

India Politics & Policy

Narendra Modi's illiberal drift threatens Indian democracy

The government has created a regime of fear, equating dissent with lack of patriotism

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India's prime minister Narendra Modi has been criticised for sowing cultural and religious divisions © Reuters

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As [India](#) completes 70 years of its independence, the nation's democracy is becoming Janus-faced. Its electoral vibrancy is not in doubt, but the polity's performance between elections is acquiring profoundly illiberal traits.

In political theory, an illiberal democracy is defined as one that only pays attention to elections, while it violates, in the years between elections, some core democratic principles, especially freedom of expression.

It views elections as the only measure of democracy and once elected, it seeks unrestrained power, often on behalf of the majority community. The India of Narendra Modi, prime minister, is beginning to resemble this description.

The electoral [vigour](#) of Indian democracy is well known. Since 1952, there have been 16 national and 362 state elections, mostly free and fair. Power has peacefully changed hands eight times in Delhi and so often at the state level that scholars have stopped counting.

In 1992, a third tier of local elected governments was added. Since then, roughly 3m local legislators have been elected every five years. Over the past three decades, defying western democratic experience, the poor and the less educated have voted as much as, if not more than, the richer and more educated classes. Elections have become civic festivals.

Comparative evidence shows that democracies can be established at any level of income, but their mortality rate is very high at lower levels of income. The longevity of Indian democracy, a lower middle income country even after four decades of high economic growth, is thus remarkable and receives a lot of plaudits.

But its increasing illiberalism is also worthy of critical attention. Especially alarming is how the Modi government has dealt with freedom of expression. Previous governments, too, faltered on this issue. Books, for example, were often banned, when some group claimed they were offended by novels or treatises. Individuals or organisations that took sharp anti-government stands were also harassed. But this process has now reached qualitatively different proportions. Often equating dissent with lack of patriotism, the government has created a regime of fear, hysteria and retribution.

Civil society organisations have been threatened and writers attacked. Independent voices in the press are noticeably declining. Many journalists are afraid to criticise Mr Modi for fear of reprisal. Business executives say they cannot openly criticise economic policies, such as demonetisation, for fear of retribution. Scholars watch what they say or write. The famously argumentative Indian is now being silenced and turned into a consenting Indian.

Freedom of expression, as an idea, also covers what citizens eat and the trade they legally engage in. Under the slogan of [cow protection](#), vigilante groups, with impunity, punish beef eating, the trade in cattle and ownership of slaughter houses.

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Such vigilante action is integrally connected to the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which animates Mr Modi's organisational base. Their belief is that cow protection is central to Hinduism, and Hinduism is the core of Indian nationhood, even though the constitution says that India as a nation belongs to all religious groups. Cow protection and nationalism have got intertwined.

Mob violence especially targets Muslims, who eat beef, own a lot of slaughter houses, and are among the biggest practitioners of the trade in cattle. A government that should be committed to the security of all its citizens is failing the nation's largest minority. On completing his term, India's vice-president, a Muslim, recently argued that Muslims are feeling increasingly insecure.

Mr Modi has criticised vigilantism, but not strongly enough. More importantly, in March, he picked as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, the largest Indian state, a [politician-monk](#), who heads a private vigilante force that has become many times larger since he rose to power, and is known for cow protection and anti-Muslim fervour.

The practice and rhetoric of Mr Modi, thus, clearly diverge. Unsurprisingly, his base has turned a blind eye to his words. His criticism of mob violence was again perfunctory in his independence day speech.

It will indeed be sad if the largest democracy of the developing world turns into a polity that mainly works for its Hindu majority and targets the minorities and government critics. Unless free expression is restored and vigilante violence checked, that is where India's democracy is headed.

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