PROJECT MUSE®

Modi Consolidates Power: Electoral Vibrancy, Mounting Liberal Deficits
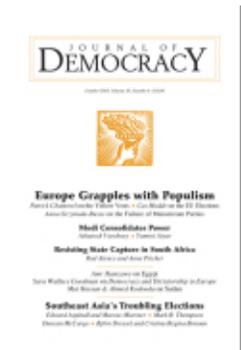
Ashutosh Varshney

➡ *For additional information about this article*
    https://muse.jhu.edu/article/735459

ELECTORAL VIBRANCY, MOUNTING LIBERAL DEFICITS

Ashutosh Varshney

***Ashutosh Varshney** is professor of political science and Sol Goldman Professor of International Studies and the Social Sciences as well as director of the Center for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University. His books include* Battles Half Won: India's Improbable Democracy *(2013).*

In 2014, when Narendra Modi first led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power, he achieved a unique political distinction. With the exception of 1977, when the Janata Party swept the elections following Indira Gandhi's state of emergency, no political party other than the Indian National Congress (Congress hereafter) had won a parliamentary election on its own.[1] In India's latest general election, held in April and May 2019, the Modi-led BJP passed yet another milestone by becoming the first party other than Congress to return to power with a majority in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, the directly elected lower house of Parliament. Moreover, Modi is the first prime minister since Indira Gandhi in 1971 to be reelected with a larger majority.

Modi and the BJP have thus scaled new political heights. The BJP has become India's most powerful political party, replacing Congress, the party most commonly associated with Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, which had thoroughly dominated Indian national politics for the forty years after independence in 1947, and most recently headed coalition governments from 2004 to 2014. Modi himself stands as India's most dominant political figure since Indira Gandhi, who died in 1984.

Following the 2014 election, I argued in these pages that the BJP, once in power, would not find it easy to remain ideologically pure and implement its Hindu-nationalist vision. Instead, it would come up against electoral and constitutional realities of the sort that have long tended to moderate the behavior of ruling parties. These constraints push ruling parties, regardless of their ideological orientation, toward the center.[2] Can that argument still be made? And if not, what kinds of twists and turns may be in store for Indian politics? These are perhaps

the most significant political questions for the future of the world's largest democracy.

The Scale of BJP Victory

No analyst predicted that the BJP would win a majority in its own right. Instead, prognosticators forecast that the BJP would lose seats, though most believed as well that this reduced BJP would remain in power with the aid of a coalition. Only on May 19—the last day of polling in a multistage election that had begun back in April—did the expectation of a solo BJP majority start forming. That was the day the exit polls came out. On May 24, when the official results were announced, the exit polls turned out to be right.

Analysts had predicted a decline in BJP-held seats for two main reasons. First, the economy had not done as well as expected. The agricultural sector was in distress and the general unemployment rate was the highest that it had been in four decades. Three important state elections only a few months earlier had seen incumbent BJP governments lose, ostensibly because of economic concerns.

Second, in 2014 the BJP appeared to have peaked in its two regional strongholds—the North and the West.[3] In those areas it looked as if the party had nowhere to go but down in 2019, while its gains in the South and East were not expected to make up the losses.

As it turned out, however, the BJP overperformed. It won 303 seats, adding 21 seats to its 2014 total and surpassing the 273 seats needed to form a majority. The BJP's coalition, meanwhile, expanded from 338 to 352 seats, or nearly two-thirds of the total elected seats (543) in the lower house. This will make the passing of laws much easier and will raise the possibility of constitutional amendments as well.[4] Congress went from 44 to 52 seats. In terms of vote share, meanwhile, the BJP's rose six percentage points to 37.4 percent, while Congress's share of the more than 600 million votes cast in this, the largest election ever held, went up only slightly to 19.5 percent.

In first-past-the-post (FPTP) parliamentary systems such as India's, there is often a gap between the vote and seat shares. The BJP's 37.4 percent vote share gave it 55.8 percent of the Lok Sabha's 543 elected seats, while Congress's 19.5 percent vote share left it with only 9.6 percent of seats. The remaining parties, most of which are regional in focus and appeal, drew a smaller total vote share and found themselves, as a group, controlling fewer seats than they had after the 2014 election.

Regionally, the BJP held its Northern and Western citadels and made gains in the East. In 2014, of the Hindi-speaking North's 225 seats, the BJP had won 187. In 2019, it won 179. In the West, which includes the city of Mumbai, the nation's business capital, and the state of Gujarat, Modi's home base, the BJP and an allied party had won 71 of the

76 seats in 2014, with a large chunk going to the latter. The two won roughly the same number of seats in the West again.

