

# Modi's Saffron Democracy

Sanjay Ruparelia

In May 2014, Narendra Modi became India's fourteenth prime minister since independence. Storming to power after a charged electoral campaign, the strongman from Gujarat represented a political earthquake. Under his leadership, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was the first party to win a parliamentary majority since 1984, ending a quarter century of national coalition governments in New Delhi. It also became the only party apart from the Indian National Congress (known simply as "the Congress"), which had traditionally ruled the country under the direction of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, to win a mandate on its own. Roughly 66 percent of the electorate, the highest share ever, voted in the 2014 general election. Voter participation increased in virtually every state and across diverse segments of the population, including historically marginalized communities of Dalits and Adivasis and especially women. The stunning triumph of the BJP heralded a new political order in the world's largest democracy.

Before the verdict, the vast majority of observers had expected another hung parliament and diverse coalition government. Controversy had dogged Modi, a longtime pracharak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the parent organization of the family of Hindu nationalist groups (including the BJP) called the Sangh Parivar. In 2002, Modi had failed to prevent an anti-Muslim pogrom that left over 1,000 people dead shortly after becoming chief minister of Gujarat, the so-called laboratory of Hindutva (Hindu cultural nationalism). There was sufficient evidence of his administration's involvement for the United States to deny Modi a visa in 2005. Yet the chief minister, while denying responsibility, never showed remorse for what happened. Modi accused critics of insulting Gujarati pride. A protracted investigation by a Supreme Court-appointed committee eventually cleared him of personal responsibility in 2012.

The following year, the BJP named Modi as their candidate for prime minister in the 2014 elections. Many within the party and the RSS, which prized collective decision-making, remained wary of empowering him,



Prime Minister Narendra Modi at an event promoting a cash subsidy program for small farms in February (Arijit Sen/*Hindustan Times* via Getty Images)

but Modi ruthlessly sidelined potential rivals and the rapidly aging BJP old guard. In public, opposition parties decried his candidacy. In private, many rejoiced that it would prevent the BJP from recapturing national power.

But the weaknesses of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which governed from 2004 to 2014, provided an opening. The UPA had achieved the highest rate of economic growth in India since independence. The governing coalition liberalized many sectors of the economy and oversaw substantial increases in savings and investment in the public and private sectors, as well as rising trade. It also introduced landmark welfare legislation granting the right to many socioeconomic entitlements. But persistent ideological differences within its leadership, neglect of underlying structural problems, and a series of events badly damaged the UPA during its second term. Major public scandals involving the allocation of contracts to favored business groups galvanized the India Against Corruption movement led by the Gandhian activist Anna Hazare. Yet the Congress failed to act decisively against individual ministers accused of corruption. Opposition parties, often led by the BJP, obstructed parliament. Senior bureaucrats stopped taking potentially sensitive decisions. A sense of paralysis, fueled by aggressive media coverage, declining private investment, and adverse global conditions, induced a rapid economic deceleration.

Modi, a charismatic politician with a keen sense of historical opportunity, seized the moment. Embracing his claim to being a humble *chaiwala* (tea-seller) from a plebian backward caste, Modi mocked the *shazhada* (prince) Rahul Gandhi, the presumptive heir to the Congress. Flaunting his “fifty-six-inch chest,” he scorned the outgoing prime minister as “*Maun* [silent] Mohan Singh,” promising to eliminate political corruption and to stand up to Pakistani cross-border aggression. As chief minister of Gujarat, a relatively industrialized state, Modi also projected the image of a “development man.” Tapping into the frustrations and aspirations of millions of people for decent work and social mobility, he vowed to turn India into a manufacturing powerhouse and create good jobs for the millions of young people entering the national labor force every year.

In Gujarat, Modi had hosted a series of conclaves to court big business with tax breaks, cheap land, and reliable infrastructural facilities. During his prime ministerial campaign, money flowed into the coffers of the BJP from industrial titans keen to elect an openly pro-business government in New Delhi. Reportedly, the party spent nearly \$1 billion during the campaign, recruiting high-level IT professionals and tens of thousands of volunteers and many paid campaigners. Harnessing old media, advertising companies’ expertise, and new social media platforms, they saturated the public sphere with images of Modi, including simultaneously broadcast holograms of him giving speeches across the country.

