



# THE HINDU CENTRE

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## General Election 2024: *Quo Vadis* India?



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A voter awareness campaign by the Election Commission of India in Hubballi, Karnataka on April 04, 2024. India goes to the polls over seven phases from April 19 to June 01, to elect its representatives to the 18th Lok Sabha. Photo: PTI.

*India's General Election to the 18<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (LS, the House of the People) has the makings of a high-stakes contest. The early decades saw the dominance the Indian National Congress (INC), even if its pan-India presence receded after the 4<sup>th</sup> LS and State Elections in 1967. The politics of the INC touched its nadir during the Emergency (June 25, 1975 - March 21, 1977). Despite bouncing back in the 7<sup>th</sup> LS (1980), after a non-Congress coalition in the 6<sup>th</sup> LS (1977) fell apart, and then securing an all-time high majority for any party till date in the 8<sup>th</sup> LS (1984), the INC is yet to reclaim the country's political commanding heights. The era of coalitions/minority governments from the 9<sup>th</sup> LS (1989) to the 15<sup>th</sup> LS (2009) played two distinctive roles: it checked one-party dominance and ushered in politics of accommodation. This was reversed with the re-emergence of a single-party rule by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabhas (2014 and 2019), under the premiership of Narendra Modi.*

*During this decade, disparate interests – religions, castes, classes; economic, social, geographical – were all sought to be coalesced under the rallying call: “One Nation, One...” (the second “One” periodically updated to incorporate a state or individual activity that would strike at India's quasi-federal structure and diversity). The undercurrents that tugged India over the past 10 years are evident: the move towards a state that is majoritarian rather than plural; a government that favours big private capital to wider redistribution; and policies to benefit a few at the cost of the many. The election manifestoes of the prime contenders to power – the BJP and the INC – also delineate their ideological positions. The former promises to take forward its policies, propel India to the status of a developed country, and retains its sharp focus on cultural nationalism; the latter seeks a mandate to reverse divisive trends, with progress, equity, and inclusivity as the touchstones of its politics and policy-making.*

*Against this backdrop, **Diego Maiorano, Senior Assistant Professor of Indian History and Politics at the University of Naples L'Orientale**, comments on what the decade that has gone by meant for India's political journey, its collective mindset, and its democratic institutions of state. He also flags the larger issues that the world's largest electorate must contend with when it votes in the 18<sup>th</sup> LS election, scheduled to be held in seven phases from April 19 to June 01, 2024.*

## **I. A decade of changes – transient or transformative?**

**A**s India approaches the 2024 General Election, I went through my notes on the main political events of the last 10 years wondering how the country's polity has changed since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister. Scrolling through hundreds of articles in my archive, I realised that a lot of attention has been paid to developments which, although very important at the time they happened, might not have a lasting impact on the country's political system.

Take, for instance, demonetisation, on which tens of thousands of words have been written. Surely, its immediate impact was debilitating: the economy suffered a heart attack from which the country—especially the large informal sector—struggled to recover. But besides revealing an erratic and unpredictable policy style, its medium-term impact will be hard to notice in a few years from now.

A similar point could be made about the recent revelations on electoral bonds. Although crucial to understand the logics underpinning the functioning of the government as well as to assess its track record, will the issue still be relevant in a couple of decades? Most probably not, as by then it will have added to a long list of exposes, which have besmirched India's political economy. Consider, for a moment, the current relevance of scandals unearthed over the decades since Independence on the popular political psyche: not much, one could say, although they probably contributed to immediate electoral defeats – only to be re-elected as time went by.

## **II. Democratic and institutional erosions – reversible or not?**

**O**f a different order, however, is the erosion of democracy witnessed over the last few years. Again, tens of thousands of words have been written, but will this political tampering have a lasting impact in, say, 20 or 30 years from now? Of course, it might be that India's democratic institutions will not recover for a long time. Previous spasms of autocratic governance – the

Emergency, above all, but also Indira Gandhi's second term in office in the 1980s – left scars on Indian institutions<sup>1</sup>. Take the politicised use of government institutions like the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), or the erosion of the autonomy of the Supreme Court (both inaugurated by the late Mrs. Gandhi). This crimping of democratic norms contributed to shaping institutional behaviour in the decades that followed and made it more acceptable for Indian voters to tolerate abuses of power by the ruling party.

