

Who Can Stop Modi and His Authoritarian Vision for India?

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Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi's conviction for criminal defamation is the latest sign that India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi is moving toward Hindu nationalist authoritarianism.

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India, opposition leader Rahul Gandhi's conviction for criminal defamation is capturing headlines. The "world's largest democracy" does not treat defamation as a civil matter, and the Congress Party leader faced justice in a lower court in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat.

This is for a public speech in which Gandhi declared that the prime minister has a surname shared with a couple of moneyed social and business highflyers who were convicted of corruption but got out of the country. The court ruled in favor of the petitioner, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislator also with the last name Modi who claimed that this was defamation of a whole bloc of intermediate caste persons.

If the Congress Party's appeal to the higher courts fails, Gandhi will have to serve a two-year imprisonment. With suspiciously great speed he has been disqualified as an MP and cannot attend or speak in Parliament. Even before this the BJP had been contemptuously dismissing his four-month-long (early September 2022 to end January 2023) daily journey on foot from the southernmost tip of the country to Kashmir to "Unite the Country" (*Bharat Jodo Yatra*). This did enhance his personal public image and raise his national stature, even though it had less of an impact on the popularity of his party. This was followed by a BJP campaign against Gandhi for being "anti-national" when, during his subsequent visit to Britain, he publicly criticized Modi and his government for degrading Indian democracy.

Diversion Within the Larger Game Plan

All this has served an important diversionary purpose for the BJP and Modi. Earlier this year an external financial company, Hindenburg Research, put out a report exposing the shady dealings of Gautam Adani, a crony of Modi from his days as Gujarat chief minister. When Modi became prime minister in 2014, Adani's rank in the world list of dollar billionaires was 608. By late 2022 he had become the world's third-richest person. Adani's plane has been regularly used by Modi for electoral campaigning, and the capitalist magnate — as part of business delegations — has repeatedly accompanied the prime minister on his official trips abroad.

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Modi's domestic image as incorruptible is being seriously threatened, really for the first time. The opposition parties, with the Congress Party and Gandhi at the fore, have been demanding that the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's Parliament) set up a Joint Parliamentary Committee to investigate the Adani affair. BJP MPs have therefore been creating pandemonium in the Lok Sabha, insisting that all proceedings in the remaining few days of the budget session must be on hold till Gandhi apologizes for his remarks made abroad.

The Modi government and the forces of Hindutva implanted in society are out to establish a de facto ethnocracy. This does not require the complete elimination of liberal democracy and associated rights, which could be counterproductive — after all, the majority-Hindu population must be persuaded to welcome this project — but it does require the dramatic hollowing out of the structures of democracy.

The system of checks and balances between the executive, legislature, and judiciary must be seriously eroded. Much has already been accomplished in the effort to curtail the independence of the Supreme Court, which sets the standard for the courts below, but more is required. Just a few days ago, that court ruled that mere membership of a banned organization — that is, “guilt by association” alone, without commission of any crime — is sufficient for application of India's most draconian law (the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act), which makes bail for anyone charged and arrested extraordinarily difficult and rare.

Some journalists have been so charged for their “anti-national” writings. At a now more mundane and regular level, the host of underlings belonging to any of the various organizations that are committed to the Hindutva project will file cases in the lower courts against many dissidents who are publicly opposed, and/or register “First Information Reports” (FIRs) duly followed up by a compliant police in the currently seventeen out of twenty-eight states ruled by BJP and allies. The purpose is to make the legal process (and costs entailed) itself the punishment, and to frighten other potential dissenters.

Most of the regional political parties in India now recognize that the BJP is hell-bent on expanding its regional electoral reach to the point where these parties become marginal or no longer exist. This emphasis on winning elections remains central to the BJP. It knows that it must retain the domestic and international legitimacy that comes from winning basically free and fair elections. By May 2024 general elections must be held, and a possible third five-year term is the prize awaiting Modi and the forces of Hindutva. Victory will mean a further dramatic consolidation of hegemony for a far-right administration that has undeniable fascist characteristics.

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This year alone features nine state assembly elections. Three have already taken place in the Northeast, with the BJP retaining its hold. It secured a majority of seats in Tripura and is the junior partner in alliances with a local party in the Christian-majority states of Meghalaya and Nagaland. These two states are greatly dependent on financial support from the center, which favors whatever party or coalition rules in New Delhi. The results in five of the remaining six state elections (one is in the small Christian-majority Northeastern state of Mizoram) will provide some idea of which way the political wind is blowing, for or against the BJP, and with what velocity. This May there will be local elections in Karnataka, already ruled by the BJP. In November and December three significant Hindi heartland states, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh — the former two currently ruled by the Congress, the latter by the BJP — go to the polls.

The Modi Factor

This is where the Modi factor comes in, and partly explains why the prime minister is hostile to personal criticism. He is steeped in the ideology of Hindutva and loyal to the parent body, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has headed a wider family of organizations (the Sangh Parivar) and spawned such bodies as an electoral wing; national federations of students, women, and trade unions; the volunteer “storm troopers”; and the cultural-religious wing, the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). But whereas the RSS has always insisted on political leaders remaining subordinate to the collective decision-making culture, Modi made a decisive break in deciding to use all communicative and other means to project himself.

