

TÜRKIYE AND INDIA

Democracy and Secularism in Crisis?*

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy requires good governance which, in turn, requires high quality policies and institutions. Indeed, in such a system, high quality, well-led, resilient and independent institutions serve as effective checks and balances in the system of governance. Nevertheless, what matters most for the quality of a democracy is good leadership with vision, wisdom, foresight, ethics, morals, values and principles. If these attributes are either missing or in serious deficit, both policies and institutions are likely to be seriously impaired or compromised.

To illustrate, this article will discuss the situation in two strikingly different countries, Türkiye (previously Turkey) and India. Both have leaders with similar leadership styles, who desire similar domestic and geopolitical outcomes—winning elections at any cost to stay in power and seeking geopolitical influence in their regions as well as globally. Both have also politicised their respective religions, Islam and Hinduism, to achieve their objectives.

This confluence of leadership styles has strangely, and somewhat unexpectedly, led India and Türkiye to embark on eerily similar geopolitical and domestic journeys despite their obvious religion, population mix and other differences. The government of Türkiye also has a longstanding brotherly relationship with the government of Pakistan, the Indian government's arch enemy.

Türkiye's population is 99.8 per cent Muslim, with the remaining 0.2 per cent Christian or adherents of other religions.

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India's 2011 census shows almost 80 per cent of Indians are Hindu, 14 per cent Muslim, 2.3 per cent Christian, 1.7 per cent Sikh, while the remaining 2 per cent include Buddhists, Jains, Adivasis and others. Most Turks are not knowledgeable about India and vice-versa. This ignorance and lack of knowledge or interest extends even to policy makers and influencers on both sides.

There are parallels between the aspirations of both countries. President Erdoğan has visualised what he refers to as a 'new' Türkiye while Prime Minister Modi talks about a 'new' India which is Bharat (the Hindi version of the country's name). Both leaders have a significant faith-based following and use civilisational discourse, nostalgia and 'lost' national pride to resurrect a mythical or glorified, romanticised past with an attempt to rewrite history.

At the international level, both 'new' India and 'new' Türkiye are middle, regional powers with hopes of becoming global ones. Leadership of the Global South is 'new' India's aspiration under Modi, especially after its 2023 G-20 Presidency, while leadership of the Muslim world has been 'new' Türkiye's aspiration under Erdoğan. 'New' India has been lobbying for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council for decades. Erdoğan has also long argued for greater inclusivity in the UN Security Council using the catchy slogan, 'The world is bigger than Five', referring to its five permanent members. While unlike 'new' India, Ankara's demand for a permanent seat there is not as clear-cut, Erdoğan has argued there should be such a seat for the Muslim world and would, no doubt, like that to be occupied by the 'new' Türkiye.

Neither 'new' Türkiye nor 'new' India can be ignored globally or in their own regions. 'New' India is bigger in population size, with the fifth largest GDP in the world and had the fourth position in terms of military might in 2023. As a result of this economic and military strength, 'new' India has more regional and global geopolitical heft, despite 'new' Türkiye's very strategic geographic and geopolitical location. Placed at the intersection of Europe, West Asia and the Middle East, 'new' Türkiye has the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) second-largest standing army.

'New' India, its nativist rhetoric over the last 10 years notwithstanding, has the US, European Union (EU) and the three other Quad members (Australia, Japan and the USA) still betting

on it as a counterweight to China. This, in spite of growing evidence that ‘new’ India cannot play such a role.

‘New’ Türkiye’s EU accession process has been all but frozen for many years now, because despite its conforming to many expectations and criteria till about 15 years ago, it is unable to fulfil most of them and has actually backslid on many World Bank governance indicators over that period. Despite this, the EU and Council of Europe have been forced to tone down their criticism of ‘new’ Türkiye because of the unwillingness of most of their members to accept even a fraction of the roughly 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently in Türkiye. Erdoğan has also repeatedly ignored binding European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) rulings (e.g., the ruling on high profile political prisoner Osman Kavala) with little or no consequence.

SIMILAR CONSEQUENCES OF COMMON LEADERSHIP STYLES

Both leaders are proponents of populist politics. ‘New’ Türkiye has witnessed this for over two decades, and ‘new’ India for a decade. In fact, it can be argued that Modi will resemble Erdoğan even more than he currently does in five to 10 years, if he remains the leader of ‘new’ India.

Both countries are regarded as electoral autocracies by Sweden’s V-Dem Institute which tracks democratic freedoms worldwide. ‘New’ India was downgraded to this status in 2018 and was included in the ‘top ten autocratizers’ and ‘one of the worst autocratizers lately’ in V-Dem Institute’s *Democracy Report* 2024.¹ It ranked 104, between Niger and the Ivory Coast, out of 179 countries in the V-Dem liberal democracy index. ‘New’ Türkiye was ranked even lower at 147 out of 179 and was listed among the 10 countries with the greatest global slide in democracy between 2009 and 2019.

Both leaderships share a common approach to decision-making. Openly majoritarian, they continue to believe in elections, but with a ‘winner take all approach’. Erdoğan has won most elections by a slim 51 per cent majority over the last two decades, although his Adalet ve Kalkınma (AK) party’s vote share declined to slightly below 30 per cent of the popular vote in the May 2023 national elections and was only around 35.5 per cent of the national popular vote in the most recent March 2024 local

elections. Modi won only 37 per cent of the national popular vote in the 2019 parliamentary election. Despite this, both leaders assert themselves and their views over the entire population, aiming to amend or rewrite their country's constitutions.

Erdoğan did so partially in 2017, using the trauma of the failed coup in July 2016 and the clash within the ruling coalition with the Gülen movement (also known as Hizmet, a transnational movement inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen) to transform 'new' Türkiye's system of governance, making himself President. The years 2016–17 were watershed years for 'new' Türkiye, accelerating the country's downward slide.

