

# India : popular movements, not elections, will bring transformative change

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With the exception of a brief period, India has been more fortunate than many other nations in being able to maintain parliamentary rule over the last 77 years. With 900 million voters—more than the populations of Europe and Australia put together—the Indian elections are hailed as the largest exhibition and celebration of democracy. The nation’s economic growth over the past 30 years—one of the fastest in the world—also makes the elections noteworthy on a global scale.

India is undoubtedly at the forefront of global capitalist expansion, despite the fact that this process has resulted in a massive rise in inequality. The proportions of this inequality are reminiscent of the darkest days of the colonial era.

## The “Modi-magic”

Like his far-right and fascist predecessors, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi can gather sizable, adoring crowds both at home and abroad. Previously a key component of ruling coalitions, his party, the BJP, has had remarkable election victories since 2014 under his individualised leadership. With its dual emphasis on Hindu nationalism and neo-developmentalism, it has also been successful in establishing ideological dominance. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the BJP’s nationalist views in detail. But we can fairly state that the party has created a new nationalist narrative that is widely accepted by a great chunk of the electorate. Over and above that, the BJP has also been able to define and refine the narrative about the economy and economic growth.

The BJP’s strategy has been centred around a few key elements. Firstly, the Modi administration is unabashedly pro-business, especially when it comes to Indian-owned enterprises. He has also deftly connected India’s prestige abroad with this unshackling of Indian business. For example, after getting elected in 2014, Modi audaciously pledged to propel India’s placement in the World Bank’s *Ease of Doing Business* rankings into the top 50 worldwide. India is rated 63rd out of 190 economies in the Bank’s most recent annual ratings.

Secondly, Modi has been successfully able to flaunt his credentials as the best anticorruption reformer. He has proved capable of transforming mainly ineffective initiatives into media hits with his mastery of public harangue and message management. Thirdly, the prime minister’s self-projection as the creator of the contemporary welfare state in India resonates with the voting public. However, the developments have given rise to concerns about the future of democracy in the

country.

## **Systemic flaws**

The Indian electoral system is fraught with systemic flaws. The first past the post (i.e., winner-take-all) electoral system, established by the Indian Constitution on the Westminster model, has been one of the major shortcomings. Previously, it had continued to give the Congress Party huge parliamentary majorities, even as its share of the popular vote began to dwindle. The BJP took advantage of this, and since 2014 Modi and his entourage have had a disproportionate presence in Parliament in relation to their vote share.

Secondly, it has become more and more obvious that money dominates Indian elections. The enormous expenditure has come to be recognised and bemoaned as a fundamental aspect of the country's political economy. Furthermore, there is essentially little transparency about political contributions. It is nearly impossible to find out who has given money to a politician or party or where the politician gets funding for their campaign. Donors are hardly ready to make their political contributions public, out of concern that they may face a backlash if their chosen party loses power. In light of this, the Narendra Modi administration made a large announcement about "electoral bonds", an ambitious 'reform' to election finance in 2017, and presented it as an attempt to increase political financial transparency.

According to a recent analysis, between 2016 and 2022 the BJP got three times as much money in direct corporate donations and electoral bonds (Rupees 5,300 crore \$639.36 million) as all other national parties put together (Rupees 1,800 crore \$217.17 million). The Indian voters certainly have the right to know the source of a party's funding for voter outreach. Are these bond-donating companies legitimate, or were they founded only to transfer black money to political donations? Are '[Public Sector Undertakings](#)' (the Indian equivalent of State Owned Enterprises) being forced to donate?

In a recent development, the Indian government's electoral bond scheme was declared unlawful by the Supreme Court. It emphasised that the scheme, by allowing anonymous political donations, contravenes the right to information under the Constitution. One can only hope that the verdict allows the electorate to make more informed decisions and facilitates a more level-playing field for political parties in the run-up to the general elections this year.

The verdict also made clear that this kind of right extends beyond exercising freedom of speech and expression. It is essential to advancing participatory democracy by keeping the government accountable. It emphasised the strong correlation between money and politics, and how economic inequality results in varying degrees of political participation. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that donating money to a political party would result in *quid pro quo* agreements. The court ruled that the amendment made to the Companies, which allowed corporations to make limitless political payments, was blatantly arbitrary.

Finally, the Election Commission of India, *de facto*, has limited independence and can be controlled and manipulated by the ruling dispensation.

## **Democratic institutions undermined**

India is one of the prime examples of global democratic recession. Growing polarisation, media persecution, censorship, compromised electoral integrity, and a declining space for dissent are all

threats to India's democracy. The BJP-led administration, which took office in 2014 and retained it in 2019, has come under fire for its dismal showing on democratic indices.

[Freedom House](#) maintains India's "Partly Free" status, but commentators argue that the country has become increasingly illiberal, ideologically. The BJP in power has encouraged radical Hindu nationalists, leading to increased attacks on religious minorities and discrimination against Muslims and Christians.

India has been classified as an "electoral autocracy" by the [Varieties of Democracy](#) (V-Dem) project and a "flawed democracy" by the [Economist Intelligence Unit](#), highlighting the country's democratic decline. The Indian government's anti-democratic tendencies have increasingly intensified, leaving very little space for dissent and protest. Even the opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, was expelled from parliament following a defamation conviction for a joke about the prime minister. The government also took control of one of the few remaining independent television channels, resulting in a significant drop in India's 2023 World Press Freedom Index ranking. India occupies the 161st spot out of 180 countries.

The forthcoming general Indian elections are going to take place in a context where the free and informed choice of the electorate is increasingly undermined by both structural and engineered factors. At this point in time, the common view is that the BJP is most likely to scrape through, even though the opposition is attempting to create a semblance of a united front against it. However, the opposition is equally embedded in the same neoliberal economic doctrines, and there's little to choose between the two warring camps as far as policies are concerned.

## **Popular movements**

The only force capable of bringing about a progressive and transformative change in the Indian body-politic is the popular mobilisations from below. A couple of years ago, the Indian farmer's movement demonstrated that strong movements from below could have the potential to take on the *Hinduvta* juggernaut, much more than makeshift electoral alliances.

Social movements, however, have very little effect on electoral politics. Despite the protests by farmers in 2020-2021, the BJP won handsomely in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh legislative assembly elections, particularly in the farming region of Western UP, which is home to a sizable *Jat* population who supported the movement in considerable measure. Undoubtedly, the movement has motivated millions of people worldwide to struggle for equity, democracy, and solidarity ; but it still has a long way to go to create a political hegemony beyond the militant protests. There have been significant mobilisations from many other social groups ; the challenge lies in figuring out how to bring them all together to develop a transformational agenda.

How can we explain the inability of the social movements to create political hegemony despite numerous struggles across the country ? Well, the absence of the Left and progressive forces has created an ideological vacuum that leads many of the movements into a blind alley, even after accomplishing gains after painstaking struggles. Instead of forging solidarities and fostering alternatives, popular resentment and rage are fuelling the ascent of the right wing in India in the absence of an ideologically driven anti-capitalist agenda. It is in this context that the rebirth of a radical new Left is more necessary than ever.

**Sushovan Dhar**

*Postscript*

A possible defeat of the BJP can surely offer a vital breathing space for the construction of an alternative agenda. However, it's only a means and not an end in itself.

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**P.-S.**

- Article written for the South African magazine *Amandla !*, issue n°92, April 2024 ("Wake up call for the Left).
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