

# Pandemic failure, democratic backslide

Why India's autocratic turn under Prime Minister Narendra Modi matters to Canada and the world

BY: [SANJAY RUPARELIA](#) / *OpenCanada*, 15 JULY, 2021

The desperate search for scarce oxygen supplies, frontline workers on the verge of breakdown, funeral pyres burning through the night: the second wave of the pandemic in India is a genuine humanitarian catastrophe. Officially, the daily number of cases and deaths exceeded 300,000 and 4,000 at their peak this spring. Independent epidemiological studies suggest the toll might be even worse, between 8000 and 32,000 excess deaths a day, according to reports in the Economist.

Yet it was only in January that daily mortality rates officially fell to less than 200 a day, leading Prime Minister Narendra Modi to declare at the World Economic Forum: India “has saved humanity from a big disaster by containing Corona effectively.”

New Delhi proceeded to launch a national vaccination drive, setting a target of 250 million by July, a bold figure in absolute terms. More strikingly, the Modi government decided to distribute vaccines freely to its neighbors in the subcontinent, and then to many low-income countries far beyond. A desire to match China's vaccine diplomacy, and India's impressive production capacity, motivated and enabled its largesse. The move stoked national pride and cast rich western democracies, which were hoarding limited vaccine supplies for themselves, in a terrible light.

Then a disaster unfolded. How did it go so wrong?

The public health-related determinants of India's ferocious second wave are relatively clear. New variants began to circulate. Chronic underinvestment in public health services created systemic vulnerabilities. The ratio of doctors, nurses and beds per capita puts India among the lower tiers in global league tables. Access to water and sanitation, especially in

poorer rural settings, is inadequate. And hospitals have to rely on a complex supply chain for oxygen, imposing logistical challenges. The pandemic has stretched the most advanced healthcare systems in the world. It was bound to test India.

But the first line of defence against COVID-19 is to prevent its spread. Curative treatment and intensive care are the last. Cautious voices in India warned that mutations could quickly emerge and testing was still too limited. Bolstering stockpiles of critical medical supplies, tracing new variants and vaccinating as many vulnerable individuals as possible were essential.

Instead, the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) succumbed to hubris, which has defined its rule since capturing national power in 2014.

It re-opened the economy and allowed normal public life to resume without consulting its national committee of scientific advisors. It permitted the Kumbh Mela, a mammoth religious festival that occurs every few years in the state of Uttar Pradesh, to proceed a year ahead of schedule, despite warning signs by early March of a second wave. Hindu nationalist ideologues alleged that bathing in the Ganges would protect believers against the virus. Millions of pilgrims from across the country congregated in the city of Haridwar, igniting the largest super-spreader event in the world.

The party also encouraged huge rallies in four state assembly election campaigns in which it sought to mobilize popular support through stridently nationalist appeals. Modi spoke at many of these and crowed about their size. Few wore masks.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses a public meeting this January. Biju Boro/AFP via Getty Images

The result was a catastrophic second wave in India's biggest cities that set new global records for daily infections and deaths, although, because of limited testing capacity and deliberate under counting, the true toll will likely never be known. Unlike the first wave, which disproportionately affected the poor, the second wave has shattered the urban middle classes, too. Confronted with mounting public anger, the Modi government deflected blame to state governments and vaccine manufacturers, instructed bureaucrats to highlight India's per capita fatality rates (which looked more favorable compared to other badly hit countries) and even arrested citizens for criticizing its handling of the pandemic. The prime minister, usually so visible, faded from public view.

India has supplied vaccines around the world. It now desperately needs international assistance and countries like Canada must provide it. Our moral duty and enlightened self-interest demand little else. In a globalized world, Canadians will not be safe from COVID-19 until everyone is.

But the devastating trajectory of COVID-19 in India reflects colossal political mistakes that signify a story far larger and more consequential than the pandemic: how the BJP has corroded the world's largest democracy and what this means for democracy everywhere else.

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In recent years, political scientists have coined a term to describe the erosion of norms, institutions and practices that we associate with modern democratic governance: democratic backsliding.

