**[Modi and MPs from Pakistan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832001/modi-and-mps-from-pakistan)**

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published May 7, 2024

REVANTH Reddy, the waggish Congress chief minister of Telangana, was fielding questions from a BJP-hugging TV anchor about Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s prospects in the ongoing elections. “Do I see myself accepting that Mr Modi is coming back with 400 seats? It’s mathematically not possible, unless he is also counting MPs from Pakistan.” Reddy’s answer reflected his recourse to ready wit, which he uses to stall time-consuming acrimony, particularly one with no political yield. The Lok Sabha has 543 elected seats, and, so far, only Rajiv Gandhi has won 400-plus seats following Indira Gandhi’s assassination in 1984.

It’s not unusual for electoral canvassing in India to bring in Pakistan. Mr Modi is a folk hero with his fawning TV anchors for using Pakistan as a peg to hang his [anti-Muslim](https://www.dawn.com/news/1831862/india-bjps-election-videos-targeting-muslims-and-opposition-spark-outrage) bias on. In his speeches, which are packed with half-truths and free-flowing communal bile, he concocts quotations from the Congress party’s election manifesto. Congress will take away Hindu women’s mangal sutras, a necklace sacred to married women, to give them to Muslims. The manifesto, he never hesitates to insist with a straight face, is inspired by the Muslim League. What he doesn’t say is that the election commissioners were handpicked by Mr Modi and the favour is returned by their refusal to name him as a violator of election laws that bar communal targeting.

India’s election commission was till recently hailed as a role model abroad, and there are countries it helped set up elaborate bodies for running elections. Mr. Modi’s parliament overturned the apex court’s advice to include the chief justice with the leader of the opposition in the three-member selection committee, along with the prime minister, to elect the commissioners.

In recent speeches, Mr Modi has curiously stopped claiming 400 seats with allies, with BJP alone securing 370. But his home minister continues to proclaim the tally as a done deal. In election season, making tall claims is normal. The problem comes when the claim is broadcast as gospel truth uncritically on English channels. The foreign media often picks up whatever is available in English, though it is equally true that diligent reporters use translators to scour the vernacular media. Most, however, would still miss the fun the Congress chief minister was having in predicting the prime minister’s fortunes.

As Indian elections enter their third phase on Wednesday, Mr Modi is looking rather unsettled, not least by the lower voter turnout.

Reddy pulled out a chart from the 2019 polls. He showed clearly that the BJP had saturated its victories in its base in northern states. For example, there are 25 seats all told in Rajasthan, 10 in Haryana, seven in Delhi, five in Uttarakhand, four in Himachal Pradesh, and 26 in Gujarat. The BJP won all the seats, including with allies. Remaining are 11 seats in Chhattisgarh, 14 in Jharkhand, 29 in Madhya Pradesh, 40 in Bihar, 48 in Maharashtra and 80 in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP won 95 per cent in these states, barring Uttar Pradesh, where it got 78pc seats. In the outgoing Lok Sabha, the BJP had 303 MPs, well above the halfway figure of 272. As Revanth Reddy asked, where are the remaining 67 MPs coming from to take the party’s tally to 370? Besides, would the BJP retain everything it has? Very unlikely.

As Indian elections enter their third phase on Wednesday, Mr [Modi](https://www.dawn.com/news/1830375) is looking rather unsettled, not least by the lower voter turnout. Some see it as the trigger for his increasingly divisive speeches. Why do they say Mr Modi looks unsettled?

Whether the picture changes in the following four phases, which end with the last round on June1, cannot be predicted. The adamant assumption (or fear) in the foreign media remains that he is primed to win a third term. The facts, as gleaned from the ground reality, look different. The inevitability of his victory today rests on ifs and buts rather than the wave that won him the previous two terms.

One has essentially two choices to follow the painfully long elections, in case braving the heatwave singeing the country isn’t an option. One may trust the 24X7 TV channels, which entails accepting the prime minister’s every claim, something the fawning anchors carry unquestioningly to a captive audience deep inside the country. Here, there’s virtually no room for the opposition’s perspective to sneak in. The seemingly more tenable and fleshed-out perspective comes from a bevy of YouTube channels. They have sprung up out of the blue, as if to rein in Mr Modi’s eagerness to declare victory before the race has begun.

These internet channels are equally wary of giving needless leeway to the opposition. On a Hindi channel called *Public India*, you would meet battle-scarred journalists from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and so forth. *NewsLaundry.com* offers brilliant insights from battlegrounds in English and Hindi. Being an avid UP person, however, I cannot help relishing the idiomatic banter and Hindi metaphors thrown in steadily, occasionally, with a fragrant paan in the speaker’s mouth. The bespectacled Arun Kumar Sharma is an old insider of the BJP from Delhi. He would tell you analytically why the BJP’s workers on the ground are not giving their best to Mr Modi. The anchor, Anand Vardhan Singh, guides the discussion professionally with a clip here of Mr Modi’s vitriol juxtaposed with a fierier speech by Priyanka Gandhi. Hari Shankar Joshi is respected for his understated insights, Sharat Pradhan is brought in for a deep survey of the battle formations in Uttar Pradesh.

There is a growing consensus among these analysts as the elections proceed that Mr Modi might even lose his job to a BJP rival if he doesn’t produce another rabbit from one of his myriad headgears. There is also a view that the BJP will struggle, if help doesn’t arrive soon from Pakistan, a reference to Mr Modi’s tested ability to conjure a real or imaginary stand-off at will.

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