

## RESILIENCE OF INDIAN DEMOCRACY DEMANDS NEW ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

by

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In the just-concluded Indian general elections, the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was humbled but ensured a majority through its pre-poll alliance. The Indian National Congress (INC), the [second-largest party](#), although it fell short of the three-digit mark, came very close to doubling its current count. Significantly, after six decades, Modi became the first leader since Pandit Nehru to take the oath as Prime Minister for the [third consecutive term](#). Moreover, Modi is probably the first leader in the democratic world to secure a clear mandate since the [COVID-19 pandemic](#). The real winners, however, are the Indian voters and the persistence of Indian democracy. They seem to have preferred stability but maintained balance within political preferences. The Indian polity embodied the mantra, ‘expect the unexpected’. This prompts a revisit to the debate on the robustness of Indian democracy and the need to develop a new analytical framework to examine Indian democracy. In 2014, the Modi-led BJP surprised everyone with an absolute majority. It marked a departure from India’s coalition politics since the late 1980s. In 2019, the enhanced mandate led to a loud chorus regarding Hindutva politics and an alleged democratic decline in the country. Many invoked the downgrade in democratic indices and pointed to shrinking civil liberties. They also argued that the government shielded anti-Muslim vigilantism. The administration dismissed the West-based democracy indices as hypocrisy and considered them [self-appointed custodians](#) of democracy. Some scholars have pointed holes in the [methodology](#), especially their qualitative aspects.

Among others, Freedom House’s Democracy Index cited The Wire’s Tek Fog story and declared India as ‘partly free’. After The Wire’s withdrawal of the story, Freedom House [argued](#) that the removal had not affected their assessment of Indian democracy, raising questions about the dependability of such

reports. Some [scholars](#) lauded the academic value of such reports but suspected their inability to comprehend the way Indians perceive democracy. Others investigated the authoritarian roots of Indian democracy through constitutional analysis.

### India’s Democratic Roots

The experience of British rule shaped the Indian Constitution and resulted in a heavy tilt towards the Union Government. The INC’s rule until 1989 manifests the same, with some variations. India was ‘partly free’ in Freedom House’s 1993 report as well. So, solely attributing the Modi-led BJP for liberal democratic erosion oversimplifies the complex issue and neglects its multifacetedness. Unlike the West, in India, [democratization](#) has not happened sequentially after secularization and industrialization. Notably, barring [Costa Rica](#), India is the only developing country with an uninterrupted democratic history for more than seven decades. India surpasses Costa Rica in scale and complexity. In the last three decades, many countries with lower socio-economic indicators have preferred to opt for democratic governance. These countries perceive India’s [democratic journey](#) as more relevant and inspiring than that of the West. India’s success entails that democracy can thrive without conventional notions of Western liberalism and makes New Delhi’s case paradigmatic. The notion of India as a ‘Western-liberal’ democracy before Modi’s arrival generalizes its complex reality. India sets its own standards and should be investigated differently than by applying existing Western standards.

Another relevant aspect to consider is the simultaneous process of attrition and expansion of values. This is evidenced by the upward trajectory of [voter turnout](#), especially among women and marginalized groups. There is a notable decrease in elitism and greater participation of common people in decision-making. The third tier of governance at the local level initiated this process. The recent legislation for one-third representation of women in the legislature may further accelerate this process.

### Democratic Processes Still Strong

Additionally, under the Indian constitutional scheme, law and order and civil liberties are within

the purview of the provinces or states. So, their performance is crucial in assessing overall democratic health. Both the BJP and the opposition share responsibility for the trust deficit. Despite the BJP's electoral defeats, power transitions have been smooth, unlike in authoritarian regimes. These aspects do not indicate the death or backsliding of Indian democracy. Furthermore, irrespective of the weakening of democratic indices, the [Pew Research Survey](#) indicated that Indian voters have shown confidence regarding democratic processes. Therefore, simplistic binaries like democratic-anti-democratic or Hindu right-liberal reflect older academic concepts, but the reality in India is shifting at a rapid pace. Especially, Hindutva politics have resonance in the elite discourse but lack [empirical evidence](#) among the masses. The BJP considers the argument of the elites to be devoid of substance and emanating from a lack of access to privileges enjoyed under the INC rule.

The recent elections indicate a return of the coalition era. The BJP is humbled, but its voter base has largely remained intact. The BJP and the INC have a gap of 15 percent in vote share. In absolute terms, this translates into a gap of close to 100 million votes. This reflects the reach of BJP's ideology. Moreover, Indian democratic conception emphasizes the local variation of democracy. Both the BJP and the INC tend to agree on this aspect. They suggested that local social, political, economic, cultural, and historical conditions shape the country's democracy. Moreover, the home-grown roots of Indian democracy have wider acceptance within both parties, elites and masses. Significantly, the phenomenon could be traced back to the Janata government in the late 1970s and was also echoed by the INC. Currently, Modi propagates the home-grown roots of Bhartiya democracy.

### Friend of the World?

Furthermore, unlike the West, Indian thought considers the individual as part of society and emphasizes the amalgamation of rights and duties. Indian political players distance themselves from the West-led democracy promotion as it may involve the unilateral export of ideology. Due to an exploitative colonial past, Indian governments have considered unilateral imposition as non-democratic. Instead,

the governments have supported the inculcation of democratic culture in the interested country with consent. This could be termed as democratic assistance. In addition, Indian governments buttress the power of the Indian democratic example for countries from the Global South. Moreover, Indian governments have equally applied democratic logic to international governance and demanded representation for developing countries. In this regard, the language of the Modi administration is confident and assertive. This language is backed by the people's mandate and Indian economic resurgence. Recently, the country has also become part of many global high tables. It will be interesting to watch the trajectory of the Modi government in this tenure. It helps that his coalition partners have not shown any appetite for foreign affairs. Besides, the coalition era in Indian politics has not indicated a fragile [foreign policy](#). Modi 3.0 will not be an exception.

Notably, in foreign policy, there could also be a visible shift towards unapologetic and confident global interaction, with a focus on being a friend of the world (Vishwabandhu) rather than a teacher (Vishwaguru). It is worth noting that while Indian diplomacy has at times been perceived as overly didactic and even arrogant, the concept of Vishwabandhu alludes to pragmatic and equal partnerships based on the rationality of the issues at hand. Modi has pushed for India as the Mother of Democracy based on the presence of the [Uttaramerur Inscription](#) from the 9th Century and other literary evidence. In essence, the discussion underscores the need for a multifaceted analytical framework to understand the complexities of India's political landscape. Notably, the simultaneous consolidation and attrition of democratic values have puzzled many analysts. India has emerged as a case study to re-examine existing 'liberal' wisdom regarding the universal application of democracy in the Global South.

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