Democracies break down when such processes happen rapidly and comprehensively. Coup d'états, such as the recent military take-over in Myanmar, are classic instances. Democratic backsliding is something different. It occurs when the deterioration in democratic governance is selective and uneven. The result, Ellen Lust and David Waldner argue in a recent [essay](#), is a hybrid political order whose character may seem ambiguous for a while. Such erosion typically happens in three areas: moves to restrict the participation of citizens, organizations and parties in electoral processes and the public sphere; decisions to reduce the competitiveness of elections and capacity of actors to contest for power in general; and efforts to constrain the accountability of rulers to other powerholders and the governed.

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Methods vary. But the most common manifestation, [says](#) Nancy Bermeo of Oxford University, is the rise of strongmen leaders. Typically, they capture power through elections, rule in the name of the “people” and increase executive power at the expense of civil liberties, institutional autonomy and political rights. Over time, these changes cumulatively rewrite the rules of the political game. This, according to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, Harvard scholars who charted former U.S. president Donald Trump’s drift toward authoritarianism, is [how democracies die](#).

A few years ago, comparative surveys of democratic backsliding praised India for maintaining a robust competitive system, bucking a regressive global trend. Indeed, roughly two-thirds of India's 815 million voters cast ballots in the 2014 general election, the highest ratio since independence in 1947. The 2019 national polls, which rewarded the BJP with an increased parliamentary majority, saw electoral participation climb even higher. The turnout of historically marginalized groups was even more impressive. And over the last three years, myriad opposition parties that contest for power in India's sprawling federal parliamentary democracy have defeated the BJP in state-level elections.

But the rise of the BJP in 2014, ending a quarter-century of hung parliaments and minority coalition governments in New Delhi, has also caused profound democratic backsliding.

Formally, the Indian constitution divides power in many ways. The prime minister and cabinet are accountable to parliament. The federal structure of the republic creates many opportunities for opposition parties to form state-level governments, and the separation of powers grants immense authority to the Supreme Court.

Yet, like authoritarian populists elsewhere, Modi has tested these checks and balances. Promising to undermine the power of corrupt old elites and rejuvenate national unity and economic prosperity in the name of the people, Modi transformed the 2014 electoral campaign from a parliamentary competition into a presidential contest by framing the contest as a one-on-one matchup between himself, a dedicated politician from humble roots, and Rahul Gandhi, the dynastic leader of the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress.

After the BJP's victory, Modi concentrated executive powers in the Prime Minister's Office and worked to elevate his own status by nurturing a personality cult. He enfeebled his cabinet. He dodged Question Period in parliament and avoided press conferences where he might be challenged, instead communicating with his tens of millions of followers through social media and monthly radio addresses.

These early moves signaled the BJP's desire to minimize political opposition and public criticism. Indeed, the party vowed to create a *Vipaksh-mukt Bharat* (Opposition-free India), casting electoral rivals and political opponents as permanent enemies to be destroyed. The BJP swept most state-level polls between 2014 and 2017, thanks to Modi's charisma and the unrivaled financial wealth, organizational resources and media prowess of his party. Campaign finance laws in India are notoriously inadequate and poorly enforced. The government's decision to introduce electoral bonds in 2017, which masked who donated campaign funds to whom, exacerbated this lack of transparency. The BJP's claim that its electoral victories justify moves to weaken democratic norms and institutions is also typical of democratic backsliding.

The Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) continues to pass many laws, but fewer bills make it to parliamentary committees, reducing the scope for scrutiny. The minority status of the Modi government in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) for much of the last six years enabled the opposition to block some legislation. But the BJP also circumvented this check in many instances by enacting controversial measures as "money bills," which only require a majority in the Lok Sabha.

Starting in 2017, opposition parties began to dislodge the BJP and its allies in several state elections, highlighting their poor record of economic management. Yet they failed to champion principles of secularism, pluralism and democracy, sensing it was a lost cause in a public sphere increasingly defined by Hindu nationalism.

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The average Indian citizen has many aspects to their social identity: caste, class and gender, as well as region, language and religion. Their political salience tends to vary across states and shift between elections, so it's difficult for parties to mobilize a durable national majority. But the militant cultural agenda of the BJP finally overrode many of these social cleavages to produce a majority Hindu bloc.

