

INDIA POLICY
COMMENTARY

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By Adam Ziegfeld
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Following the end of the Cold War, a shared commitment to democracy has lain at the heart of increasingly warm Indo-U.S. relations. Of late, however, many have questioned the depth of India's commitment to the democratic project. For instance, in 2021, the international NGO Freedom House downgraded India from "Free" to "Partly Free." Over the past several years, two narratives about Indian democracy have emerged in many academic and journalistic circles. Both narratives contain important elements of truth, but both also potentially understate the resilience of democracy in India.

An Unstoppable BJP?

The first narrative is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — which currently governs India and has overseen India's dramatic fall in global democracy indicators since 2014 — is an unstoppable electoral juggernaut. Undoubtedly, the BJP is India's ascendant political force, far more popular than it ever has been, far more popular than its main rival (Congress), and likely to retain power after the next parliamentary election.

However, this narrative overstates the BJP's invincibility in two important ways. First, the BJP's popularity remains, in absolute terms, fairly modest. Its 2019 "landslide" garnered it only 37% of the popular vote (dozens of small regional parties combined to win about 40% of the vote). Because India elects members of its parliament using first-past-the-post electoral rules, legislative seats are not necessarily distributed in proportion to a party's votes. For example, in the country's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, the BJP won about 50% of the vote in the 2019 parliamentary election but almost 80% of the seats. India's fragmented party system, in which the races for many seats feature multiple competitive parties, also matters. So long as it faces a divided opposition, the largest party can often win huge numbers of legislative seats on relatively unimpressive vote shares. Thus, the BJP's success in winning national-level power is as much a function of the electoral system and the party system as it is of the BJP's appeal among voters.

Second, recent events suggest that further expansion of the BJP's support may be difficult. The party's growth in the mid-2010s ensured that it has repeatedly won handsomely in its stronghold states. But these convincing victories, in which the party wins nearly every seat up for grabs, leave little room to increase its seat tally in those places. In some states where it was previously marginal, the party has made meaningful inroads (Odisha, West Bengal), suggesting that continued expansion is possible. But such growth is hardly inevitable, as evidenced by the BJP's persistently poor showings in a number of states, largely in the south. Unless the BJP can break into states where it has never enjoyed much support, there is a real limit on just how popular the party can become.

An Authoritarian India?

The second common narrative is that India has become, for all intents and purposes, a nondemocratic regime. What this narrative gets right is that India has moved away from the ideal of a “liberal democracy” in which citizens enjoy a range of rights and freedoms thought to sustain a free and fair electoral marketplace. Scholars and journalists alike have documented the increasing politicization of the judiciary, government attempts to quash dissent in the media and civil society, and the state’s apparent indifference to the rights and safety of religious minorities. The government’s pursuit of a majoritarian agenda — one in which the preferences of the (Hindu) majority rule, while the rights and freedoms of dissenters of all kinds enjoy diminished protection — has arguably left the country’s Muslim minority feeling more beleaguered than ever. Moreover, these developments have unfolded with startling speed.

And, yet, elections remain truly competitive. The country’s most popular opposition parties and candidates are not barred from competing on technicalities or because of politicized criminal prosecutions (as in Vladimir Putin’s Russia). Where opposition parties are active and highly organized, they have continued to win elections. The BJP’s record in state elections since its 2019 victory at the national level has been profoundly unimpressive. In several states, the party either lost power to united opposition fronts (as in Jharkhand or in Maharashtra where the coalition that ousted the BJP from power collapsed, paving the way for the BJP to return to power, albeit as a junior coalition partner). Or the BJP retained power with diminished seat shares (Haryana, Uttar Pradesh). In states where the BJP hoped to dislodge powerful regional parties, it did not (Delhi, Odisha, West Bengal), and its attempts to break into other states where it has hitherto been marginal have failed completely (Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu).

If democracy is, as a prominent political scientist [once put it](#), “a system in which parties lose elections,” then the years since 2019 would suggest that India’s democracy remains robust, even if of an increasingly illiberal ilk. Indeed, India embodies what Iza Ding and Dan Slater [refer to](#) as “democratic decoupling” — the decoupling of free and fair elections from the rights and freedoms normally associated with democracy. Whereas once countries tended to have either both features or neither, more and more resemble India, where one element (free and fair elections) exists — surprisingly and perhaps uncomfortably — without the other (the full suite of democratic rights).

Where Next?

The twin narratives of the BJP’s unstoppable alongside a view of India as already authoritarian paint a particularly grim picture of India’s democratic future. For the optimist, those narratives miss important facts. Elections are vigorously contested. The BJP is ascendant but far from invulnerable and loses far more often than it would like. These state-level losses point not only to the limits of the party’s electoral appeal but also to the party’s continued willingness to abide by the results of democratic elections. Importantly, too, India has come back from the edge before. The country’s truest descent into authoritarianism came in the 1970s under the BJP’s current rival, Congress. That period did not last.

Of course, placing a boundless faith in democracy’s forward march is also naïve. After all, mass publics are not always particularly effective bulwarks against democratic erosion. Though public opinion surveys in India (and many other countries) reveal widespread support for the abstract idea of democracy, support for alternatives to democracy, such as strong-man or technocratic rule, also remains [fairly strong](#). Meanwhile, mass opposition to the government’s more controversial decisions has been limited (though protests surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act remain a notable exception). Popular opposition to the Modi government has

arguably been most sustained and effective in response to proposed changes to agricultural policy — not in response to democratic backsliding.

Looking forward, the BJP may well expand its electoral footprint across India and use that expanded support as a justification to materially reduce the competitiveness of future elections and durably entrench a political system that is neither liberal nor democratic. The risk that the government's waning commitment to democratic rights and freedoms will eventually undermine genuine electoral competition is a real one, but India is not there quite yet.

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