

BJP KEEN TO MAINTAIN SOCIAL BASE FOR 2019 ELECTION

Modi plays Hindu card in pivotal state

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The election result in India's largest and most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) confirmed that Narendra Modi's star shines as brightly as it did in 2014, when he was elected the country's prime minister.

The election, which saw the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) win three quarters of the seats in the UP Assembly, also underscored the party's dominance in a pivotal state.

It was not surprising then that all the post-election talk was about the bright prospects of Mr Modi getting re-elected in 2019; the elbow room that he now had for accelerating economic reforms; and perhaps a more inclusive policy towards minorities.

Instead, Mr Modi surprised everybody by appointing Mr Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu nationalist hardliner, as UP's chief minister.

Mr Adityanath, the head priest of a well-known temple in UP and five-time member of parliament, is not only known for making incendiary statements against minorities, but also has several criminal charges against his name.

What is the reasoning behind the appointment, which has been hailed by the BJP's core constituency of Hindu nationalists, but has caused unease among those who have bought into Mr Modi's promise of development and good governance?

There are a few possible answers. First, though Mr Modi had by-and-large emphasised development (or *vikas*) during the election campaign in UP, he was not averse to rhetoric that could polarise voters.

One of the more notable such statements that he made during campaigning was: "If a village has a kabristan (Muslim graveyard), it should have a shamshan (crematorium). If there is uninterrupted electricity during Ramzan, it should be the same during Diwali." This was a reference to what the BJP perceived as the pro-Muslim bias of the incumbent government in UP.

But beyond campaign rhetoric, the way the BJP distributed election tickets was telling of the party strategy.

The BJP did not field a single Muslim candidate in a state where one person in every five is a Muslim, sending a clear message that it was capable of winning without Muslim support.

Second, while the UP victory was propelled by Mr Modi's popularity and charisma, the win was also made possible due to the BJP's strategy of stitching together a broad constituency of voters. This comprised both Hindu upper castes, who are the traditional supporters of the BJP, as well as lower castes who voted in large numbers for the party in 2014.

By appointing someone such as Mr Adityanath, who is a popular face of Hindu politics, and assisted by two deputies, one of whom is an upper caste Brahmin and the other from a backward caste, the BJP is intent on



(Front row, from left) Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Uttar Pradesh Governor Ram Naik and India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Yogi Adityanath greeting the crowd in Lucknow, India, on Sunday, before the swearing-in ceremony of Mr Adityanath as the new Chief Minister of India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh. PHOTO: REUTERS

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keeping its social base intact for the 2019 general election.

There is also speculation that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, which forms the ideological core of the BJP and provides its foot soldiers, might have pushed for Mr Adityanath as chief minister.

His appointment, however, represents a change in the BJP's strategy, since Mr Modi tends to prefer less visible faces as chief minister and those who would be more likely to do his bidding.

Third, and perhaps more importantly, Mr Modi and the BJP have been successful in pushing the mainstream of Indian politics towards the right and made Hindu nationalism and majoritarianism far more acceptable than it was earlier.

Mr Modi has achieved this by adroitly combining Hindutva (or Hinduness), the central plank of the Hindu nationalists, with a promise of development.

According to political scientist Suhanshu Palshikar, the "central space" in India has become more majoritarian.

Finally, Mr Modi has revelled in the role of a disrupter. This was apparent in the sudden move to withdraw 86 per cent of India's currency at the end of last year, which caused

immense hardship and did not achieve its professed goal of cleaning up illegal or black money.

Voters, however, seem to have been won over by the logic that Mr Modi was leading a crusade against the corrupt and their ill-gotten gains.

Similarly, Mr Modi has upended conventional logic by appointing a Hindutva icon as chief minister. While this might have upset some of Mr Modi's new-found followers, it serves to consolidate the BJP's core constituency. There were those who had believed that Mr Modi would play the Hindu nationalist card as and when his ratings dipped. But he has played it from a position of dominance. This is a gamble where the payoffs will be apparent only in the next two years.

Until now, acts of religious extremism and hate-mongering during Mr Modi's tenure were being dismissed as the work of marginal and extreme elements within the BJP and its allies. But the move to install Mr Adityanath signals, as political analyst Pratap Bhanu Mehta put it, that the BJP could now be "dominated by extremes".

At the very least, Mr Modi has demonstrated that the agenda of Hindu nationalism is as important to him as development.