The party and its supporters defined Hindus, who form a strong majority of the population, as the country's "natural" citizens. As the Indian political scientist Niraja Gopal Jayal has argued, the BJP also emphasized duties and sacrifices instead of rights. This meant that individuals and communities had to demonstrate that they deserved their citizenship. And non-Hindus, particularly Muslims, had to express their loyalty explicitly.

Restrictions on freedom of speech, assembly and association, which always existed in India, intensified. The BJP appointed ideologues with relatively mediocre records and dubious credentials to lead universities, research centers and cultural institutions. Party stalwarts revised school textbooks to valorize Hindu nationalists. They co-opted figures like Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, a historic leader among India's lowest-caste Dalits, hoping to benefit from the allegiance many voters felt towards them. But Hindu nationalists also sought to erase the deeds of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, because of his commitment to secularism and democracy.

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The scope for interference in public universities has always been relatively high in India. But under the Modi government university administrators constrained academic freedom to a greater degree, pressuring faculty not to criticize government policies and encouraging greater self-censorship, while BJP-affiliated student organizations intimidated critics and provoked violent campus clashes. In extreme cases, the police jailed students and activists who protested against human rights violations, charging them with sedition for their "anti-national" deeds. The government attacked NGOs critical of the BJP or the Modi government by accusing them of violating laws on foreign contributions. Thousands of NGOs lost their licence, and legal amendments have made it harder for others to function. Amnesty International **says** it stopped operating in India because of pressure from government agencies.

Cultural vigilantism flourished. Hindu nationalist organizations promoted various social campaigns: "love jihad" (to break relationships between

Hindu girls and Muslim boys); *ghar wapsi* (to reconvert Dalits and Adivasis, who had “left” Hinduism “back home”); and *gau raksha* (cow protection), which led many states to pass new laws with draconian penalties.

Attacks on Muslims and Dalits involved in cow slaughter, leather tanning and the cattle trade, or simply rumored to be, escalated sharply after 2014. Many were lynched. The police didn’t always intervene. State-level BJP politicians praised the perpetrators, leading to acquittals and withdrawn cases.

Many courageous individuals castigated these developments in the few independent sections of the mainstream press. They were threatened on social media as a result. Some were murdered. Few of their killers faced justice. Surveys revealed growing support for a strong executive leader. The BJP militarized public discourse, sanctioning its followers to view opposition and dissent as treason.

Many citizens hoped the Supreme Court would constrain executive overreach and rights violations. In some cases, it did — rebuffing government attempts to have greater say over new judicial appointments, for example. But its jurisprudence was inconsistent. Gradually, the motivation and capacity of the apex judiciary to maintain its autonomy weakened. Concern over executive interference exploded in 2018, when the four most senior judges of the court publicly accused the sitting chief justice of allocating cases to favour the government. Observers debated the merits of these unprecedented allegations. But the integrity of the Supreme Court, and thus its independence, was damaged. It increasingly bent to the government’s will.

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The BJP returned to power in New Delhi even stronger in 2019. A strong plurality of voters supported the prime minister personally. His willingness to launch air strikes against Pakistan, following an attack by militant groups in Kashmir during the campaign, stoked nationalist fervour.



Following his re-election, Modi unveiled a new governing slogan: *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas* (“with everyone, for the development of all, with everyone’s trust”). Unprecedented religious polarization marked the campaign. Emboldened by victory, the BJP advanced its militant Hindu agenda by introducing three major changes, consecrated into law.

In August 2019, the government annulled Article 370 of the constitution, which granted special asymmetric rights to the contested Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir. The region and its constituent parts now came under direct rule from New Delhi as union territories. The Modi government claimed the move, taken without the consent of the state assembly, would enhance domestic security and economic development. Neither argument had much credibility. The government deployed more than 500,000 troops, arrested former chief ministers that belonged to opposition parties and imposed a severe communications lockdown throughout the region. Enough opposition parties, in disarray after their crushing defeat in 2019, backed the BJP for the amendment to be approved. The Supreme Court delayed hearing cases invoking *habeas corpus*, denied opposition leaders standard bail and failed to investigate mass detentions in the region. Historically, the court often deferred to the executive when the latter invoked emergency powers. Yet its constitutional abdication stunned many observers.