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However, Indian institutions did recover substantially after 1989<sup>2</sup>. A key reason for this is obviously the configuration of the party system, which, during periods of coalition governments, freed up breathing space for India's institutions to reassert their autonomy and independence. As much of the fortunes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) depend on the Prime Minister himself – in 2019, when the party won its second consecutive term, as many as one-third of the BJP's voters said they would have not chosen the party had Mr. Modi not been the prime ministerial candidate<sup>3</sup> – it is far from certain that the BJP will continue to win absolute majorities in the years to come. In fact, even a relatively small decline in the party's vote share (say 5 per cent) might result in a much more pronounced decline in the seat share, reopening the space for coalitions to play a larger role in government affairs and, in the process, limiting the reach of the central government into the functioning of other institutions of state. Civil society and the media would also likely flourish again. The Parliament would also probably reconquer a more central, and rightful, place in the country's political life<sup>4</sup>.

Of course, much depends on where the current phase of autocratisation stops. If a certain undefined threshold is crossed, the country might struggle to recover for a long time. If, for instance, the BJP (and its allies in business, government, and society) start fearing that in the case of an electoral defeat they will be treated as enemies (rather than rivals), a smooth transition of power could become messy;

or even more blatantly, a possible erosion in the quinquennial popular collective expression that still reminds Indians that they live in a (bruised, to be sure) democratic system: free elections. (Given the heft of an aggregate of powers – money and muscle, to name two – the fairness of the elections is currently a bit of a question mark). Or, if and when the BJP eventually loses an election, and a new government retaliates in a similar fashion – persecuting rivals, arresting other parties’ leaders, stuffing institutions with their own people, and shrinking the space for free speech – the country might indeed find itself mired in a hybrid political system, from which it will be difficult to get out.

In short, although recent erosions to India’s democratic ethos might or might not be a fundamental shift from a long-term perspective; institutions, political parties, and the public at large may have to bear the scars in the near to medium run.

### III. Five shape-shifting factors

**T**here are, however, at least five political developments that I notice which occurred or spread roots over the last decade which might have long-lasting consequences on India’s politics and society. First, the majoritarian drive that promoted the BJP. Second, the abolition of Article 370. Third, the widening of the north-south divide. Fourth, the persistent inability of the economy to generate jobs. And fifth, and in a long-drawn but positive way, the introduction of female quotas – even with the present caveats.

The establishment of something close to a Hindu Rashtra will most probably be long lasting for one fundamental reason: The long list of changes brought in by the BJP to Hinduise the polity tapped into an existing majoritarian sentiment among large segments of the population <sup>5</sup>. This is something far from unique to India. The rise of extreme right-wing parties in the west drew sustenance from similar feelings of hatred towards immigrants, white

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supremacy, and intolerance. Crucial from a collective-behavioural perspective, these were considered political taboos or even something to be ashamed of before right-wing populist parties voiced and legitimised these sentiments and gave them representation <sup>6</sup>. The important thing to note is that once these sentiments are legitimised, normalised, and translated into policy, it becomes very difficult for non-right-wing political parties to change course. You will not find a single mainstream political party in Europe or the U.S., which will argue for welcoming more immigrants or even relaxing the draconian immigration laws that were established in recent years – something which, by the way, would bring enormous economic benefits to rapidly ageing societies.

Similarly, it will be difficult for whoever will succeed the BJP in future decades to reverse policies such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), laws banning cow slaughter, and regulations limiting the sale or consumption of meat. Of course, when a more secular coalition of parties forms the government, many of the most blatant displays of the majoritarian state, such as cow vigilantes or various other manifestations of moral policing present, especially in some north Indian States, might disappear or at least not enjoy anymore the protection of the state. In other words, the “de facto” Hindu Rashtra <sup>7</sup> – the set of informal mechanisms and actions which contributed to making India a more Hindu country – might lose importance. But the formal mechanisms (laws, above all else), will be more difficult to change. As will be difficult to remove the symbolic representations of the Hindu Rashtra, from cities and street names – can you imagine a U.P. political party proposing to change Prayagraj back to Allahabad – to, of course, the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya which, as the Prime Minister said, is built to last for the next millennium.