In the end, the BJP captured 31 percent of the national vote and 282 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament, cementing its leadership of a multi-party coalition named the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The Congress won 19 percent of the vote and 44 seats, its worst performance ever. The stunning reversal of fortunes reflected the disproportional logic of India’s electoral system, which, like the United States and the United Kingdom, is first-past-the-post. The BJP’s vote share was conspicuously low in historical perspective, but the party achieved stunning victories in traditional regional strongholds in the north and west, where it either dominated or swept the opposition, and significant gains in the south and east where it had previously failed to penetrate.

Moreover, the BJP had mobilized an unprecedented social coalition. The party consolidated its traditional high-caste, upper-class, urban base but also won a plurality of votes among other backward castes, and rising support from Dalits and Adivasis, especially among middle-class sections in semi-urban zones. Constituencies that saw a higher turnout of young voters—individuals under twenty-five years old constituted an astonishing 50 percent of the population—disproportionately voted BJP because of Modi. Triumphant, the new prime minister proclaimed, “Victory to India. Good days are coming.”

### Concentrating and Personalizing Power

Since attaining power, Modi has assiduously pursued the populist, plebiscitary, and presidential style of rule that marked his campaign for office. While politicians and parties across the spectrum have long tried to constrain the autonomy of state institutions by appointing partisan administrators, few displayed the BJP's desire and capacity to capture entire institutional domains. After a quarter century of coalition governments, which increased the clout of the president, parliamentary committees, election commissioners, comptroller and auditor generals, Supreme Court justices, and the media, the BJP-led government has recentralized political authority.

Modi and a small circle of advisers dictate the tempo and direction of the government. They have disciplined the prime minister's offices everyday operations and political messaging while undermining collegial responsibility and cabinet autonomy. Few ministers have much sway. The various parties that comprise the NDA, which formally rules, have even less. Most observers simply refer to "Modi *sarkar* [government]," underlining its personalization of power.

If allies in the NDA feel disempowered, opposition parties confront a far greater threat. The new ruling dispensation views electoral rivals and partisan opponents as permanent enemies to be destroyed. Modi vowed to usher in a Congress-*mukt* (free) India. The BJP rejected the Congress's claim to be the official leader of the opposition, as the second largest party in the Lok Sabha, on grounds that its forty-four seats constituted less than 10 percent of the total. The prime minister rarely subjects himself to questioning in parliament.

This unwillingness to face criticism extends to the media. Modi grants very few interviews. Most are highly scripted affairs with carefully selected journalists. Press conferences, a routine affair in previous administrations, rarely occur. Modi often derides journalists as "news traders," except for channels such as Zee TV and Republic TV, which are essentially mouthpieces for the government. (BJP party colleagues have stooped lower, calling them "presstitutes.") Modi prefers direct communication via new digital media with his legions of followers. To date, more than 22,000 messages have been sent on his Twitter handle, which boasts more than 45 million subscribers. He also gives a monthly radio address, *Mann Ki Baat*, and uses the "NaMo"—Narendra Modi—app to deliver the latest updates directly to his followers' phones.

Some traditional newspapers and media houses, along with new digital outlets, have investigated the government more assiduously. Yet critical scrutiny has led to behind-the-scene interventions in some cases, including the dismissal of editors that failed to toe the line. In other cases, bureaucratic harassment and police raids for ostensible lapses in tax payments and other administrative matters have made life difficult. A vast swath of private media in India, afflicted by "paid news" scandals in recent years and

beholden to corporate houses for advertising revenue, has been compromised for some time. Yet the climate of fear and threat of reprisal today is far more ominous, encouraging many to self-censor.

The Supreme Court has provided some checks on the current government. Its expansive constitutional remit makes it one of the most powerful judiciaries in the world. Yet the structure of the court, whose thirty-one judges sit on benches of various sizes depending on the significance of a case and who must retire by sixty-five, also creates a fluid polyphony of voices. In late 2015, a constitutional bench of the court (appointed to interpret fundamental law) rebuffed legislation designed to grant the executive far greater power in selecting higher justices. It also quashed the government's efforts in 2016 to impose direct rule in two smaller states. And in the summer of 2017, another constitutional bench unanimously declared that privacy was a fundamental right, a landmark judgment with ramifications for many social questions. Yet the Supreme Court has also issued controversial rulings. A 2016 order made it mandatory for individuals to stand for the national anthem in cinema halls; another bench eventually overruled the order, but the incident exposed the court's susceptibility to rising nationalist fervor. Prospective and active justices who had crossed the BJP found their nominations scuttled or posts transferred, intimating behind-the-scenes interference. Most explosively, in early 2018 the four most senior judges of the Supreme Court publicly accused the chief justice of fixing the composition of benches in sensitive cases, presumably to favor the executive. Since then, the prime minister's office has delayed the appointment of justices and allowed a staggering case backlog in the higher judiciary to worsen.

