

Opinion **The FT View**

## India's democratic backsliding

Decline of political freedoms under Narendra Modi is tragic for the country and the world

**THE EDITORIAL BOARD**



Fear of speaking out against Narendra Modi is common in public life © Ritesh Shukla/Getty Images

### The editorial board YESTERDAY

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India will soon [officially](#) be the world's most populous country. Its claim to be the largest democracy, however, is wearing thin. On Thursday a court in Gujarat, the home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, rejected an appeal by India's most prominent opposition politician, Rahul Gandhi, seeking a stay on a dubious defamation conviction that prompted parliament to eject him from his seat. He could face a two-year jail sentence and disqualification from next year's election. Gandhi's legal troubles are one of the most extreme examples of widespread democratic decline in Modi's India. That is bad news not only for its 1.4bn people, but also for the world.

With democratic values [under pressure](#) globally and economic fragmentation afoot, India's vibrant, tech-savvy population and rapidly growing economy are precious assets. A robust, inclusive and truly democratic India that might serve as a counterweight to China and as a global role model matters for everyone. But it is ever clearer that Modi's Bharatiya Janata party is ready to use all tools at its disposal to bend India's democratic institutions to its own ends.

Since the BJP defeated Gandhi's Indian National Congress party in 2014 on a Hindu nationalist platform, Modi's backers have stifled free expression across media, civil society, and politics, and have [stoked inter-religious](#) tensions with India's Muslim minority. Fear of speaking out against Modi is common in public life. Freedom

House, a US NGO, has downgraded the country from “free” in 2021 to “[partly free](#)” [now](#) while the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute [considers](#) India an “electoral autocracy”, alongside the likes of Russia and Turkey.

Journalists deemed critical of the BJP frequently experience [online harassment](#) and sometimes legal repercussions. The government exerts enormous influence on media outlets through its ties with owners, and editors are pressured to toe the government line. Foreign media are not immune. In February tax inspectors [raided the BBC](#), shortly after the broadcaster aired a documentary critical of Modi. Academics, think-tanks and foreign non-profit groups are under pressure too. Just this week authorities carried out new searches at Oxfam India over alleged [foreign funding violations](#).

The undermining of political opponents also goes beyond the Congress party. A senior figure in the Aam Aadmi party, India's second-biggest opposition party, [is in detention](#) over alleged excise fraud and its leader and Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal was also questioned [on Sunday](#).

With the crackdown on dissent, India is damaging its own prospects. The country needs robust and open public debate to help it address challenges that are holding it back from reaching its full potential. These include chronic [unemployment](#), high illiteracy, and crony capitalism. A recent investigation by US short selling group Hindenburg Research into companies owned by Gautam Adani, a tycoon with ties to Modi, has also raised important questions.

The west sees India as a democratic and economic counterweight to China. But disillusionment with Xi Jinping has prompted western leaders to turn a lamentably blind eye to Modi's actions. On a visit last week US commerce secretary Gina Raimondo [gushed](#) that “he is the most popular world leader for a reason”. Businesses and investors see opportunities in India for growth and diversification away from China. But the weakening rule of law will make them think twice.

India's democracy has never been perfect, but it has achieved impressive results. It has supported the country's rise to the [fifth-largest economy](#) in the world and cultivated a burgeoning middle class. For India's sake, western leaders need to be more outspoken in condemning the Indian government's attacks on civil society and free speech. If Modi fails to reverse course, his vision of India as a superpower will remain only a fantasy.

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