The BJP's biggest gains came in the East, where its presence had previously been thin. This swath of the country (which includes what is officially called the North East Region, lying mostly east of Bangladesh) has a total of 88 seats. In 2014, the BJP had won a mere eleven of these. In 2019, that figure soared to forty. The South with its 130 seats remains the only region where the BJP is not dominant, having won just 29 seats in 2019. All but four of these, moreover, are in a single state (Karnataka). Elsewhere in the region, the BJP remains nearly absent.[5] Finally, the BJP won more than half the popular vote in thirteen of the 36 states and union territories,[6] a feat not seen since the days of Congress dominance.

What does the 2019 vote look like when we shift from a regional to an economic focus? The economic disaggregation of the Indian vote is typically presented in terms of sector (urban, semi-urban, or rural) and class.[7] Here, the most important inference is that the BJP's relative vote gain was highest in the countryside and among the poor. As Table 1 below shows, compared to 2014, the BJP's vote share went up about two and three percentage points in urban and semi-urban seats, respectively—increases far exceeded, in proportional terms, by the more than seven points that the party added to its vote share in rural constituencies, where it went from 30.3 to 37.6 percent.

Likewise, the BJP's vote share rose among all classes, but went up most steeply among the poor. About a third (32 percent) of middle-class voters gave the party their votes in 2014, while 38 percent did so in 2019. Among the rich, those figures were 38 and 44 percent, respectively. Poor voters, however, gave the BJP less than a quarter of their votes (24 percent) in 2014 but more than a third (36 percent) five years later—a whopping twelve-point increase.

These BJP gains among the poor and rural dwellers contrasted dramatically with preelection surveys suggesting that joblessness and agrarian distress were the economic issues most deeply troubling the electorate. Some of the Modi government's signature programs, such as the building of millions of toilets through the Swachh Bharat (Clean India) program and the provision of cooking-gas connections to replace unhealthy coal-fired hearths, did benefit the countryside as well as the poor. Yet both programs suffered from delivery flaws.[8] Many citizens appear to have voted against their economic interests because of an overriding confidence in Modi's all-around leadership, or because issues they especially trusted him to handle (such as national security) gained in salience thanks to events that transpired just before, or during, the campaign.

Another important disaggregation breaks the vote down along social lines, especially caste and religion. Compared to 2014, the BJP increased its vote share among all social categories save one (Table 1). Upper-caste

TABLE 1—THE BJP VOTE, 2014 VERSUS 2019

Category	2014	2019
Caste and Religion		
Upper Castes	54%	61%
Other Backward Castes	34%	44%
Dalits	24%	33%
Adivasis	38%	44%
Muslims	8%	8%
Class		
Poor	24%	36%
Middle Class	32%	38%
Rich	38%	44%
Sector		
Rural	30%	38%
Semi-Urban	30%	33%
Urban	39%	41%

Source: Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy 2019 postelection survey. Figures rounded.

Hindus gave 61 percent of their votes to the BJP in 2019, an increase of seven percentage points since 2014. The BJP's vote share also increased among the so-called Other Backward Castes (from 34 to 44 percent), Dalits (from 24 to 33 percent), and Adivasis (tribals—from 38 to 44 percent). Only among Muslims did the BJP's appeal stagnate: In 2014 and 2019 alike, the party drew the support of about 8 percent of Muslim voters.

Table 2 presents the breakdown differently. It focuses only on 2019. It not only reports the BJP's latest figures in all these categories (and more), but also shows Congress's vote share among these groups. The key finding is that Muslims form the only large community (14 percent of India) that gave more votes nationwide to Congress than to the BJP. The Sikhs, another religious minority, did the same, but their share of the population is less than 2 percent.

Together, the 2014 and 2019 results reveal a very substantial consolidation of Hindus (who compose about four-fifths of the populace) behind the BJP. This consolidation is a historic novelty. Traditionally, Congress's winning coalition was interreligious. It brought together upper-caste Hindus, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other minorities. The BJP's social coalition today reflects the lead it enjoys over Congress in all categories of Hindu castes, not simply the upper and middle ones, but also Dalits and Adivasis, the groups traditionally at the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy. Congress, meanwhile, maintains an edge only among India's non-Hindu minorities. This signals a kind of religious polarization that India has not witnessed since independence.

