

When the dangers of backsliding may be greater than breakdown: reflections from India

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Abstract

Since 2014, India has been governed by a powerful new leader, Narendra Modi, and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The demise of diverse multiparty governments in New Delhi, which had ruled India's federal parliamentary democracy since 1989, represents a complex watershed in the world's largest democracy. On the one hand, the rise to power of Modi has witnessed the highest electoral turnout since independence. In addition, the new political dispensation has catalyzed growing parity among voters belonging to historically subordinate groups. The electoral dimensions of democratic contestation have deepened in India over the last decade. On the other hand, however, the new prime minister has assiduously pursued a populist, plebiscitary and presidential style of rule, subverting the autonomy of many crucial institutions. His government has imposed a harsh crackdown on criticism and dissent in the media and civil society. And through controversial high-level constitutional amendments and legislative changes and ground-level social campaigns, it has sought to infuse a militant Hindu vision in the national imaginary and public sphere, spurring greater violence, especially towards Muslims. Unsurprisingly, such regressive tendencies eventually registered in major comparative indices of democracy in 2021, characterizing India as an "electoral autocracy" (V-Dem) that is now "partly free" (Freedom House). Many of these developments remind observers of the rule of Indira Gandhi, which eventually led to the suspension of democracy during the Emergency (1975-1977). Yet the historically unprecedented weakness of opposition parties in the electoral arena, relative decline of social movements in civil society, and growing ethnonational militancy towards minorities, secularists and liberals that define the Modi era are striking too.

These comparative developments may represent a far greater threat to the durability of modern Indian democracy than its brief suspension during the 1970s under Indira Gandhi. Under specific circumstances, backsliding can pose greater threats to democracy than its breakdown.