As it is, the acquisition of state power by the BJP greatly increased the capacity of the Sangh to advance Hindutva goals, thus shifting the relationship of forces between the RSS and the BJP more in the latter’s favor. Since electoral victories are in turn crucial to the BJP achieving state power, the electoral draw of Modi becomes that much more important. Today’s era of the mediatization of political life and messaging has greatly valorized personal image projection. Furthermore, policy convergences in India of almost all the contending parties toward harder or softer versions of Hindutva — and toward a common compensatory form of neoliberalism in economics — means that political vices are more shared, and differentiating virtues less meaningful and more obscured.

Indeed, all poll surveys repeatedly show that Modi is significantly more popular than his party, and this has real electoral impact; even among the voters of other parties, at the national level he is ranked easily ahead of all other candidates, including Rahul Gandhi.

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These are substantial political reasons why Modi must protect his reputation and image. His

electoral appeal keeps him unchallenged within his party, the Sangh, and the government, where he has centralized more power for both domestic and foreign policy making than any previous prime minister, with the exception of Jawaharlal Nehru in the terrain of foreign policy. But this is not the whole story. Modi is a deeply self-obsessed personality. For someone who sees himself as potentially a world leader of sorts — himself as the embodiment of India as a *Vishwaguru* or “World Teacher” — he was greatly shaken by his status as an international pariah when he was denied a visa to travel to the United States, the UK, and some countries in Europe after the Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom of 2002. It still hurts.

Any casual visitor to India will be amazed at the truly Goebbelsian manner in which images of Modi feature up and down the country (especially but not only in BJP ruled states) in public spaces and in the electronic and print media, where his picture will be on any number of advertised government schemes, big or small, past and present (including those that were never initiated under his government). An incredible but revealing lowest point in this respect was reached when every COVID-19 vaccine certificate given out to Indians had his picture embossed on it.

Modi is the first prime minister never to have given a public press conference; he lets his ministers answer questions in Parliament, and always prefers monologues delivered in campaign gatherings or on his regular radio program. A recent BBC documentary film on the 2002 pogrom shows how indifferent, if not collusive, the government and police under his chief ministership seemed to be, and also features his stone-faced responses to a British interviewer. This film, available on mobiles, was promptly banned.

Just a short while ago the Common Man’s Party (AAP) printed and plastered posters in Delhi that said in Hindi, “Get Rid of Modi and Save the Country.” The Delhi police, under the central government, were ordered to lodge FIRs against those responsible as well as arrest some of the contracted printers. The message being sent is clear: to be anti-Modi is to be anti-India and a stooge of foreign enemies who want to degrade his national and international reputation when India under Modi is currently being honored as president of the G20, whose various meetings are taking place in India throughout 2023.

Opposition Unity and the Near Future

The attack on Gandhi is also very much a part of the strategy of sticks and carrots to weaken the opposition as a whole. Is the fact that most other non-BJP parties have joined the Congress in condemning Gandhi’s conviction a sign of growing opposition unity for campaigning and for the 2024 elections? This is being much too optimistic. The Congress is now basically a regional party, but because it rules in three states it has a wider national presence than the others. The AAP, ruling in Delhi and Punjab, and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, intend to advance nationally and see their best chances of doing so requiring them to intrude into the base of the Congress, not into that of the BJP. Other ruling parties would have to settle the terms of working with the Congress and would be reluctant to accept a Congress leadership in any national front that is to be established.

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The Left Democratic Front rules in Kerala, where the Congress is the main opposition, thus posing its own tricky problems. The Left's pre-poll alliance with the Congress in Tripura resulted in the Left faring worse than it did in the 2018 assembly elections. More importantly, anti-BJPism and not even anti-Hindutva is the only common thread among the bourgeois parties, and this can hardly be a basis for providing a serious ideological alternative to the ruling dispensation.

What it perhaps comes down to is whether the anti-corruption plank can be both the glue to keep the opposition more or less together and the factor that can mobilize sufficient public anger. Corruption is the safest of issues in that whether parties, groups, and individuals are on the Left, the Right, or the center, all can jump onto this particular bandwagon.

So, can there be further revelations about the Adani affair, and will these be damaging enough in the period between now and the general elections? On three occasions in India's past this anti-corruption plank has proved politically effective. In 1974, the JP Movement certainly shook Indira Gandhi's government at the time. Then there was the Bofors arms-purchase scandal that enabled a patched-up coalition of parties to defeat Rajiv Gandhi's Congress government in the 1989 elections. Finally, it was the anti-corruption movement of 2011 that would propel the AAP to victory in the Delhi elections two years later and help the BJP arrive to power in 2014.

By the end of this year we will have a better sense of what to expect or hope for in the general elections. But let us not fool ourselves. Irrespective of election results state-wise or national, to decisively defeat the hegemony of Hindutva will require a much longer struggle — with a key role for a new and more militant left.

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P.S.

• Jacobin. 03.28.2023:

<https://jacobin.com/2023/03/narendra-modi-authoritarianism-hindutva-corruption-rahul-gandhi-opposition>

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