Modi's 2019 campaign was remarkably different from the one that he ran in 2014. That year, the main themes were economic development, good governance, and an attack on Congress and its Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Of these, only the last survived as a major theme in 2019. Instead, Modi seamlessly and repeatedly wove together two rhetorical tropes: na-

TABLE 2—VOTE SHARES FOR THE BJP AND CONGRESS, 2019

Category	BJP	Congress
Caste and Religion		
Upper Castes	61%	12%
Other Backward Castes	44%	15%
Dalits	33%	20%
Adivasis	44%	31%
Muslims	8%	33%
Class		
Poor	36%	17%
Middle Class	38%	21%
Rich	44%	20%
Sector		
Rural	38%	18%
Semi-Urban	33%	22%
Urban	41%	21%
Gender		
Male	39%	19%
Female	36%	20%
Age Cohort		
18–25 years	41%	19%
26–35 years	39%	19%
36–45 years	37%	20%
46–55 years	37%	20%
56+ years	35%	19%

Source: Lokniti Programme for Comparative Democracy 2019 postelection survey. Figures rounded.

tional security and Hindu nationalism. In addition, he stressed his personal charisma, resolve, and incorruptibility. Feeling vulnerable on issues of economic development, he left his welfare schemes on the campaign's margin.

The data on what might be called Modi's "personal vote" are striking. Nearly a third (32 percent) of BJP voters said that had he not been the BJP's candidate for prime minister, they would have voted for another party. In 2014, this figure was roughly 25 percent. Modi's growing popularity has brought him a higher level of adulation than any national leader since Indira Gandhi.

That Modi's popularity might matter electorally was expected, though no one could be sure how much difference it would make. What was electorally novel was the role of national security. Never before had it figured so prominently in a campaign. Here, politics followed events: On February 14 in the region of Kashmir, which Pakistan also claims, a suicide car-bomb attack on an Indian security convoy killed forty paramilitary troopers. Jaish-e-Mohammed, a Pakistan-based terrorist group, claimed the attack. On February 26, Modi sent Indian Air Force jets to attack Jaish's training camps inside Pakistani territory.

Although the Indian government's claim that it had destroyed the camps and killed scores of Islamic militants could not be independently

corroborated, that hardly mattered. The very act of ordering warplanes against Pakistani targets for the first time since the December 1971 Indo-Pakistani War was itself momentous. Since the 1990s, India had suffered several terrorist attacks that had been reliably linked to terror-group supporters inside Pakistan, yet before February 2019 India had never hit back militarily. Wagering that such retaliation would yield electoral dividends, Modi used his military boldness as a campaign theme. It appears that his bet was correct. Of those voters who heard about Modi ordering strikes, 40 percent voted for the BJP, whereas only 29 percent of those who were unaware of the strikes did so.

Why did national security play this role in 2019, as it had not earlier? The answer suggests a great deal about the changing character of Indian politics. Historically, national security has been a topic of elite debate, but it has not moved the masses. The urban middle classes might follow matters of war, peace, and terrorism in the media, but mass politics was about religion and caste on the one hand, and prices and poverty on the other. India's countryside, where 82 percent of all Indians lived at the time of the first elections in 1952 and where 65 percent of the nation still resides, is the largest arena of mass politics. National security has never been a rural preoccupation.

Today, the middle class, larger than ever, forms at least a third of India's population. An estimated 41 percent of Indians are online. Earlier attacks made little impression on rural voters, but not so the current national-security discourse. Also different was the timing of the Kashmir suicide attack—it was the first time a major national-security incident had come so close to a general election.[9]

The militant attack gave Modi the chance to weave Hindu nationalism into the campaign in various ways. One was candidate choice. Pragya Thakur—a Hindu *sannyasin* (religious ascetic) indicted though not yet convicted for a 2008 terror attack that killed ten Muslims, and an open admirer of the Hindu nationalist who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948—was made the BJP candidate for the important seat representing Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.[10] She defeated one of Congress's best-known minority-rights defenders by a wide margin, and now sits in the Lok Sabha.

Then there was campaign rhetoric directly and openly targeting Muslims. Amit Shah, the BJP's party president, compared Muslim migrants from Bangladesh to "termites" and said that the BJP government would throw out all immigrants except those who were Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or Jain. Modi, too, used anti-Muslim tropes. He jibed that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had chosen a new constituency in which to run (Wayanad, Kerala) because the non-Hindu minorities, constituting a majority there, would give him an easy win. Modi's drawing of a sharp distinction between Wayanad's Hindus and its Muslims and Christians implied that the minorities, as citizens and voters, were not equal to the

Hindus. Finally, though India is 14 percent Muslim, there is not a single Muslim in the BJP's Lok Sabha contingent.[11]

