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# **DYNAMICS OF SELECTIVE DEMOCRACY: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF GOVERNANCE PATTERNS DURING THE MODI ADMINISTRATION**

AUTHORED BY - MIHIR AGRAWAL

## **ABSTRACT**

Modi led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ever since gaining power in 2014 has embarked a distinctive phase in India's historical narrative. During this period, the nation has witnessed a departure from fundamental democratic tenets, minority rights, and executive responsibility to a more authoritarian approach. India serves as a prominent illustration of the global decline in democracy. The recent reclassification of India as a hybrid regime significantly contributes to the broader trend of global autocratization. The manner in which India's democratic regression unfolds offers insights into contemporary democratic erosion – a process characterized not by dramatic coups or midnight arrests of opposition figures, but rather by the systematic employment of legal mechanisms to harass the opposition, the intimidation of media, and the consolidation of executive authority. Through the characterization of government criticism as an act of disloyalty to the nation, the Narendra Modi administration is eroding the fundamental notion that opposition is a legitimate and integral aspect of governance.

The analysis delves into the various dimensions of this approach, highlighting instances of media censorship, covert political maneuvering, and policies that appear to prioritize one specific class over others. The Article digs into the intricate dynamics of Selective Democracy, employing a comprehensive analytical approach, this article scrutinizes the governance patterns that have emerged under Modi's Administration, shedding light on the extent to which certain aspects of democracy may be prioritized or marginalized.

## **MODI RULE: RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM / PRE-DOMINANT HINDU ERA?**

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), rooted in the ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism, achieved a historic victory in 2014 by securing the first single-party majority in India's parliament in over three decades. The BJP's resurgence was fueled by accusations against the Congress Party of

practicing “pseudo-secularism” and allegedly favoring minority communities over the Hindu majority. This marked a notable shift toward a robust and pro-Hindu form of nationalism. Capitalizing on its significant 2014 success, the BJP has systematically extended its influence across extensive regions of India, wresting political dominance from the Congress Party and various regional adversaries. This trajectory characterizes the advent of the Modi era as a period dominated by a pronounced Hindu-centric ethos. While numerous political parties in India utilize religious symbols for political objectives, the BJP champions a unique ideology inherently favoring the Hindu community over others. Despite Hindus constituting 80% of India's population, the nation accommodates a substantial number of religious minorities, notably over 175 million Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 could be perceived as one such discriminatory policy that establishes an expedited pathway to Indian citizenship for undocumented immigrants belonging to particular religious minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian) hailing from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, while explicitly excluding Muslims. Critics assert that this legislation, favoring non-Muslims, is in contradiction to the principles of equal treatment and secularism.<sup>2</sup> Incidents of violence against Muslims, including acts such as lynchings or mob killings, have seen a significant increase. Cases of mob-lynching related to bovine crises (often involving rumors of individuals handling cows, typically Muslims) have notably surged as a proportion of overall violence in India since 2010. As reported by numerous autonomous International organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the U.S. Commission on Religious Freedom, an overwhelming minority population in India currently lives in an atmosphere characterized by a “widespread climate of fear.”<sup>3</sup>

## **DEVIOUS ELECTION STRATEGIES: SUPPRESS OPPOSITION?**

The frequent and consistent conduct of raids against political adversaries has become an established and unsurprising element of our political landscape. The government routinely characterizes objections to these raids as inconsequential uproar, asserting that it is merely

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<sup>1</sup> Indian Ministry of Home Affairs Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, “2011 Census Data,” 2011, <http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-Common/CensusData2011.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia Polgreen, “The World’s Biggest Democracy Is Jettisoning Freedom and Tolerance,” *The New York Times* (Feb. 8, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/08/opinion/india-modi-bbc-democracy.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Sandipan Baksi and Aravindhnan Nagarajan, “Mob Lynchings in India: A Look at Data and the Story Behind the Numbers,” *Newslaundry* (July 4, 2017), [www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/04/mob-lynchings-in-india-a-look-at-data-and-the-story-behind-the-numbers](http://www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/04/mob-lynchings-in-india-a-look-at-data-and-the-story-behind-the-numbers).

upholding the rule of law. It maintains that its actions are aimed at dismantling any perceived immunity from legal scrutiny and holding accountable those deemed corrupt within the established political echelons. Additionally, the government rebuffs criticisms from the opposition, dismissing them as hypocritical, citing instances when the opposition itself utilized similar raid tactics for political purposes during its tenure in power. This recurring pattern raises questions about the broader implications for democratic principles and governance within our political system. Although using raids as political instruments against the opposition predates the Modi administration, there have been alterations that have elevated these sporadic raids into a systematic paradigm known as 'Rule by Raids.'<sup>4</sup>

There has been a significant escalation in both the frequency of political cases and the number of raids, particularly with the Enforcement Directorate emerging as the preferred tool of the government. Employing the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002, a statute seemingly favored by the administration for prosecuting adversaries, there has been an increase exceeding 27 times in the searches conducted by the Enforcement Directorate during Modi's tenure.<sup>5</sup> This remarkable surge has resulted in the transformation of politically motivated raids from sporadic occurrences into a systematic and anticipated mechanism of political influence. There is a notable absence of meticulous public examination regarding the ramifications of these raids and their societal benefits. Similar to political rallies, raids have evolved into a repetitive political exhibition, strategically managing the news cycle. These actions serve to curb the mobility of opponents while concurrently undermining their credibility through punitive measures.<sup>6</sup>

The deliberate targeting of opponents through raids contravenes the fundamental principles of democracy, as it imposes consequences such as raids and prosecution for the exercise of the fundamental rights of political speech and assembly. Critique, dissent, and free speech are seen as fundamental rights and are not punished under democratic institutions when individuals voice their disagreement with those in authority. However, the use of raids in this context sends a

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<sup>4</sup> Pranee Pathak, "Five Reasons Why Modi Government's 'Rule By Raids' Weakens India's Democracy," The Wire (Feb. 28, 2023), <https://thewire.in/government/five-reasons-why-modi-govts-rule-by-raids-weakens-indias-democracy>.

