



Diminished Rights but Robust Competition: Challenging Conventional Wisdom on India's Democratic Backsliding

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Following the end of the Cold War, a shared commitment to democracy has lain at the heart of increasingly warm Indo-U.S. relations. Of late, however, many have questioned the depth of India's commitment to the democratic project. For instance, in 2021, the international NGO Freedom House downgraded India from "Free" to "Partly Free." Over the past several years, two narratives about Indian democracy have emerged in many academic and journalistic circles. Both narratives contain important elements of truth, but both also potentially understate the resilience of democracy in India.

An Unstoppable BJP?

The first narrative is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) — which currently governs India and

An Authoritarian India?

The second common narrative is that India has become, for all intents and purposes, a nondemocratic regime. What this narrative gets right is that India has moved away from the ideal of a “liberal democracy” in which citizens enjoy a range of rights and freedoms thought to sustain a free and fair electoral marketplace. Scholars and journalists alike have documented the increasing politicization of the judiciary, government attempts to quash dissent in the media and civil society, and the state’s apparent indifference to the rights and safety of religious minorities. The government’s pursuit of a majoritarian agenda — one in which the preferences of the (Hindu) majority rule, while the rights and freedoms of dissenters of all kinds enjoy diminished protection — has arguably left the country’s Muslim minority feeling more beleaguered than ever. Moreover, these developments have unfolded with startling speed.

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arguably been most sustained and effective in response to proposed changes to agricultural policy — not in response to democratic backsliding.

Looking forward, the BJP may well expand its electoral footprint across India and use that expanded support as a justification to materially reduce the competitiveness of future elections and durably entrench a political system that is neither liberal nor democratic. The risk that the government's waning commitment to democratic rights and freedoms will eventually undermine genuine electoral competition is a real one, but India is not there quite yet.

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