It should be noted that none of this was explicitly presented as Hindu nationalism *per se*. Rather, it was portrayed as nationalism without any prefixes. The attempted fusion of Indian nationalism and Hindu nationalism is intellectually and politically significant. The nationalism that drove the anticolonial independence movement and shaped the 1950 Constitution explicitly recognized all of India's communities, including its diverse religious groups, as equal owners of the nation. It did so by conceptualizing citizens' rights as individual rights, and by enshrining in the constitution provisions that give minorities special rights in the areas of cultural preservation and educational enhancement. The assumption was that the majority, due to its numerical weight, would need no special safeguards, while the heavily outnumbered minorities would. This idea of the nation, championed by freedom fighters, was called secular or composite nationalism. The Congress party represented this idea in politics.

Muslim nationalists who argued in the 1940s that Muslims and Hindus were separate nations and led the movement for Pakistan as a Muslim homeland, as well as Hindu nationalists who have always viewed India as a Hindu nation with non-Hindu minorities as second-class citizens, were the biggest ideological adversaries of composite nationalism in the twentieth century—in their own eyes as well as those of nonpartisan observers. With the formation of Pakistan in 1947, Muslim nationalism migrated to the newly created country and ceased to be a force in Indian politics.

Hindu nationalism remained a political stream in India after 1947, though it was not a powerful force for several decades. The sight, earlier this year, of Hindu nationalists fusing the terms Hindu and Indian, casting themselves as the true Indian nationalists, and running for office on that basis shows how much Indian politics has changed under BJP dominance. During the first four decades after independence, no attempt to equate being an Indian with being a Hindu would have taken hold. The equation began to gain traction in the late 1980s. Under Modi, it has moved to the center of the political stage.

Electoral Triumph, at a Price

India's electoral vibrancy continues to be striking. The 2019 parliamentary election was India's seventeenth. Since independence, there have also been 372 state elections. And since 1992, when a constitutional amendment formalized a system of local self-governance, village, district, and municipal elections have taken place regularly. Power has changed hands eight times in Delhi and so many times in state capitals that political scientists have virtually stopped counting the state-level turnovers.

FIGURE—ELECTORAL AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY INDICES FOR INDIA
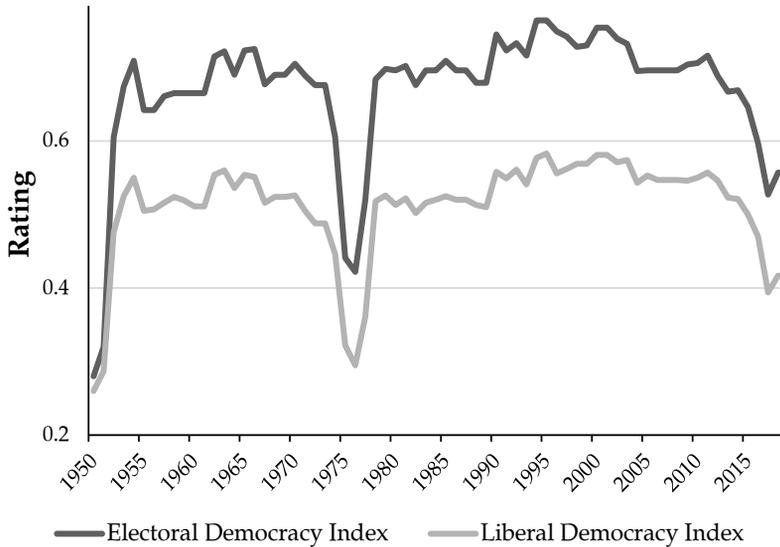
Source: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Database, *https://www.v-dem.net/en*.

Notes: V-Dem's Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) is a measure of the existence of all seven institutions in Robert Dahl's famous articulation of "polyarchy" as electoral democracy.

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) captures the liberal and electoral principles of democracy. Each principle constitutes half the Liberal Democracy Index score.

In 2019, the electorate numbered almost 900 million people, up from 173 million in the first elections in 1952. Turnout, at 67.2 percent, was also the highest ever, exceeding the previous record of 66.5 percent reached in 2014. Both of Modi's victories have thus been achieved with record turnouts. The 2019 voting required close to a million polling booths—one booth for each eight- or nine-hundred voters. (No registered voter is supposed to be more than two kilometers away from a booth.) About twelve-million federal and state employees were involved in conducting the electoral process.[12]

As the turnout records suggest, Indian elections have become civic festivals.[13] Female turnout now more or less equals male turnout. And in defiance of standard observations in political science, lower-caste, rural, and poorer voters are more rather than less likely to vote. The plebeian thrust of voting over the last several decades has come to be widely recognized by scholars.[14]

The mounting turnouts under Modi, the 69-year-old son of a railway-station tea vendor, suggest how much his rise has enthused voters. The BJP also commanded far greater resources than any other party, showing its popularity with corporate donors. Among the masses and the economic elites alike, Modi currently has no rival.

