Who is Narendra Modi? India’s controversial Prime Minister may offer a role model for Donald Trump

Riding high on unprecedented polling numbers and rapid economic growth, India’s controversial Prime Minister Narendra Modi will give the keynote address at the opening session of the 48th annual World Economic Forum (WEF) this Tuesday. The WEF is the annual meeting of the world’s great, good, or just plain rich held every January in Davos, Switzerland.

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, is the star attraction. His American counterpart Donald Trump may or may not make it to Davos, due to the U.S. government shutdown. If he does go, the Swiss locals may not make him feel very welcome, even if the WEF grandees can’t very well turn him down. Modi, by contrast, is very much the man of the moment.

International relations weren’t always so smooth for Modi, who in 2005 as Chief Minister of India’s Gujarat state had his U.S. visa revoked and was denied permission to enter the country. The reason? He was allegedly implicated in fomenting (or at least failing to contain and condemn) inter-ethnic riots in 2002 that resulted in more than 1000 deaths. Think of it as “India’s Charlottesville,” only much, much worse.

In 2014, Modi was elected India’s Prime Minister with just over half the seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India’s parliament), but less than one-third of the popular vote. India’s first Twitter Prime Minister is widely reviled among the country’s bickering intellectual elite. Modi, who rose from humble origins as a grocer’s son, has been ridiculed as an uneducated chaiwala (tea seller), a label he has since embraced with pride.
Political pundits dismissed him as a knee-jerk populist who came to power by making simplistic promises of national revival. Modi stands accused of dog-whistle politics, endangering the nearly 40% of India’s population that belongs to religious, ethnic or regional minorities. He is regularly condemned as dangerous, a strongman, and a dictator by Indian and Western elites.

And he is a huge success, both economically and politically. The economy is booming, and Narendra Modi is the most popular Indian leader since Mahatma Gandhi, both inside and outside the country. Now a little more than midway through his five-year term, his job approval rating stands at 88%. If he really has oppressed 40% of the population, they must not be aware of it.

Modi has also burnished his image in the West. British Prime Minister Theresa May has high hopes of a post-Brexit trade deal between India and the UK, where Modi is wildly popular among people of Indian heritage. Modi is also a frequent guest in the rest of the European Union, which is seeking to revive talks for an EU-India free trade agreement, the Broad-based Trade and Investment Agreement (BTIA). Modi has also received the rock star treatment in Israel, where Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally shepherded his three-day tour of the country.

In the U.S., the State Department’s reservations about granting Modi a visa have long since been quashed. In June, 2016 Modi traveled to Washington to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress, where he received nine standing ovations in less than one hour. He returned in June, 2017 to visit the White House, where he hugged Donald Trump in the Rose Garden three times.

Modi has accomplished this amazing about-face in Indian and international opinion through good economic governance and pure hard work. His tough (and sometimes unpopular) economic reforms have put India on track to be the world’s fastest-growing major economy in 2018. And from the beginning he has portrayed himself as a leader who is always on the job working to “make India great again.”

The unlikely story of Narendra Modi’s rise to national and international favor shows that it is possible for a once-divisive figure to become one of the world’s most popular politicians. Like Modi, Trump is enjoying an
economic boom, one that is likely to be prolonged by the fiscal stimulus provided by the 2018 tax reform. But Trump doesn’t seem to share Modi’s reputation for grueling days at the office. If Trump wants to win big in this year’s midterm elections, he might just look to Modi for advice — and inspiration.

*Salvatore Babones*

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