The overriding factor enabling executive overreach is the remarkable march of the BJP in state-level elections, which has transformed the map of India's federal democracy. In 2014 the party controlled just seven of the thirty-six states and union territories in India. By the spring of 2018, either by itself or with its allies, the party had won control of twenty-one states, which comprised roughly 70 percent of India's total population. The Congress governed just four. The sources of the BJP's newfound electoral prowess are twofold. First, Modi remains by far the most charismatic politician in the country, the only true mass leader on a national scale. He possesses remarkable personal energy and self-discipline, an ability to rally massive crowds and exploit popular aspirations as well as elite resentment through a mastery of Hindi, and the courage to address difficult public issues. And no Indian prime minister—not even Nehru—has visited so many countries in a single parliamentary term. Second, the installation of Amit Shah, an old colleague of Modi's from Gujarat, as president of the BJP has turned the party into an electoral machine. Party membership has increased dramatically, with some estimates at 100 million, which would make it the largest party in the world. Moreover, Shah has tasked newly recruited members to undergo strict ideological training and acquire fine-grained knowledge of potential

voters so they can disseminate propaganda down to the level of local voting booths, using both old-fashioned canvassing as well as social media. He has also changed the social composition of the traditionally high-caste party by introducing organizational elections for positions within the party. The BJP accumulates vast funds by mobilizing these local networks and cajoling sections of business and capital to pay through a mix of coercion and inducement. These party-organizational assets, combined with the traditional ground strength of the cadre-based RSS and wider Sangh Parivar, have enabled the BJP to become an electoral juggernaut.

### **Disrupting the Economy**

Many progressive critics feared Modi would pursue a radical agenda given his past, his clear parliamentary majority, and the expectations of Hindu nationalist ideologues in the Sangh Parivar. The BJP manifesto contained many controversial pledges, including the construction of a Ram temple on the ruins of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, whose destruction by Hindu nationalists in 1992 unleashed terrible communal violence; the establishment of a uniform civil code, which would nullify special personal laws for religious minorities; and the abrogation of Article 370, which gave special rights to the contested Muslim-majority state Jammu & Kashmir. Indeed, despite electing 282 MPs to the lower house, the BJP did not have a single Muslim in its ranks.

Other commentators noted that the BJP lacked a majority in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) and believed Modi would focus instead on governance and development, which would require opposition cooperation. Political tensions and communal violence would unnecessarily jeopardize that agenda. Shortly after coming to power, Modi declared, “My government will function on the mantra of ‘Minimum Government, Maximum Governance.’” Neoliberals rejoiced that New Delhi would streamline decision-making; deregulate land, capital, and labor; and devolve power to the states. The appointment of several well-known proponents of economic liberalization to key positions seemed to signal Modi’s commitment to that agenda.

Yet the size of government, and quality of governance, has failed to change in expected ways. The Modi administration has announced a plethora of schemes to modernize the economy, expand work opportunities and improve social welfare, many of which tout personal initiative and commercial entrepreneurship: Startup India, Skill India, Stand-Up India. Others stress impressive public commitments, most prominently a campaign to eliminate open defecation through universal rural sanitation and public investment in renewable energy. But ardent liberalizers bemoan the absence of structural reform.

To promote its Make in India campaign, which aimed to raise the share of manufacturing from 16 percent to 25 percent of GDP and create 100

million skilled jobs by 2025, the government has cut red tape and relaxed caps on foreign direct investment in various sectors. Labor protocols and environmental regulations have been scaled back, and businesses have been allowed to self-certify their compliance with the remaining rules to end “arbitrary harassment” by the “inspector raj.” The Modi administration passed a national value-added tax, eliminating a bevy of state-level levies that hampered interstate trade. And it unveiled a bankruptcy code, enabling struggling companies to declare insolvency and state banks to redirect credit to under-resourced sectors.