This great electoral triumph, however, has come at a price. The rise

of Modi and the BJP is reorienting the Indian polity in profound ways. The electoral health of India's democracy may impress, but its liberal dimensions are in steep decline. Injuries to the constitutionally anchored minority rights and to the liberal freedoms of expression, association, and religious practice are matters of real concern. So are threats to the constitutionally prescribed institutional checks and balances, especially judicial independence. [15] The contradiction between electoral vitality and the distressing state of constitutional liberalism is becoming all too clear.

Of course, the gap between the electoral and liberal democratic dimensions has always been present in India. Based on the V-Dem dataset, the Figure above depicts this historical gap from 1950 to 2016. In 2018, as the Modi government's political inclinations became unmistakably clear, the V-Dem annual report said that "infringements" of freedom had "started to undermine" Indian democracy even as "core electoral aspects of democracy [did] not show significant decline."[16] The latest V-Dem report, published in 2019, categorizes India as a democracy that, along with the United States and Brazil, is going through a period of "autocratization."[17]

At election time, India is remarkably free. Speech inciting violence is banned, but almost anything else can be said. There is a rule against seeking votes on religious grounds, but enforcement is weak and punishment light: At most a candidate will be barred from speaking for a few days, while ground-level campaigning—however religiously oriented—goes on and is virtually impossible to regulate. The freedom to campaign is beyond doubt.

But once the weeks of voting are done and a government takes charge, all kinds of restrictions are placed on civil liberties. Intellectuals, artists, students, and NGOs are favorite targets. The First Amendment to the Indian constitution allows citizens' freedoms to be limited on grounds of national security, public order and morality, and foreign relations. How the government of the day interprets these grounds determines which activities are, in practice, repressed.

The Modi government's interpretation of these restrictions shows its growing illiberalism. Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency and suspension of democracy in 1975–77 remains the biggest illiberal episode to date, but the voters rejected her actions at the polls in 1977. The Modi government's illiberal practices—best understood as democratic deficits rather than as a wholesale suspension of democracy, which the Emergency was—have *not* been so rejected. Indeed, Modi's enhanced mandate might lead to a further weakening of liberties. The temptation to view the electoral verdict as allowing greater curtailments of freedom is considerable.

One of the new Modi government's first legislative acts was to seek an amendment of the law relating to terrorism. By early August, this amendment passed both houses of Parliament. Unless the courts rule the change unconstitutional, the amended law will give the government power to

designate individuals as terrorists, to list such designations in the government's public gazettes, and to keep the designations in the gazettes for months before judicial appeal against the terrorist label is permitted.[18] Checks on executive power weakened during Modi's first term. With Modi's mandate now even larger, these checks are unlikely to regain strength.

Another dramatic legislative development, approved by both houses of Parliament in early August, is the effective scrapping of Article 370 of India's constitution. This article preserved the special status of (Jammu and) Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, and granted it considerable autonomy vis-à-vis Delhi. Indeed, such autonomy was the prior condition for Kashmir joining India, instead of Pakistan, soon after partition in 1947. Calling Article 370 an act of "minority appeasement," the BJP has long been committed to its abrogation. Once the BJP returned to power in May with a larger majority, the revocation of Article 370 was expected—sooner or later. But the manner in which it was scrapped was entirely unexpected.

From a procedural perspective, two developments in particular were galling. First, the entire state was locked down, with a curfew imposed and leaders of the Kashmir Valley (home to most of the Muslim population) preemptively arrested. In effect, India's BJP-led Parliament ended the special status of Kashmir without consulting the state's elected representatives. Second, Kashmir was also demoted from a state to a union territory, which means that it will be ruled directly from Delhi and will not have its rights as a state of the federation. As of this writing in early September, the Kashmir Valley lockdown remains in force and most of the elected leaders remain in jail. Reminiscent of Indira Gandhi's 1975–77 suspension of democracy nationwide, it is a Kashmir-level emergency. Those most vitally affected by Delhi's decision have been coerced into silence.