<sup>5</sup> Prem Shankar Jha, "Weaponising ED Shows Modi's Limitless Ambition to Stamp Out All Political Opposition," The Wire (Aug. 26, 2022), <https://thewire.in/politics/weaponising-ed-shows-modis-limitless-ambition-to-stamp-out-all-political-opposition>.

<sup>6</sup> PTI, "PM Modi has resorted to tactics of FDI - fear, deception, intimidation: Congress on ED raids in Rajasthan," The Deccan Herald (Oct. 27, 2023), <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/pm-modi-has-resorted-to-tactics-of-fdi-fear-deception-intimidation-congress-on-ed-raids-in-rajasthan-2743664>.

disquieting message to individuals endeavoring to hold the government accountable. This pattern also poses a threat to another crucial facet of the rule of law: equality in legal treatment. It establishes a dichotomy, wherein individuals aligned with the regime enjoy an added privilege of immunity from prosecution even when offenses are committed, while those in opposition face the prospect of persecution even in the absence of criminal wrongdoing.

## **MEDIA CONTROL AND CYBER MILITANCY**

The initial term of the Modi administration initiated a series of actions aimed at undermining and assimilating the mainstream media. Access to government sources for primary news gathering was restricted, with the prime minister and his ministers predominantly utilizing state-owned media and social media platforms for direct communication with the public. During its second term, the Modi government is solidifying a pre-existing, nascent pattern of narrative control. Traditional media outlets in print and television have been effectively brought under influence, exhibiting a reduced inclination to significantly challenge the government. The current emphasis on control is directed towards digital media platforms, encompassing a strategic concentration on social media. This indicates a discernible progression in the government's strategy to influence and manage public discourse, with an increased focus on the digital landscape.

Since 2014, India's position in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders has declined to 161st out of 180 countries. This ranking places India below countries such as Bahrain, Egypt, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Journalists in India occasionally face death threats and are commonly subjected to hate campaigns on social media orchestrated by troll farms associated with the government. Prominent media networks refrain from openly criticizing the Modi government due to perceived limitations on press freedom.

Mukesh Ambani, a business figure closely affiliated with Modi, exercises direct control over media platforms that collectively reach a minimum of 800 million Indian audiences.<sup>8</sup> In another instance, Gautam Adani, a notable associate of Modi, completed the acquisition of NDTV, India's last significant independent television network, in December 2022. Analysts assert that Adani's takeover of NDTV signifies the conclusion of independent media in India, thereby consolidating

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<sup>7</sup> Media Ownership Monitor, India, 2023, <http://india.mom-gmr.org/en/>

<sup>8</sup> Anjana Krishnan, "India Report 2022," Reuters Institute, Oxford University, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/india>.

major television news channels under the ownership of billionaires with significant connections to the Indian government.<sup>9</sup>

The present state of affairs in India is frequently characterized as an “Undeclared Emergency,” primarily due to the fact that the government is not compelled to officially declare an emergency because the effective tool of self-censorship can be wielded as a powerful means to suppress any dissenting voices.<sup>10</sup> The government is progressively leveraging technology to restrict human rights and suppress freedom of expression on the internet. In February 2021, the Indian government introduced the Information Technology Rules, posing threats to both freedom of expression and the right to privacy. These regulations grant the government the authority to unilaterally demand the removal of online content without the need for judicial oversight.

## CONCLUSION

Democracy in India, akin to global patterns, is presently not succumbing to overt military coups or orchestrated, large-scale arrests of political adversaries. Rather, autocratic leaders have acquired the skill to articulate democratic rhetoric while concurrently implementing autocratic policies. This involves upholding a legal semblance of democracy while actively engaging in the harassment of opposition figures and ruthlessly limiting the space for sincere criticism from devoted voices.

Modi government's approach to governance has been marked by a multifaceted strategy that extends beyond traditional political practices. From stifling media voices to employing covert methods to quell opposition, and exhibiting preferential treatment towards Hindu nationals, the government's actions have raised concerns about fairness, pluralism, and the protection of democratic values. The discernible favoritism towards a specific class has not only impacted the principles of equal representation and justice but has also contributed to a broader narrative of democratic erosion. As India navigates these complex challenges, the need for a transparent, inclusive, and accountable governance model remains paramount for the sustained vitality of its democratic institutions.

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<sup>9</sup> Astha Rajvanshi, “India’s Richest Man Is Buying a Major TV Channel. It’s a Blow to Independent Media in the Country,” Time (Dec. 1, 2022), <https://time.com/6238075/india-ndtv-gautam-adani-narendramodi/>.

<sup>10</sup> Gurpreet Singh, “Media under Modi,” Citizens for Justice and Peace, (Mar. 6, 2018) <https://cjp.org.in/media-under-modi/>.