliating loss in the Delhi elections in February, and now the even more humiliating and momentous loss in Bihar.



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Bihar has been bruited about, mainly by the BJP, as a referendum on Modi's popularity. Modi heavily invested his political capital in the Bihar campaign. He turned it into a make or break election.

It was a grudge match between a powerful prime minister, still basking in the glow of his sweeping victory in the May 2014 national elections, and a charismatic but flawed chief minister of a Hindi heartland state. Not very long ago, Modi and Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar were allies.

They are also similar in many ways. Both have sidelined their ministers and like to wield centralised power through a strong group of bureaucrats. Both are solitary and single men. Both are non-dynastic sharks who swim in a very dynastic sea. And both like hitting the road and pressing the flesh.

In June 2013, well into his second term as chief minister, Kumar broke away from the National Democratic Alliance and removed 11 BJP ministers from his cabinet. This time, his critics predicted he would lose badly because he was no longer backed by the BJP's cadres. What the pundits did not recognise is that this was not an anti-incumbency vote. Kumar is still popular. And somewhere, Modi's message backfired.

Two months before the elections were announced, Modi announced a huge Rs1.25 lakh crore (\$18.9 billion) financial package for Bihar, the nation's poorest state. He threw every politically savvy minister in his cabinet into the campaign. He spoke himself at more than two dozen rallies. In the beginning, his message was about development and the promise of jobs, health, and education.

But as the campaign for the five-phase election wore on, Modi's



speeches became more poisonous, laced with rising invective and downright slander. Towards the end, he accused Kumar of harbouring a terrorist module. BJP president Amit Shah, who has also staked his reputation on a Bihar win, said firecrackers would be lit in Pakistan if the BJP lost. Many Biharis must have felt their loyalty was being questioned.

Besides Hindi, Biharis speak dialects like Bhojpuri and Maithili, redolent with Sanskrit, imagery, and aphorisms. The birthplace of Buddhism, the state is rich with history and febrile debate. It straddles the Ganga and is the country's most politicised, riven by religion and class. As somebody said, in Bihar you do not cast your vote, you vote your caste.

Bihar has a huge population of young people who aspire to a better future. Biharis are among the most mobile Indians and have migrated far and wide from their region. Besides 19th-century migration to Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, the Seychelles and Suriname, Biharis also constitute a huge migratory population every year within India. In some ways, therefore, it is indeed a national vote against Modi.

Modi has also been ill-served by his followers. One day after another, one BJP politician or the other places his foot firmly in his mouth with one outrageous statement or the other.

If it was not BJP-Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ideologue Ram Madhav labelling vice president Hamid Ansari unpatriotic for not taking part in Modi's Yoga Day show on Delhi's Rajpath (he had not been invited), it was finance minister Arun Jaitley, who has become a cheerleader for Modi, and a Facebook firebrand, calling the writers and filmmakers who returned their national awards "rabid anti-BJP elements"; or it was the BJP's monk-MP Yogi Adityanath likening popular actor Shah Rukh



Khan to Pakistani terrorist Hafiz Saeed.

In between, you had Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief, the BJP's mother organisation, calling for a review of caste-based reservations in a recent interview. Modi and the BJP had to strain massively to defuse the Bhagwat caste bomb. The campaign was also shadowed by the national uproar over beef and cow slaughter, and the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq in a village on Delhi's outskirts merely on suspicion that he had beef in his refrigerator.

What are the repercussions of the Bihar defeat likely to be?

First, Modi's personal image as a national and transformational leader who will lead India into developmental nirvana has taken a body blow. He has clay feet, and they are crumbling.

Second, despite his big majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, Modi sorely needs a majority in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house. The Bihar loss will now likely push that majority beyond the end of Modi's term in 2019.

Third, Bihar will embolden a hostile opposition inside and outside parliament and jeopardise the economic reforms that Modi desperately needs to push through to haul India out of its glide path into real growth. Modi has already had to jettison a Land Acquisition Bill that he fought for fiercely. Now, the key goods and services tax, which he has vowed to introduce by April 1 next year, is in peril.

Fourth, a rejuvenated Kumar, who did not personally stand for election and focused on the campaign, might well cash in on his popularity and spearhead a combined opposition against Modi in the 2019 general election.



Fifth, even as the RSS and the BJP conduct their post-mortems, religious polarisation will grow. The extreme-right militant Hindu elements in the Sangh Parivar—the larger grouping of organisations that owe allegiance to the RSS—could well raise their anti-Muslim words and actions to fever pitch, and they will be reined in even less by a weakened Modi.

How much is Modi going to reinvent himself? He may not rest long on his thorns. He has already made 28 foreign trips, and is scheduled to take off on his next one next week. By the time he completes 18 months in office on Nov. 26, he will have taken in four more countries: Britain, Turkey, Malaysia and Singapore. Modi needs to come home, and stay home.

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