Similarly, the government has altered social welfare provisioning using market instruments. The National Mission on Financial Inclusion extended bank accounts and debit cards to roughly 150 million poor families, seeking to reduce their vulnerability to extortionate money lenders. The JAM Number Trinity program has converted many in-kind subsidies to cash transfers, lowering the scope for bribery by officials and middlemen. Finally, the extension of accident and life insurance, and the massive increase in hospital insurance under the Ayushman Bharat scheme, provides greater economic security to informal sector workers.

But to access these accounts and entitlements, beneficiaries must authenticate their identities through biometric identity cards, a controversial project initiated by the UPA called Aadhaar. Despite widely publicized technical deficiencies, the Modi administration rapidly expanded their use through parliamentary legerdemain. The result is a massive potential expansion of bureaucratic surveillance without adequate safeguards regarding individual privacy and data security. The Supreme Court finally intervened in the fall of 2018, saying that the government could not deny benefits to citizens lacking an ID card and private businesses could not demand it. But the judiciary upheld the constitutionality of the project and its underlying legislation for welfare entitlements using public funds, disappointing activists that wanted it to be struck down completely.

The Modi administration’s most dramatic exercise of arbitrary state power came at the end of 2016, when it decided to demonetize all 500- and 1,000-rupee notes—the sort of move rarely pursued except in countries facing massive hyperinflation or the aftermath of war. Modi’s government issued a variety of explanations: to eliminate illicit wealth (most of which is actually held in commodity or property form, or is stashed abroad); to weaken underground terrorist organizations using counterfeit currency; and to accelerate India’s transition to a cashless economy. The last justification is of a piece with the government’s faith in modernizing, leapfrog technologies, but it made a joke of Modi’s pledge to reduce arbitrary state intervention in the economy.

The demonetization was an extraordinary shock, affecting roughly 86 percent of all currency bills in circulation in an economy predominantly driven by cash. Citizens were forced to wait in lines for hours over many

days to convert their demonetized notes to new legal tender. Urban middle classes were able to cope. But hundreds of millions of workers, merchants, and traders without access to credit in the vast informal economy suffered immense hardship, losing their businesses and jobs, likely driving many into absolute poverty. It has been reported that the prime minister neither consulted his chief economic advisers nor the Council of Ministers, and gave the Reserve Bank of India only a few hours' notice, before announcing the decision. The demonetization exemplifies the decisive image Modi has cultivated, but it also revealed a lack of preparation and poor implementation.

Modi survived the effects of demonetization in the short run. In fact, by portraying the decision as necessary for the good of the nation and not backing down in the face of criticism, he reaped huge political dividends. Most observers assumed the BJP would suffer major losses in the subsequent 2017 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh. Instead, voters awarded it with an overwhelming 312 seats in the largest state in the country. The party now appeared invincible. Modi's subsequent decision to appoint Yogi Adityanath, a reactionary Hindu preacher known for fomenting communal violence, as its chief minister deepened his critics' worst fears.

### **Saffron Civil Society**

Like virtually all cultural nationalists, members of the Sangh Parivar have long pursued the Gramscian imperative to reshape ethical norms, popular consciousness, and social practices in the trenches of civil society. Their ideological leaders have sought to reinterpret history to valorize purported Hindu deeds, rulers, and customs against the ostensibly alien influences of Christianity and Islam. They promulgate a skewed notion of Hindu common sense, which includes promoting vegetarianism, opposing intercommunal marriage, and redefining the public sphere in simplistic Hinduized terms. Their project has advanced furthest in states run by the BJP administrations in northwestern India and to a lesser extent in the Gangetic Plain across northern India, through a mixture of state policy and social mobilization.