Curtailing Speech, Undermining the Courts

Since 2014, Modi's government has repeatedly undermined free expression and judicial independence. Before him, admittedly, such attempts were not unknown: In the 1980s, a Congress government banned Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* for hurting Muslim sentiments and jeopardizing public order. Congress held power from 2004 to 2014, but did nothing to shield M.F. Husain, India's most famous painter of recent decades, from Hindu nationalists' vociferous complaints about his semi-nude paintings of Hindu deities. Fearing for his life, he left the country in 2006 and died in London in 2011.

What has happened under Modi, however, is more severe. It has gone beyond BJP state governments jailing dissidents (again, a practice not unheard of earlier, but now covering Kashmir's political leaders as well), and has extended to vigilante groups murdering journalists and writers, with no forthright condemnation from the Modi government.

The wholesale return by artists and writers of state-bestowed honors and awards has shown how deeply the threat is felt. When it comes to intellectual and artistic freedoms, India is going through its worst time since the 1975–77 Emergency.

Another aspect of growing regime ruthlessness is the BJP's rhetoric about "antinationalism." Labeling critics "antinational"—the term is embraced at the highest level—has allowed the use of India's draconian sedition laws against them. Media freedom in general has also declined. The normally contentious press has backed away from its watchdog role and become increasingly submissive toward the government. Only a few newspapers, television channels, and online outlets have maintained their independence.

Again, a comparison with the Emergency is instructive. The Emergency allowed no press freedom at all. Modi has curtailed freedom, but not crushed it. In the mid-1970s, opposition politicians went to jail; under Modi, they have spoken freely, except in Kashmir. But dissenting citizens, as opposed to politicians, have on the whole witnessed a perceptible decline in freedom since 2014. Modi judged that the larger electorate would not care about freedoms that mattered mostly to liberals and dissenters. The 2019 elections show that he was right, which makes the state of civil freedoms even more fragile.

Even more important than the assault on the press is the political pressure applied to the judiciary. Media outlets can unearth and broadcast scandals, but lack the power to send anyone to jail or overturn government decisions. The courts can do both. In a constitutional polity, the judiciary is the final arbiter of the constitution. Moreover, in a parliamentary democracy, where the legislature is not as strong compared to the executive as in a presidential democracy, the judicial branch is also the biggest check on executive power. Judicial review is an integral part of India's constitution.

Modi vows loyalty to the constitution, but his government's relations with the judiciary are fraught. Normally clouded in confidentiality, these broke into the open in early 2018. In January, four senior Supreme Court judges held a press conference to protest executive interference in the functioning of the judiciary. Two months later, a letter to the chief justice that one of them, Justice Jasti Chelameswar, had written became public. In it, he criticized any tendency to cede "our independence and our institutional integrity to the Executive's incremental encroachment" and warned that "bonhomie between the Judiciary and the Government in any State sounds the death knell to Democracy."[19]

Leaving aside the Emergency, India's judiciary has a record of keeping its distance from the executive. Indira Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, towered over Indian politics as prime minister from 1947 to 1964, but the courts retained their independence. At one point, the Supreme Court overturned Nehru-era land-reform legislation—the linchpin of Nehruvian economic policy—on the ground that the law

interfered with the constitutionally guaranteed right to property. There may have been moments even apart from the Emergency when the executive pressed the judiciary hard, but until 2018 judges never complained publicly. That they have now done so gives reason to think that they see the Modi government's pressure as especially threatening to judicial independence.

The Besieged Muslims

Writing in these pages following Modi's 2014 victory, I argued that while a right-wing turn could not be ruled out, India's obdurate political realities were likelier to drive Modi toward moderation. My reasoning was that the anti-Muslim ideological imperative of Hindu nationalism would run up against two other well-known imperatives. The first is the electoral imperative, which normally requires coalition-building and promotes pragmatism over ideological purity. The second is the constitutional imperative, which requires officeholders to take an oath to the constitution, with its principle that India as a nation belongs equally to all religious communities, without special political, legal, or cultural privileges for the Hindu majority.

The record of Modi's first term makes it clear that the rightward shift I viewed as a low-probability outcome has actually taken place. While it would be premature to say that the Republic of India is fated to leave secularism behind and become a Hindu state, the 2019 election and the scrapping of Article 370 show that the political center of gravity has shifted toward Hindu majoritarianism. The BJP's rhetoric, its choice of candidates, the forces it has privileged, and its first actions since returning to power all point to this. The electoral reality of unprecedented Hindu consolidation is coming into line with the ideological imperatives of the BJP. Whether the third, constitutional imperative of secularism can stand in the way of the Hindu-nationalist project will be determined by how the judiciary interprets its task in the coming years.