Then, in November 2019, the Supreme Court ruled that Hindu plaintiffs could build a temple on the contested site of a razed mosque in Ayodhya. The court described the destruction of the mosque by militant Hindu nationalists in 1992, which had unleashed the worst communal violence since Partition, as “an egregious violation of the rule of law.” But the judges observed that Muslims could not substantiate exclusive possession of the site — a burden of proof it failed to impose upon Hindus. In a widely publicized religious ceremony, the prime minister performed a groundbreaking ceremony for the temple, implying the nascence of a theocratic state.

Finally, in December 2019, the Modi government passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). Officially, the law was a humanitarian gesture, granting illegal migrants fleeing religious persecution in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh a path to citizenship. Yet it denied sanctuary to

Muslims. Revealingly, BJP leaders claimed the move atoned for Partition, offering Hindus a “right of return” to their natural “homeland.” The act undermined the secular foundation of Indian citizenship and the right to equality of all citizens in the constitution.

The passage of the CAA triggered protests. Participants waved the flag, sang the anthem and read aloud the preamble to the constitution, seeking to reclaim the language and symbols of the nation. Yet the prime minister declared that protesters could be identified by their clothing — a clear reference to Muslim dress. Other BJP leaders vilified them as agents of Pakistan, saying they should be shot. Police eventually cracked down with impunity.

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The nationalist rhetoric, concentration of power and rights violations that marked the last few years reached their apogee during the pandemic.

In March 2020, the Modi government imposed the most severe lockdown in the world, which ultimately lasted 68 days. The official rationale for the lockdown, to break the transmission of the virus and allow the government time to prepare, replicated conventional wisdom. But the Modi government failed to consult either state governments or relevant ministries.

Shockingly, the citizens of the world’s largest democracy were given four hours’ notice. An estimated 30 million seasonal migrants living in the cities, completely dependent on informal daily wages to survive, had to fend for themselves. Multitudes undertook a perilous journey to their rural homes. In a national address, the prime minister called on them to display “restraint, penance and sacrifice,” to “fulfill their duties like a disciplined soldier” for “the sake of the country.” He instructed the urban middle classes to bang their pots and pans as dusk fell each day, to show their support for the country’s overwhelmed medical workers. Yet the additional public spending announced by the government comprised less than one per cent of GDP. Exhaustion, hunger and accidents took many lives. Local communities and social organizations mobilized relief efforts to protect as

many citizens as possible. The government cajoled national media to relay positive news, but curtailed media access, batting away questions about its decision-making and plans.

The first wave of the pandemic peaked in late September 2020, when the official number of cases and deaths reached almost 100,000 and 1,000 per day, making India one of the three hardest-hit countries in the world on these measures. The country suffered its worst economic contraction since independence and one of the deepest in the world since the pandemic began. Yet the prime minister retained the support of more than 80 per cent of Indian citizens, according to opinion polls. Apart from a pliant media and disorganized political opposition, the severe lockdown was the latest dramatic gesture taken by Modi, whose cult of personality relies on such political theatre. As John Harriss, an emeritus professor at Simon Fraser University, put it, **Modi supporters saw a decisive leader to be trusted**. If the pandemic was out of control, others clearly were to blame, if not fate itself.

Seeking to exploit its apparent political invincibility, the Modi government introduced controversial agricultural reforms. Yet rather than consult farmers' unions and state-level governments, which had jurisdiction over agriculture, the BJP rammed legislation through parliament via a voice vote, refusing opposition demands to review the proposed laws in committee. Their high-handed passage forced India's farmers, highly organized and strategically encamped around New Delhi, to mobilize the largest protests the country has witnessed since the 1980s. The BJP attempted to delegitimize their cause, claiming its leaders were Khalistani separatists. This merely inflamed the situation, even leading Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, facing growing pressure from the Punjabi diaspora in Canada, to proclaim his support for the farmers' right to protest. His intervention earned a stiff rebuke from New Delhi.

The government's defensive insecurity reached a crescendo a few weeks later, following a tweet by the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who supported the farmers' protest and shared tips for mobilizing via social media. It warned of a "conspiracy to wage economic, social, cultural and regional war against India" and charged an associated Indian activist with sedition. The government pressured Twitter and Facebook to suspend

hundreds of accounts on national security grounds. It subsequently introduced new Internet rules curbing media freedom on many digital platforms, which granted the state immense powers to remove material, hold social media companies' executives liable for violations and create systems to identify the author of "offensive" posts.

