CHENNAI, India — Prime Minister Narendra Modi has wielded near-total control over Indian ***politics*** since coming to power 10 years ago, with one exception: He has failed to win over the country’s wealthier southern region.

Five states across southern India account for roughly 20% of the country's population and 30% of its economy. They are the heartbeat of India's manufacturing and high-tech sectors. They are ethnically diverse and proudly multilingual. They empower women with educational and employment opportunities and have a long history of progressive ***politics***.

Not one of them is controlled by Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party — a stark rejection of its [*Hindu-nationalist agenda*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-narendra-modi-hindu-nationalism-rss-79c30c8ae750a9c037d86b9e2c1b640c) that enjoys wide support in northern India.

[*The BJP is expected to win*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-bjp-democracy-8998fe6aba5fa26debc0f82c4e2ccf69) India's election when results are announced in June, delivering Modi another five years as prime minister. But the odds are also high of strong resistance in the south. That would deny Modi his ambition of uniting all of India behind him and limit how far he can push the BJP agenda of promoting one religion and language over others.

“If you conceive of a Hindi-speaking, unified civilization as the reason you exist, then that becomes a significant barrier for you to cross,” data scientist and political analyst Neelakantan R.S. said.

Voters and leaders of India’s southern states have different needs than their counterparts in the north, which is more rural and populous. One thing they want is greater recognition from the Modi government of the key role their region plays in advancing the country’s economy.

They feel their outsized contribution to India’s tax base is betrayed by Modi’s preferential treatment for poorer northern states, which receive a disproportionate amount of government funds for development projects and social welfare programs.

Modi’s injection of religion into ***politics*** only exacerbates tensions with many southern voters.

Despite the strong opposition, Modi is campaigning aggressively in the south. His goal is for the BJP to win enough seats in the lower house of parliament to secure a two-thirds majority. That much power could embolden the party to try changing the constitution to serve its Hindu-centric goals, political analyst Kavitha Muralidharan said.

“A super majority is what they need to launch a full-scale, pan-India, Hindutva experiment,” Muralidharan said, referring to the century-old ideology guiding Modi.

**MODI'S SOUTHERN STRATEGY**

Modi has made some 20 trips this year to five southern states: Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. They control roughly a quarter of the 543 seats in the lower house of parliament — and if the BJP can win just a few more than the 29 seats it won from these states in 2019, its super majority is within reach.

But experts are skeptical this will happen because southern voters have deep connections to regional political parties that have dominated for decades and are the BJP's toughest electoral opponents nationwide.

Modi is heavily focused on the southernmost state, Tamil Nadu, where the BJP did not win any of its 39 seats up for grabs in the 2019 election.

On a recent visit there, Modi wore the region’s traditional white silk garment -- a veshti -- wrapped around his lower body, and he used artificial intelligence software to have his speeches translated in real-time from Hindi to Tamil.

“As the world’s oldest language, Tamil fills us with immense pride,” Modi said recently, making an apparent effort to tamp down rumors that the BJP wants to impose the Hindi language on the state.

Still, Dileep Kumar, a computer engineer in Bengaluru, said voters in Tamil Nadu are wary. “I can’t go and say to a Hindi guy, brother, please quit your Hindi and start talking in Tamil. That’s not going to work, will it?” he said.

One BJP candidate running for parliament in the state’s capital of Chennai believes the party has its best shot in years at gaining support.

“His frequent visits are helping us," Tamilisai Soundararajan said. "People here were electrified when they saw the prime minister.”

But the incumbent she's up against is doubtful. Hindu-centric ***politics*** won’t resonate in a place with a long history of social justice and equal rights movements, said Thamizhachi Thangapandian, a retired college professor who is a member of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party, the BJP's strongest rival in Tamil Nadu.

The beat of drums and firecrackers welcomed Thangapandian as she greeted voters recently riding an open-roofed tuk-tuk through Chennai’s alleyways. The achievements of her party blared through a set of speakers, including a reference to keeping out the “religion crazy” BJP.

Modi routinely mentions on the campaign trail the recent [*construction of a Hindu temple*](https://apnews.com/article/india-modi-temple-hindu-muslims-ayodhya-election-12102e8dd13a677b15d8760b4252aa7a) atop a razed mosque, but the issue doesn't animate voters in southern India like it does elsewhere.

Southern India is home to some of the country's most visited temples and has millions of Hindu devotees. What sets it apart, experts say, is that religion hasn't been weaponized for political gain.

“People are religious here,” said Muralidharan, the political analyst. “But it doesn’t convert into a frenzy.”

The BJP's religious zealotry makes leaders in the region nervous because of its potential to create a “disturbance to the peace” in a place with a global reputation as a good place to do business, said G Sundarrajan, a robotics entrepreneur in Chennai, where Hyundai and Foxconn (the maker of Apple iPhones) have located factories.

“Investors prefer Tamil Nadu precisely because its peaceful, has a large educated labor force and support from local government,” he said.

Modi tempers his Hindu-nationalist rhetoric while visiting the south, focusing his speeches instead on economics. For example, he has promised to build a high-speed rail line that would run through southern India and to help develop fisheries and auto manufacturing.

**TENSION OVER REDISTRIBUTING WEALTH**

The economy of southern India is more industrialized than the north, its cities are more urbanized, and its youth are more educated.

Southern Indian cities have also become a magnet for global technology companies seeking to diversify beyond China, [*including Apple*](https://apnews.com/article/technology-health-india-covid-apple-inc-3921c0959668994cfde3b679136461c3) and Google. The vast potential for India's economy, now the world's fifth-largest, is a point of pride for Modi.

But political leaders in southern India feel short-changed by Modi.

Tamil Nadu, India's second-wealthiest state, receives far less in return for every rupee in taxes it pays compared with poorer northern states like Uttar Pradesh or Bihar, which receive government investments equal to two or three times the amount they pay in taxes.

This tension over the redistribution of wealth from south to north existed long before Modi came to power. But the BJP has made it worse.

Southern leaders believe Modi’s priorities lie in the north, where he derives the bulk of his support. They worry that the BJP government will snatch away even more decision-making power from states if their majority grows, said Muralidharan.

Southern leaders have protested against the Modi government for holding up development funding, for misusing federal agencies to target political opponents in the region, and for not sending enough emergency relief after natural disasters.

And they believe their fight against the BJP and Modi is existential.

“In southern India, the threat of being reduced to a vassal state is a serious problem,” said Neelakantan, the political analyst.