It is also worth noting that the legitimisation of majoritarian sentiments facilitates their explicit expression not only in politics, but among society as well. The increasing number of instances of intolerance towards other people’s food habits or the increasing segregation of communities in India’s largest cities – already a reality before the current government took power <sup>8</sup> – are very likely to continue



and probably deepen, as these sentiments are increasingly seen as legitimate. Similarly, the already low levels of societal intermingling between different religious communities are not likely to be reversed in the current political environment.

Indeed, the Indian National Congress (INC) has included in its manifesto a promise to restore people's freedom to eat or marry whoever they want. That said, even if Congress were to defy predictions and form the government, reversing the legitimisation given to certain intolerant behaviours will be an even more arduous task to achieve. This is because the widespread opposition to personal choices (take, for example, inter-religious marriages) has been given a great deal of legitimacy by the actions of a collective of state and non-state actors, including the police, the courts, the lower rungs of the bureaucracy, politicians, and groups which effectively play the role of a moral police.

It would, therefore, be somewhat premature to hope that top-down legislation will change the behaviour of these actors, who, in all probability, acted on the basis of personal values, which are catalysed by the current political scenario. Moreover, many of the regulations impacting people's lives come from the State or even district administrations, not to mention actions taken by private actors.

The recent move by the online food delivery platform, Zomato, to provide a “pure veg” option – a decision it had to drop the same day – is symptomatic of the state of being. This episode, however, also reveals that society is not uniformly behind the Hinduisation of the public realm. The very fact that Zomato's decision elicited such strong reactions that the company felt the need to retract the move, does represent a form of “resistance” and comes as a timely pointer to the presence of a large number of antibodies in the country's body politic to guard against more intrusive policies.

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Another decision which might shape India for a long time is the abolition of Article 370. Is it conceivable for a hypothetical secular coalition of parties 20 years from now to restore Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomy? I frankly doubt that, also considering that some key parties outside the BJP's alliance (the Aam Aadmi Party, for instance) closed ranks on that decision. The history of somewhat similar conflicts – from Catalonia in Spain to India's north-east – suggests that regionalist or secessionist challenges are rarely solved by undermining local autonomy. The use of force – in Palestine for several decades and elsewhere at various points in recent history – is an option only to put a lid on violence temporarily, rather than to integrate centrifugal forces into the mainland permanently. Therefore, the present situation in Kashmir – a militarised lid on violence – is here to stay and the abolition of Article 370 has probably inserted a stumbling block to an already extremely complicated situation.

Of course, the militarisation of Kashmir is a problem that predates the Modi government. But the abolition of Article 370 seems to be a turning point, similar to the fateful 1987 Assembly elections, which sanctioned the loss of faith in India's central institutions among large sections of Kashmiris <sup>9</sup>. Of course, I am not comparing the two episodes on their merits: the abrogation of Article 370 was a legitimate political choice (albeit surreptitiously executed), whereas the rigging of the 1987 elections clearly was not. What I am suggesting is that the 2019 decision might constitute – as the 1987 elections did - a turning point from which it will be difficult to change track if a future Indian government decides to embark on negotiations to find a more stable solution to the Kashmir issue.

Another issue that certainly predates the current era, the divide between the North and the South of the country, has sharpened since 2014, if only because of the striking political polarisation between the Hindi belt and the southern States. And it seems likely that the polarisation will become more intense under the next BJP-led (if we are to believe opinion polls) government. This will be so not only because existing sources of tension will presumably continue to simmer. For



instance, internal migration to the more developed southern States will continue, as will attempts to consolidate the usage of Hindi for official purposes.

More importantly, the looming delimitation of constituencies – due in 2026 – will be a very intractable problem for the BJP to manage, especially because it will be impossible to separate the administrative exercise from its own political interests. On the one hand, the delimitation exercise has been postponed for so long (the last time it was conducted was 1971) that the current representation of the States in the Lok Sabha hardly has any proportion to the States' population. In this sense, the northern States do have a legitimate claim to see their much larger populations reflected in the composition of the Parliament. On the other hand, however, the southern States also have an argument in that they should not be penalised for having reduced their populations much faster than in the north. The BJP will have to adjudicate between two rights. But the northern States do have a stronger argument, at least in relation to the functioning of democracy and constitutional provisions. The problem here is compounded by the fact that the accommodation of the northern States would coincide with a massive boost in seats for the BJP, thus sharpening the political polarisation.

