

# Landslide win for Indian opposition party

By Muneza Naqvi and Elizabeth A. Kennedy  
The Associated Press

**N**EW DELHI — India's opposition leader, Narendra Modi, will become the next prime minister of the world's largest democracy, winning the most decisive election victory the country has seen in three decades and sweeping the long-dominant Congress party from power.

Modi, a career politician whose campaign promised a revival of economic growth, will have a strong mandate to govern at a time of profound changes in Indian society. He also has said he wants to strengthen India's strategic partnership with the United States. But critics worry the ascendance of his Hindu nationalist party could worsen sectarian tensions with India's minority 138 million Muslims.

The results were a crushing defeat for the Congress party, which is deeply entwined with the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty that has been at the center of Indian politics for most of the country's post-independence history. The party, led by outgoing Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, has been plagued by repeated corruption scandals and a poor economy.

As his overwhelming win became clear last week, Modi appeared before a crowd of cheering supporters and tried to strike a conciliatory note.

"I have always said that to govern the nation it is our responsibility to take everyone with us," Modi said after a lengthy and punishing race. "I want your blessings so that we can run a government that carries everyone with it."

Nevertheless, Modi remains a divisive figure in the country of 1.2 billion people, in large part because he, as chief minister of Gujarat state, was in command in 2002 when communal rioting there killed more than 1,000 people — most of them Muslims.

Modi was accused of doing little to stop the rampage, though he denies any wrongdoing and has never been charged with a crime. He was denied a U.S. visa in 2005 for alleged complicity in the riots.

U.S. President Barack Obama called Modi last week to congratulate him on his victory and invited him "to visit Washington at a mutually agreeable time to further strengthen our bilateral relationship," the White House said in a statement. The U.S. administration had watched Modi's rise carefully, and in February, for the first time in Modi's decade-long tenure as the top official in Gujarat state, the American ambassador met with him.

In India, the question now is whether Modi can be a truly secular leader in a country with many faiths. The Congress party tried to highlight the 2002 riots during the campaign, but Modi's momentum — and laser focus on the ailing economy — carried him to victory.

There was a record turnout in the election, with 66.38 percent of India's 814 million eligible voters casting ballots during the six-week contest, which began April 7 and was held in stages across the country. Turnout in the 2009 general



**LANDSLIDE VICTORY.** Opposition leader and India's next prime minister, Narendra Modi, sits with his 90-year-old mother Hiraben during a visit to seek her blessings after election results showed his party won national elections in a landslide, in Gandhinagar, in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The 63-year-old Modi is widely seen as the darling of India's corporate world and a decisive, 21st-century administrator expected to revive job creation and economic growth. Modi's singular message on the economy has helped him ignore or beat back criticism of his personal life, including his strong links to a right-wing Hindu nationalist group, as well as his four-decade marriage to a retired school teacher he had never mentioned publicly until last month. (AP Photo/Ajit Solanki)

assumes responsibility.

The two took no questions after their brief remarks, and Rahul trailed his mother off the stage.

Rahul Gandhi, who first won a seat in parliament in 2004, has been viewed as prime-minister-in-waiting for his entire political career, though he never appeared comfortable in the role. When he finally gave the first television interview earlier this year, it made for dull, uninspiring viewing full of vague promises.

In sharp contrast to the street parties outside the BJP office, a sober scene played out in front of the Congress headquarters, where few showed up despite barricades erected to protect supporters from passing road traffic.

Modi, 63, promised a fresh start in India, noting that he is the first Indian prime minister born after independence from Britain in 1947.

"I would like to reassure the nation that while we did not get to fight and die for independence, we have the honor of living for this nation," Modi said. "Now is not the time to die for the nation but to live for it."

Associated Press writers Ashok Sharma and Katy Daigle contributed to this report.

election was 58.13 percent.

The last time any single party won a majority in India was in 1984, when an emotional nation gave the Congress party a staggering victory of more than 400 seats following the assassination of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

But 30 years later, India is now in the throes of rapid urbanization and globalization just as the youth population is skyrocketing. Many new voters are far less deferential to traditional voting patterns focused on family lineage and caste. For young Indian voters, the priorities are jobs and development, which Modi put at the forefront of his campaign.

Sreeram Chaulia, a political analyst and dean of the Jindal School of International Affairs, said the BJP's image as a purely capitalist, pro-business party resonated across India. That image contrasts with Congress, which is considered more of a welfare party, mixing capitalist reforms with handouts for the poor.

"A lot of ordinary people believed in (Modi's) message and wanted to give him the strong mandate he was seeking, to see if he could really change things in India," Chaulia said. "There has been growth in the middle class, so of course why have they punished the incumbents? Because they want more, obviously, something more than subsistence. They want upward mobility."

The BJP has promised to change tough labor laws that make foreign manufacturers reluctant to set up factories in India. Manufacturing makes up only 15 percent of India's economy, compared to 31 percent in China. Attracting manufacturing investment is key to creating jobs for the 13 million young Indians entering the workforce each year, and foreign investors have been pouring billions of dollars into Indian stocks and bonds in anticipation of a Modi victory.

Although he focused strongly on the economy, Modi has given some hints of his foreign policy leanings, saying the BJP wants to build on the foundations laid by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the last BJP prime minister. Vajpayee, who governed from 1998 to 2004, rode a bus across the border to Pakistan in what was seen as a bold step in trying to mend ties with India's longtime enemy.

Modi said during the campaign that

India did not want a war with regional giant China but that his government would be prepared to deal with what he called Beijing's possible expansionist designs.

The election came at a low ebb for the Congress party, which has been in power for all but 10 years of the country's history since independence in 1947.

The leader of the Congress campaign, 43-year-old Rahul Gandhi, failed to inspire public confidence. He was seen as ambivalent at best over winning a job held previously by his father, grandmother, and great-grandfather.

"I wish the new government all the best," Gandhi told reporters, adding that he held himself responsible for the party's losses.

Immediately after his appearance, his mother, Sonia Gandhi, the president of the party, took the microphone and said she

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