

The corrosion of democracy in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the state of democracy in India, and arguments over whether it has suffered backsliding, since the capture of power by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014. On the one hand, the world's largest democracy appears in rude health. Constitutionally, India's democratic regime has many norms, institutions and mechanisms to share power and prevent the tyranny of majorities. National electoral participation has reached new heights. Opposition parties are able to unseat the BJP in competitive state elections. And social movements have been able to thwart specific policy changes. On the other hand, however, steady executive aggrandizement has concentrated power in the office and persona of the prime minister, tested the separation of powers, weakened the autonomy of many public institutions and the media, and undermined parliamentary cabinet government to an unprecedented degree. Furthermore, the resurgence of militant Hindu nationalism has threatened political opponents, secular dissidents and minority communities. Social campaigns by Hindu nationalist organizations have encouraged quotidian acts of harassment, intimidation and violence, sowing fear into civil society. Executive orders, legal rulings and lapses by the apex judiciary have eroded constitutional values and the fundamental rights of many citizens, particularly Muslims. Similar to other severe cases of democratic backsliding, the rise of an authoritarian populist invested in a politics of aggressive ethnonational majoritarianism, which seeks to delegitimize opposition parties, has exposed the limits of institutionalism and contestation through elections. The emergence of a new political hegemony in New Delhi suggests deeper sociological changes that, unless reversed, could imperil India's constitutional democracy.