How will the southern States react to a possible reduction of their federal importance to virtual irrelevance? It is not unconceivable that regional parties – existing or new ones – will be able to tap on existing feelings of ill-concealed frustration with the dominance of a 

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BJP-dominated north, with **The contraction of federalism has probably exacerbated ill-concealed frustrations and the seeds of future discontent are already visible.** 

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consequences difficult to imagine, but potentially very serious. The contraction of federalism by two back-to-back Modi governments has probably exacerbated these feelings and the seeds of future discontent are already visible, for instance in the protest staged by the Kerala and Karnataka governments. In Tamil Nadu as well, the issue of devolution of funds from the centre to the State is a key element of the electoral campaign by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam

(DMK), which is in power in the State and a key ally of the INC. Moreover, the State fights legal battles on the controversial behaviour of the Governor, who has repeatedly withheld his assent to Bills passed by the Assembly. These and other sources of tension between the States and the Union – a certain degree of which is normal in any federal context – might be exacerbated by the redesigning of Parliamentary Constituencies, with consequences which are difficult to predict.

The chronic inability of the Indian economy to generate enough jobs – although something that cannot be attributed entirely to the Modi government but constituted a key election promise when his party won two general elections since 2014 – will be a long-lasting drag on India's development. Mr. Modi said repeatedly that his long-term plan is to transform India into a developed economy by 2047. Even leaving aside what exactly that means, it is difficult to see how any form of “developed” can be realised if the current job generation rates persist. This is particularly important because the coupling of high growth and low job generation has assumed structural features, as it has been virtually immune to policy changes or different governments <sup>10</sup>. Although Mr. Modi's set of policies to promote manufacturing and generate jobs, and his government's massive infrastructural push, are certainly moves in the right direction, concrete outcomes are yet to be seen. More importantly, there has not been any significant push to correct the structural foundations of low job generation, which are directly related to the very low levels of human development, particularly in the country's most populous States. Unless and until primary education and healthcare are taken as a policy priority, it is difficult to see how the workforce bottleneck could be eliminated and thereby gain from whatever remains of the rapidly closing demographic dividend.

India thus risks being stuck in a middle-income trap <sup>11</sup>, especially if current levels of inequality are not reversed. With the top 1 per cent of the income scale able to eat up an increasing share of the pie, economic growth will have to be faster for the majority of the population to reap substantial benefits <sup>12</sup>.

Finally, a much more positive development which will probably have a long-lasting effect on India's politics and society are the recently introduced quotas for women in Parliament and in the Legislative Assemblies. Of course, the road will still be uphill for women to gain a more prominent role in politics and society. Still, one should not underestimate the importance of a lot more women occupying positions of power, both for the political class as well as, and more importantly, for the public at large <sup>13</sup>. Some issues which are important for the welfare of women, but invisible in a male-dominated polity, will gain visibility and have an impact on millions of women. More women will be able to imagine themselves as holding political responsibilities, just by seeing a larger number of them in such positions. And this might start a virtuous cycle, where women politicians will just be the "new normal".

#### **IV. Quo Vadis?**

**T**o conclude, India goes towards the 2024 general election not only with a lot at stake but also with recently added baggage, some of which will be difficult to abandon for a significant period of time. In the near term, the elections will determine whether voters are still comfortable with the democratic erosion witnessed in recent years. If they are – like many voters in other countries

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have been, from Hungary to Rwanda, and from the U.S. to Poland – the country will take its chances at crossing that unmarked boundary which might lead to long-term autocratisation. But it is more likely that the obituary of India's democracy has been written too soon <sup>14</sup> and that democracy will be able to reassert itself in the not-too-distant future. From the time of its freedom in 1947 and its founding as a republic in 1950, some prophets of doom – including and especially many white men like myself – have on-and-off despaired over an impending demise of India's democracy <sup>15</sup>. However, Indian democracy has, till date, defied nay-sayers and reasserted itself time and again.

Irrespective of the electoral results, however, the Modi government has changed the country's politics in some critical ways that would be challenging for any government to reverse, at least in the near to medium term.

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