In any event, even without open challenges to the constitution it is likely that Hindu nationalism will increasingly inform everyday official practices, especially those of police officers and bureaucrats in states with BJP governments. In India, law and order are mostly matters for the states. The street-level bureaucracy in BJP-ruled states is very likely to acquire an increasingly Hindu coloration. The sense of insecurity that Muslims feel is only likely to deepen.

Central to the Hindu-nationalist project is the question of the respective standings—cultural, political, and constitutional—of the Hindu majority and the largest minority, the 180 million or so Muslims. Since its birth in the 1920s, Hindu nationalism has harbored deep-seated doubts about whether Muslims are loyal to India and deserving of equality with Hindus. Because Muslims look to a holy land outside India, Hindu national-

ists have historically claimed, they cannot be as loyal as the Hindus (for whom India is the holy land) and should therefore not have equal status. In short, Hindu nationalists believe that India is a Hindu nation. Non-Hindu minorities, and especially Muslims, must accept Hindu primacy.[20]

Since independence, riots have been the principal form of Hindu-Muslim violence. Under the first Modi government, however, a new form of communal violence raised its head. This was lynching—targeted murders by Hindu vigilantes of minorities (most often Muslims) accused of putative offenses such as dealing in cattle or possessing or eating beef.[21] This was completely unanticipated by scholars of Hindu-Muslim relations.[22] The data show a spike in lynchings after Modi's 2014 win, with Muslims as the main targets.[23] Since the 2019 results came in, lynchings have continued.

Prime Minister Modi either remains silent on these deaths or offers delayed and perfunctory words of condemnation. His deeds have spoken louder than his words: In March 2017, he named Yogi Adityanath chief minister of Uttar Pradesh—India's largest state, with a population the size of Brazil's. Though a BJP member, Adityanath was also, critically, the head of a large Hindu-vigilante organization well known for its anti-Muslim mob campaigns and statements. Of late, BJP politicians have sought to compare anti-Muslim lynchings with anti-BJP violence in states where the BJP used to be a small political force, such as West Bengal and Kerala. Such analytical equivalence ignores the fact that anti-Muslim lynchings predominantly target individual civilians, whereas most anti-BJP violence comes as part of clashes between rival political organizations with considerable histories of strife. This attempt to claim an equivalence between violent organizational battles and lynchings is analytically imprecise but politically revealing.

The ostensible aim of lynchings is to prevent three things: the trade in cattle and the consumption of beef (on the argument that cows are sacred to Hindus); Hindu conversions to Islam (on the argument that such conversions are always prompted by coercion, deceit, or material temptation); and attempts by young Muslim men to court or marry Hindu women (on the argument that such attempts are aimed at swelling Muslim ranks till they outstrip the Hindu population).

It is, however, hard to escape the impression that the basic aim of lynchings is the building of a political order that establishes Hindu primacy and reduces Muslims to second-class citizens. That is why vigilante groups not only catch "suspected" Muslims and perpetrate group violence against them, but also force them to chant religious Hindu slogans, such as "Jai Sri Ram" ("Glory to Lord Ram," a leading Hindu deity). If the issue was simply swift punishment of theft or crime, there would be no need for a violent imposition of Hindu slogans. Yet such activity has not yet received clear, timely, forthright, and unambiguous denunciation from BJP governments—in Delhi or the relevant states. The U.S. State

Department's religious-freedom reports have also criticized India's recent governments for not providing adequate support—including physical safety—to minorities, especially Muslims.[24]

To conclude, India's democratic evolution has reached a stage where the electoral and liberal aspects of democracy have come into acute conflict. India's electoral vibrancy is not in doubt, but the liberalism of its polity is increasingly in question. While the liberal deficits have always been there, they are now approaching critical proportions. If Hindu majoritarianism is allowed to go unchecked, if liberal freedoms are more curtailed than before, and if minorities become more insecure in the coming years, the Global South's longest-lasting democracy will be fundamentally transformed. It was a liberal democracy, substantially if not entirely. If the current trends intensify, it will become a majoritarian and illiberal democracy.

NOTES

1. In 2019 as in 2014, the BJP heads a multiparty coalition. But the party's ability on both occasions to win a majority of seats on its own means that its dependence on coalition partners has been and will remain minimal.

2. Ashutosh Varshney, "India's Watershed Vote: Hindu Nationalism in Power?" *Journal of Democracy* 25 (October 2014): 34–45.

3. For a disaggregated analysis of the BJP's 2014 vote, see Eswaran Sridharan, "India's Watershed Vote: Behind Modi's Victory," *Journal of Democracy* 25 (October 2014): 20–33.

