

India: Explaining Narendra Modi's Global Image Victory

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Modi's biggest image-building weapon is neither in his control nor in his consciousness.

It is [highly likely](#) that Narendra Modi will be handed another term as prime minister on May 23, even if the Bharatiya Janata Party takes a few losses here and there. If, by some unlikely chance, he loses, he has already established a global presence as a bold, imaginative and popular leader, a tribute to the democratic voice of India's people.

This is a global media victory for Modi, regardless of the outcome on May 23. If Modi wins this time, some of his followers have said that India will [no longer need a constitution](#), or even its electoral democracy. How did Modi achieve this global image, in spite of his disturbing record on human rights, tolerance and dissent? Is this some magic Teflon coating that is woven into his tailor-made waistcoats and kurtas, or is something else involved?

Modi's years as chief minister of Gujarat (2001-2014) were inaugurated with India's worst state-endorsed pogrom against Muslims, sparked by the killing of a group of Hindu pilgrims on a train in Godhra in February 2002.

After the Godhra attack, Gujarat saw the worst organised violence against Muslims since Partition, in which over a thousand Muslims were butchered – many were raped, tens of thousands were dispossessed – all with the full knowledge and collusion of the police and the state bureaucracy. Though the Special Investigation Team set up by the Supreme Court decided there were no grounds to charge Modi with direct involvement in this pogrom, numerous independent commissions, inquiries and reports have demonstrated his full support of it.

Not only did Modi escape with no major stain on his reputation for the post-Godhra brutality against Muslims in Gujarat, he went on to build a formidable following in his state, strengthen his reputation and power in the BJP, and rode both these horses to victory in 2014, when he became prime minister. Since 2014, Modi has made many claims about his contributions to India's economic growth, its military might and its global standing. Most of these claims have been credibly contested.

What is most important about the Modi regime is its systematic destruction of Indian secular ideals, its freedoms of speech, assembly and expression, and the guarantee of the lives and safety of journalists. In addition, the boards of universities, museums, foundations and non-governmental organisations have been packed with doctrinaire BJP members and personal devotees of Modi. The army has been systematically pulled into political debates and scandals, and planning and economic policy at the highest levels have been handed over to BJP party hacks.

On the streets, Hindu nationalist thugs have been involved in the destruction of statues, rapes, the killing of activists, Dalits, Muslims, journalists and other political opponents – with impunity, and frequently with police protection or collusion. The Election Commission of India, its proudest agency for guaranteeing free and fair elections, has been cowed into compliance, the police forces have

become tied to the whims of the ruling party, and every form of dissent from Modi and his party is labelled anti-patriotic, anti-national and treasonous. Modi and his followers have captured both the symbolism of the nation and the organs of the state.

This is the largest democratic coup in history. It is also the clearest sign of the global erosion of democracy by electoral majority.

The big puzzle is why Modi still enjoys such a positive reputation worldwide, and most notably in the United States and Europe. The Western media generally portrays him as a strong, charismatic, effective and democratic leader. There have been exceptions, such as the *New York Times* in the US, the *Economist* in the UK and *Le Monde* in France, especially since 2017. But this mild reversal in major media outlets is too little, too late. All these outlets have taken their time to get over the euphoria of Modi's 2014 victory, and they still do not significantly affect the broader views of Modi among Western intellectuals in academia and the public sphere. And if Modi wins, their tune might well revert to their prior admiration.

How is this possible, given that information – verifiable information – about his active destruction of democratic values and institutions in India is easily available in newspapers, magazines, websites, social media and reports and documents of every type? How can we account for his high standing even among otherwise liberal politicians, diplomats, journalists, policy-makers and public intellectuals in the West?

Among these people are many who are sharply critical of such elected dictators as Donald Trump, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Benjamin Netanyahu, Rodrigo Duterte, Jair Bolsonaro, Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orban, not to speak of other leaders in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East who have subverted what were originally Western democratic values. Why is Modi's global image still so clean?

Some plausible answers might be found in such factors as Modi's media savvy, India's potential as a counterweight to China, the friendliness to global trade and investment of the Modi regime, India's status as a major arms buyer and seller, and the prominent role of many iconic members of the global Indian diaspora in promoting 'pro-India' messages which also whitewash Modi.

But many other authoritarian populists also have big media machines, a relentless Twitter presence or major inventories of commodities like oil. But they are not able to escape the opprobrium of important voices in the Western public sphere. What is Modi's secret?

Modi's biggest image-building weapon is neither in his control nor in his consciousness. It is the persistent, prominent and hard-wired image of India as "the world's largest democracy", as a land of peace, tolerance and spirituality, of hard-won successes in science, industry and entrepreneurship, and above all of a working, mass democracy. Not even a compromised judiciary, an embattled free press, a corrupt and criminalised legislative sphere, terrorised minorities and the biggest networks of crony capitalism anywhere can shake this image. And Modi is the biggest beneficiary of this obsolete image.

It is not just that Modi is a major beneficiary of fake news of his achievements and fake denials of his crimes, but he is the beneficiary of a fake image of India – one that is so precious to many Western observers, perhaps especially the liberal ones, that they cannot let it go. This image of India has been built over decades, equally by Jawaharlal Nehru's quasi-socialist planners, Western politicians and development agencies, neoliberal globalisers, Indian corporate image-makers and nationalist technocrats. It is the one broad image on which right and left, Western boosters and Indian nationalists, all find common cause, and thus it has had time to evolve, grow deep roots and become

impervious to the evidence.

In the unlikely event that Modi loses in the current elections, it will be because the Indian electorate has recognised that this image of India is deeply out of sync with reality. If Modi wins, these voices of dissent within India will be throttled and the liberal West (and its Indian nationalist counterparts) will continue to live in their dream of India as a peaceful, tolerant and multicultural democracy. In either case, it is time for progressive liberals everywhere to wake up.

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Note: In an earlier version of this article, the year of the Babri Masjid's demolition was wrongly stated as 1989.

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