

Is Narendra Modi a populist?

The old narrative about India's Prime Minister is not dead, but a new one is emerging



The old narrative about Modi is, of course, still not dead, but a new one is trying to emerge. PTI Photo / PIB

Over the last six months, I have participated in several panels on populism, spread as far apart as the United States, India and Australia. Some questions have repeatedly appeared: Is [Narendra Modi](#) a populist? Does Modi's India share some political characteristics with Donald Trump's US, Rodrigo Duterte's Philippines, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey, Viktor Orban's Hungary?

The World Economic Forum's recent India Summit in Delhi also had a panel on populism, where I spoke. This forum does not spend energy on arcane

academic matters. It reflects what is uppermost in the minds of business leaders worldwide. Populism is now a larger concern.

In 2014, soon after Modi's rise to power, political analysts did not ask whether he was a populist. His 2014 victory, many argued, was based on a campaign whose two principal planks were, one, a rage against corruption and dynastic politics and, two, a fervent plea for governance and India's economic revival. Unlike L.K. Advani's rousing 1991 campaign trope, "*garv se kaho hum Hindu hain* (say with pride we are Hindus)", a pro-Hindu master narrative was missing in Modi's election speeches. Voter surveys conducted by Lokniti's National Election Study 2014 also did not show that Modi's victory was a vote for Hindu nationalism.

In international circles, this early narrative about Modi is losing its salience. The world has begun to notice the lynching of Muslims, the BJP's preoccupation with cow protection, Modi's aversion to the press and his direct communication with the masses through Twitter and "Mann Ki Baat", his preference for leaders such as Yogi Adityanath, known for their pro-Hindu private militia, not disbanded even after ascension to power. Allowing vigilante forces is the opposite of democratic governance.

Alongside, it is now felt that, for Modi, India's economy was a secondary concern. The decline in India's economic growth rate is being viewed as a self-inflicted wound. The world could not understand how the demonetisation of 86 per cent of an economy's currency, especially if 93 per cent of the work force is informal and cash-dependent, could possibly unleash economic dynamism in the short to medium run.

The old narrative about Modi is, of course, still not dead, but a new one is trying to emerge. And the new narrative is taking the following form. Modi might still be very popular, but for him, ideology triumphs over governance,

civil liberties are less important than political conformity, and enforcement of a Hindu majoritarian politics is more significant than India's economic ascendancy. Hurting minorities also contradicts a core promise of his campaign: "Sabka saath sabka vikas (If all are brought together, each will be lifted economically)".

But what does all of this have to do with populism? For conceptual clarity, we need to turn to the social sciences which have studied populism, especially in the West and Latin America.

At the heart of the concept of populism is the distinction between "popular" and "populist". [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) and [Barack Obama](#) were popular, winning huge electoral majorities, but they were not populists. In their political conduct were absent the core ideas of populism: That democracy is primarily about elections, and the customary institutions of oversight — the press, judiciary, intelligence agencies etc — which normally constrain democratic governments between elections must follow electoral verdicts, not the law; that some leaders authentically represent the wishes of the masses, while others are corrupt and moral crooks to be tamed by the state and mass hysteria; that charisma is higher than the law; that the constitution matters less than a crusade on behalf of the masses.

These populist ideas can take two forms: Populism of the left, and populism of the right. The former, economic at its core, pursues economic redistribution on behalf of the poor. The latter, culturally oriented, believes that the majority community owns the nation, and minorities are dependents and supplicants, not carriers of rights.

In India, [Indira Gandhi](#) was the best example of left-wing populism. She combined "garibi hatao (remove poverty)" and electoral primacy, with attacks on the press and judiciary, and a demonisation of political opponents, both

within and outside the party. Arguing that she, and she alone, embodied the people's wishes, she went to the extent of suspending democracy, calling the emergency a true expression of popular will.

India has not had right-wing populism in power at the Centre, nor is Modi a typical representative of such populism. He belongs to a hybrid category. Like Indira Gandhi, he privileges electoral majorities over everything else, is hostile to the idea of an independent press and distrustful of courts, and courts mass adulation.

But he is different from Indira Gandhi in that, unlike her, he has a Hindu majoritarian view of the nation and is deeply unsympathetic to minorities. Absent in Indira Gandhi, racial or religious majoritarianism is a defining element of right-wing populism. The hostility of Trump, for example, to Hispanics, Blacks and Muslims, and that of European populists to minorities and immigrants is all too evident.

Modi's economics, however, does not align with the standard populism of the right, which relies heavily on markets and/or business classes to steer economic progress. His economic policy does have pro-market elements (new bankruptcy laws, reform of indirect taxes) and he has also not been able to hide his pro-business proclivities, but his economics concomitantly also has non-market "people oriented" elements (bank accounts for the poor, modern toilets for all, doubling farm income, farm loan waivers). Moreover, he justified demonetisation in terms of mass welfare. It is another matter that the masses have been badly hurt.

In this newspaper, Ram Madhav, a national general secretary of the BJP, summed up Modi's appeal thus: "The mob, humble people of the country, are behind Modi... They are enjoying it" (IE, August 15). How should one react?

A populist can celebrate mob rule. But a democrat cannot. He knows that

mobs are not always right: Untouchability, after all, was popular in India, as was lynching of blacks in the American south. That is why all modern democracies constrain mob sentiments with constitutions and laws. Populism and democracy are not to be confused. A conflation of mobs and democracy only leads to frequent vigilante violence, an undermining of the press and judiciary, and a weakening of law-based governance.

Would that be good for the country? This question has moved to India's political centrestage.

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