The Modi-led government declared that the Constitution would be its only scripture. Since attaining national power, however, it has appointed stalwart ideologues to key leadership positions in many universities, research centers, and cultural institutes. Other parties had often pursued a similar partisan approach, but the BJP's ousting of perceived opponents, often replacing them with individuals with far less experience and more dubious qualifications, is more brazen than before. Modi's promotion of certain Hindu nationalist myths, such as the claim that ancient Indian civilization had mastered genetic science and plastic surgery, has invited widespread ridicule. In other cases, such as the decision to designate Christmas as "good governance day," the motive was clear: to render minority communities less visible. More systematic efforts to normalize Hindu nationalism





Modi in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP won a major electoral victory in 2017 (Rajesh Kumar/*Hindustan Times* via Getty Images)

have occurred in the domain of education in Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Gujarat, states run—presently or in the past—by the BJP. The party has revised school textbooks to glorify ancient Hindu myths, denigrate Mughal rulers, and downgrade the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi in the nationalist movement as opposed to key *Hindutva* figures such as Vinayak Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar. Even more troubling, the revised textbooks openly praise the strong, unifying rule of Hitler and Mussolini and cast doubt upon the benefits of rights and democracy.

Praising European fascism and distorting Indian history is part of a wider political campaign against liberal, progressive, and secular voices in civil society. The government has intensified a crackdown on political opponents and dissent that began in the last years of the UPA. New Delhi has accused many NGOs with external funding of violating the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act. Over 10,000 organizations have been compelled to modify or suspend their activities as a result, including national chapters of Greenpeace, Oxfam, and the Ford Foundation, which had questioned the social, economic, and ecological costs of recent development policies. The government justified its move on grounds of transparency and accountability, but it has also labeled these organizations as “anti-national,” revealing a cynical exploitation of governance norms to erode civil liberties and political rights.

Students, intellectuals, and activists expressing political dissent or secular views have been increasingly harassed and intimidated online as well

as in the streets. Some BJP politicians have said that critics of Modi should move to Pakistan. Government authorities have charged activists and university students with sedition, a colonial era law still on the books, for questioning state policy, social inequality, and human rights violations in Jammu & Kashmir, the northeast, and the so-called red corridor of central India where various states have waged a brutal campaign against Maoist guerillas. Critics of Hindu mythological claims, such as Govind Pansare, M. M. Kalburgi, and Gauri Lankesh, have been murdered for expressing their views.

As prime minister, Modi has gradually moderated his rhetoric. But his proclamations that every town should have a Muslim cemetery as well as a Hindu crematorium, and every village deserves electricity for Ramadan as well as various Hindu festivals, also represent a cunning ruse to insinuate that Muslims had it better under opposition rule. State-level politicians from the BJP have pursued traditional *Hindutva* goals far more aggressively, encouraging campaigns that have spread militant cultural vigilantism into everyday life.

Governments in many states have introduced bans on cow slaughter with draconian penalties, a long-held demand of the Sangh Parivar. Spurred by these polices, Hindu vigilantes have taken the law into their own hands. Muslims and Dalits rumored to be involved in cow slaughter, leather tanning, and the cattle trade have been attacked and lynched in many regions since 2014. Given the significance of Dalits to the new electoral base of the BJP, the prime minister eventually denounced attacks upon them, tweeting in the summer of 2017 that “anti-social elements were spreading anarchy.” Yet he left it to state governments to resolve the problem and failed to condemn the violence against Muslims. Taking his cue, many state-level BJP politicians have shielded the perpetrators of these heinous acts or even praised them, leading to acquittals and the withdrawal of many cases.

Upon coming to power in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP sanctioned “anti-Romeo squads” in the name of protecting girls and women from harassment and violence, a searing public issue. Again, the formation of such groups have emboldened its foot soldiers to impose vigilante justice. Campaigns by organizations affiliated with the Sangh Parivar to break relationships between Hindu girls and Muslim boys, who allegedly pursue “love jihad,” and to reconvert Dalits and Adivasis, termed *ghar wapsi* (back to home), are more explicit attempts to polarize communal tensions and extend social control. The failure of the government to combat these acts of intimidation and violence has encouraged more quotidian forms that differ from previous deadly episodes, like the anti-Sikh pogrom instigated by the Congress in revenge for the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. Many intellectuals, artists, and other public figures have courageously decried these developments, including Bollywood stars like Aamir Khan and Naseeruddin Shah, only to incur vitriolic responses from Hindu extremists on social media.

## Cracks in the Road to 2019

Given these events and trends, many commentators believe the BJP and its Hindu nationalist ideology represent a new hegemonic force in modern Indian democracy. Yet the electoral sweep of the party in many northern states, and the concentration of power in New Delhi, create political vulnerabilities too.