When Freedom House, a U.S.-based democracy-tracking NGO, and V-Dem, the Varieties of Democracy research consortium in Sweden, respectively downgraded India to a "partly free" "electoral autocracy" in their 2021 annual reports, the reaction of the BJP foreign minister, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, was fierce:

"It is hypocrisy. We have a set of self-appointed custodians of the world who find it very difficult to stomach that somebody in India is not looking for their approval, is not willing to play the game they want to play. So they invent their rules, their parameters, pass their judgments and make it look as if it is some kind of global exercise," he said at a national media conclave.

The minister was right to point out the hypocrisy of many western democracies given their own flaws, support for autocratic regimes when it served their reasons of state and enduring colonial legacies. Yet Freedom House and V-Dem weren't wrong. The Indian government has severely undermined India's once-vaunted democracy.

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**"The persistence of democracy in India against unprecedented historical odds offered a powerful example to the world."**

The resilience of democracy in India, whose population represents almost one-fifth of humanity, obviously matters to its own citizens. Yet its significance has always extended far beyond the subcontinent. The persistence of democracy in India against unprecedented historical odds offered a powerful example to the world. It showed that a postcolonial

country, facing mass poverty, entrenched social inequalities and deep cultural diversity, did not have to pursue an autocratic path. Hence its severe degradation, during a decade where democracy has faltered almost everywhere, has far-reaching implications.

India matters to Canada for many reasons. **Our bilateral relations are complex.** Both are federal parliamentary democracies with diverse multiethnic societies. During the early post-Second World War era, India was the largest recipient of Canadian external assistance. Today, over 1.2 million citizens and residents of Indian origin contribute to Canadian society, from university students and professionals in many fields to elected representatives and public officials in Ottawa and the provinces. Yet disagreements over how to handle demands for autonomy and secessionist threats in Kashmir and especially the Punjab also caused tensions until the 1990s. New Delhi's decision to test its nuclear capabilities in 1998 led Ottawa to impose sanctions for several years. The Harper government thawed bilateral relations by bolstering trade and investment, recognizing India's nuclear status and exploring collaborative initiatives in energy, science and technology. The Trudeau government expanded similar initiatives in agriculture, environment and women's health. But **various missteps during the prime minister's 2018 visit to India** caused a preventable diplomatic setback.

Nevertheless, both countries officially support a multipolar international order, especially in Asia, its center of gravity in the twenty-first century. Like Canada, India displays mounting concern over China's willingness to pursue its geopolitical claims aggressively in multiple realms. Indeed, relations between Asia's two giants are at their worst in decades, following fatal clashes along the contested Himalayan border over the last two years. Hence the rising political status of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (India, Australia, Japan and the United States), and decision at the recent G7 meeting in the UK to convene the so-called D11 (the G7 plus Australia, South Africa, India and South Korea). India's strategic importance is self-evident.

Yet the difficulties posed by such initiatives, including a Summit of Democracies proposed by the Biden administration, are substantive. On the one hand, it is hard to censure Beijing for constructing internment

camps in Xinjiang and Moscow for jailing political opponents when New Delhi imposes an indefinite security lockdown in Kashmir and clamps down on social dissent. Any public criticism is likely to provoke official rebuke. Yet silence would suggest complicity or hypocrisy. On the other, the West's commitment to democracy and a rules-based international order demands critical scrutiny. Many supporters of the Republican Party sympathized with the January 6, 2021 mob attack on the Capitol aimed at overturning the presidential election. Its elected representatives refused to allow an independent commission to investigate the origins of the attempted insurrection, and blocked a landmark bill to stop voter suppression. All too frequently, the U.S. has propped up autocrats and violated international law whenever its perceived national interests demanded. Many western democracies have acted similarly. And we still must confront our colonial legacies, not least in Canada.

Hence the growing calls for a new approach to supporting democracy abroad. The threat of backsliding afflicts democracies everywhere in varying degrees. Establishing transnational networks of committed democratic actors to share their respective experiences, mutually learn from each other and develop practical strategies to overcome such threats might significantly help. The courageous individuals and organizations battling India's autocratic turn deserve our support and would have something to teach us in return. Such engagement would be good for its own sake — and thus for the prospects of democracy around the world.