4. Constitutional amendments normally require two-thirds support not only in the Lok Sabha but also in the upper house (the Rajya Sabha), which comprises 233 indirectly elected members plus a dozen presidential appointees. In the case of certain types of amendments, half the states must assent as well. The BJP, along with its partners, is the governing party in more than half the 29 states. In the Rajya Sabha, however, the BJP's coalition currently fills 115 (46.9 percent) of the 245 seats. Rajya Sabha members serve staggered six-year terms; about a third of the 233 nonappointees are up for reelection every even-numbered year. Before long, the BJP-led coalition may have a majority in the upper house.

5. BJP also won four of the seventeen Lok Sabha seats in Telangana, where previously it had no seats.

6. Union territories are geographical units that lack the status of states.

7. Unless otherwise indicated, all vote distributions reported here and later are from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)–Lokniti postelection survey (2019). For summaries, see Sanjay Kumar and Pranav Gupta, "Where Did the BJP Get Its Votes from in 2019?" *The Mint,* 3 June 2019, *www.livemint.com/politics/news/where-did-the-bjp-get-its-votes-from-in-2019-1559547933995.html*; and Suhas Palshikar, Sanjay Kumar, and Sandeep Shastri, "Post-Poll Survey: Explaining the Modi Sweep Across Regions," *The Hindu,* 26 May 2019, *www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/post-poll-survey-explaining-the-modi-sweep-across-regions/article27250054.ece.*

8. A significant, though as yet undetermined, number of the new toilets for the poor

are merely pits with no running water. Many such constructions are being used for storage. On a visit to the state of Uttar Pradesh during the campaign, I saw several such toilets. See also John Elliott, "Has Modi's Swachh Bharat Campaign Been a Success?" *South Asia @ LSE,* 16 May 2019, *https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/05/16/has-modis-swachh-bharat-campaign-been-a-success.* On liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) used for cooking, see Kapil Narula, "LPG Subsidies for Clean Cooking in India: Trials and Tribulations," *cogitAsia,* 26 June 2018, *www.cogitasia.com/lpg-subsidies-for-clean-cooking-in-india-trials-tribulations.*

9. Only the 1999 Kargil War with Pakistan is comparable. The conflict broke out in early May. Diplomatic efforts led by U.S. president Bill Clinton put a stop to the fighting before the end of July. The election began on September 5. But India's urban middle class was far smaller in 1999, and access to cellphones and the internet was nothing like what it is today.

10. I was present at a May 10 rally where she called the campaign a "dharm yudh" (religious war).

11. In six heavily Muslim constituencies, the BJP did run Muslim candidates, but all lost. Even had they all won, Muslims would have been a mere 2 percent of the BJP's Lok Sabha members.

12. S.Y. Quraishi, "What It Takes to Run an Election for India," *New York Times,* 25 April 2019. Quraishi is a former chief election commissioner of India.

13. Mukulika Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

14. This recognition first came to light with Yogendra Yadav, "Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge," in Francine Frankel et al., eds., *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

15. Should this kind of politics be called populist? I discuss this in my essay "The Emergence of Right-Wing Populism in India," in Niraja Jayal, ed., *Re-Forming India: The Nation Today* (Gurgaon, Haryana: Penguin Viking, 2019).

16. V-Dem Institute, *Democracy for All? V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2018,* 27.

17. V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Facing Global Challenges: V-Dem Annual Democracy Report 2019,* 5.

18. For details, see Apurva Vishwanath, "Explained: What Are the UAPA Amendments? When Is an Individual Designated a 'Terrorist'"? *Indian Express* (New Delhi), 4 August 2019, *https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/uapa-amendment-bill-terrorist-designating-individual-as-terrorist-5864906.*

19. For the full text of Justice Chelameswar's letter, see *https://scroll.in/article/873787/full-text-bonhomie-between-judiciary-and-government-sounds-the-death-knell-to-democracy.*

20. Varshney, "Hindu Nationalism in Power?"

21. Christophe Jaffrelot, "India's Democracy at 70: Toward a Hindu State?" *Journal of Democracy* 28 (July 2017): 55–57.

22. My own book, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), did not anticipate that lynchings would become so common.

23. For the latest data on "cow-related" hate crimes, see *http://data.indiaspend.com/hate-crime.* For an analysis, see Rupa Subramanya, "Has India Become a Lynchistan?" *India Matters*, 1 July 2017, *www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/has-india-become-lynchistan.*

24. See *www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india.*