The early veneer of sound governance has been tarnished. The Modi administration has thus far avoided high-level corruption scandals like those that damaged the UPA. Yet questions have arisen over its failure to apprehend high-flying businessmen accused of financial misdeeds and its decision to revise the terms of the Rafale fighter jet deal with France, benefitting the powerful Ambani conglomerate. The government has also weakened the Right to Information commission as well as the Whistleblowers Protection Act through administrative delays and parliamentary amendments. It has held only two meetings of the Lokpal committee, charged with appointing national and state-level ombudsmen, a key demand of the anti-corruption movement that helped Modi capture national power. The government has introduced electoral bonds, purportedly to reduce the flow of black money in electoral campaigns, but neither the donor nor the party has to disclose the source of these bonds, merely the amount, leaving the system as non-transparent and unaccountable as before.

India's disappointing economic performance under the government is another serious electoral liability. Annual economic growth has once again topped 7 percent. But the government's decision to revise the figures using a new statistical methodology has even impartial observers asking questions. Moreover, growth remains extremely dependent on high public spending, especially on infrastructure. The early boom in foreign direct investment has faded. Private domestic companies and public-sector banks are still constrained by very high levels of debt and non-performing assets, necessitating massive recapitalization. The campaign to Make in India remains an aspiration. The national value-added duty brought many companies into the formal tax net, improving India's low tax-GDP ratio, but its five tiers of tax rates and clumsy roll-out imposed a high regulatory burden on millions of small- and medium-sized enterprises it was supposed to help. Perhaps most damaging, formal sector employment has failed to expand. Last spring the Indian Railways, the country's biggest civilian employer, received an astonishing 23 million applications for 90,000 vacancies. Moreover, since 2016, the government has stopped releasing customary job reports, saying the underlying measures had to be revamped.

On August 15, 2018, giving his last Independence Day speech before the general election this spring, Modi vowed to double farmers' incomes by 2022. It was a characteristically extravagant pledge—but reckless too. Prolonged drought, lower prices, and higher input costs had cut agricultural growth rates in half since his administration took office in 2014. Severe rural



A Kashmiri woman near concertina wire installed following mass arrests by government forces in the aftermath of a suicide bomber attack that killed forty members of an Indian paramilitary force (Faisal Khan/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

distress, alongside the slow-burning ramifications of demonetization and poor employment prospects, exposed the “tall promises” of the BJP. In state elections at the end of 2018, opposition parties inflicted a surprising defeat on the BJP in three of its strongholds in the Hindi heartland, despite heavy political campaigning by the prime minister. The outcome rejuvenated the Congress, bestowing greater leadership credibility to Rahul Gandhi, and encouraging his more charismatic sibling, Priyanka, to finally step off the political sidelines. It also galvanized diverse regional parties to explore the prospects of mounting an anti-BJP coalition. It remains to be seen whether the opposition can mount a united front among its myriad personalities and diverse interests, and offer a real programmatic alternative, in their respective states and across the country. So far, apart from pledges to protect minority rights and restore public institutions, its main idea is to extend a universal basic income to every poor citizen.

The Modi government has responded with old-fashioned populist gestures it had previously disparaged as dole. It passed a 10 percent quota for individuals from poor upper caste families in public-sector jobs and higher education. The government pressured the Reserve Bank of India (the country’s central bank) to share its excess savings with the finance ministry. And it broke convention by announcing new schemes—most notably cash handouts, tax breaks, and monthly pensions to small farmers, middle-class households, and informal workers—in the last budget before the 2019 polls.

The prime minister has also doubled down on old *Hindutva* demands, saying the government would explore how to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya once the Supreme Court had delivered its impending judgment—implying a willingness to bypass judicial review. And he has retaliated against Pakistan for the recent suicide bombing in Kashmir claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammad, the worst attack against Indian forces in the region since 1989, raising nationalist fervor and the prospect of war to galvanize voters.

Only two years ago the BJP claimed it would rule New Delhi for at least a decade. Now, the party's desperation is increasingly clear. The upcoming general election is a contest, the prime minister declared at the start of 2019, of "*janata* [the people] versus *gathbandhan* [coalition]." India's demos may grant Modi another chance to embody its aspirations and fears. But his classic populist gambit failed to hide a plain truth: the "good days" he promised have still not arrived.

*Sanjay Ruparelia is the author of Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India. He holds the Jarislowsky Democracy Chair at Ryerson University in Toronto.*