In addition to undermining the Indian Constitution in many ways regularly through their current actions, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) hope that it will get 370 seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha election with more than 400 for its electoral alliance is at least partly because it wants to rewrite key aspects of the Indian Constitution, especially taking out the word 'secular' from it. This has been openly said by more than one of its current members of parliament, even though it has been subsequently denied by Modi.

Another similarity in terms of decision-making is that ministers have little or no independent influence on overall policy except perhaps the Minister of Home Affairs or the National Security Adviser in 'new' India and the Foreign Minister or Head of Intelligence in 'new' Türkiye. Other ministers in 'new' Türkiye, for example, can be jettisoned anytime.

Both leaders also depend on loyalists rather than meritocrats. Few, if any, women have any real power in their respective cabinets. Important decisions and policies are often approved with no public discussion and little understanding or regard for consequences. 'New' India saw demonetisation overnight and the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown at a few hours' notice. In 'new' Türkiye, the Central Bank of Türkiye was forced to keep interest rates low despite high inflation for years.

Both leaders have an antipathy to the West and are self-confessed sectarian leaders, vindictive to critics, and with a strong dislike of secularism and pluralism of religion, language and culture. The discourse, rhetoric and practice in both cases has been anti-minority, especially anti-Muslim and anti-Christian in India and anti-Christian in Türkiye.

The two leaders have had similar humble origins, sharing many personality traits. Their core base lies primarily amongst conservative, poorly educated and economically disadvantaged segments, although conservative, highly educated and wealthy segments also support them.

Both have relied heavily on religious discourse to reinforce deepening social divides and capitalised politically on the growing sectarian/secular cleavage. In ‘new’ India, this led to the destruction of a mosque in Ayodhya by a mob in 1992 on the unproven grounds that a temple previously existed at the site of the mosque. This mob action was declared illegal by the Supreme Court but strangely, in the same ruling, it confirmed that a temple previously existed where the mosque had been, something impossible to conclusively prove. As a result, Modi consecrated a new temple on the same site in January 2024, conveniently only a few months before the Indian parliamentary elections.

In ‘new’ Türkiye, President Erdoğan ran a campaign which successfully culminated in 2020 with a court ruling wiping away an 80-year government decree, converting a beloved Christian symbol and globally famous museum, the Hagia Sofia in Istanbul, into an operational mosque. Supposedly independent courts were complicit in both countries, allowing these changes to happen.

UNDERMINING THE RULE OF LAW AND INSTITUTIONS

‘New’ Türkiye under Erdoğan is more than a decade ahead of ‘new’ India under Modi in terms of institutional breakdown but both have been headed in the same direction. The ‘new’ Turkish Republic, on paper, has the same three pillars of a parliamentary style democracy that ‘new’ India has: the executive, the judiciary and the legislature. The latter two pillars were weakened when the executive became all powerful after 2002 when Erdoğan became Prime Minister.

Both leaders have undermined the constitution they inherited. As already stated, Erdoğan used 2016 events to call a constitutional referendum in April 2017. This led to the office of the prime minister being abolished and the replacement of the existing parliamentary system of government with an executive presidency and a presidential system. This gave him

more control over appointments to the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors, further disempowering the judiciary. While a parliament still exists in ‘new’ Türkiye, it has been ineffective and often dysfunctional after the April 2017 referendum.

In ‘new’ India, executive power has always been with the Prime Minister, but the President and the State Governors s/he appoints have always been independent of the Executive. This is much less so now, with both sets of appointments reflecting the picks and preferences of the ruling party.

The Indian parliament is often just a chaotic, sometimes violent, display of majoritarian power. Discussions in parliament for decisions that need approval have sometimes been absent. For example, three landmark bills relating to India’s criminal justice system replacing the 1860 Indian Penal Code, the 1973 Code of Criminal Procedure and the 1872 Indian Evidence Act were recently passed by a simple voice-vote in the absence of the majority of the opposition members from the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc parties. This happened because 97 opposition members were suspended from the session by the House Speaker, who is from the ruling party. The number of opposition member suspensions went up to 146 at its peak, making a mockery of parliamentary procedure.

The judiciary in India is also now politically polarised. It has increasingly taken decisions based on inappropriate interpretations of the law in favour of the ruling dispensation (e.g., Ayodhya, Article 370 on Kashmir) or unnecessarily delayed decisions, reducing their effectiveness (e.g., a recent decision, seven years late, declaring electoral bonds unconstitutional).

Both countries have also increasingly witnessed the breakdown of the rule of law in addition to increasing human rights and freedom of speech violations. Violations have particularly victimised independent journalists. ‘New’ Türkiye was in the world’s top slot in the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) list of shame five times since 2012. While it was promoted to 10th place in 2023, this does not tell the full story since most journalists released from jail since 2022 are still under investigation or awaiting trial. Nor does this signal an improvement in media freedoms since journalists can be imprisoned at any time.

A number of journalists in ‘new’ India, the second highest since the national census on this began in 1992, have been charged and jailed under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) for merely non-partisan, independent journalism. In addition, an increasing number of foreign journalists with Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards have had these cancelled with little notice, prohibiting them from entering India again.

Elections in both countries are far from being fair and there is currently no level playing field in either.

Domestic institutions which should be non-political have been deployed for partisan political purposes in ‘new’ India, including the Enforcement Directorate (ED), Police, Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), the Income Tax Department (ITD), the State Bank of India (SBI) and even the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The opposition Congress party’s financial assets were frozen by the ITD prior to the 2024 elections, while two sitting opposition chief ministers were arrested by the ED just months before. The SBI, the largest public sector bank responsible for receiving and maintaining records on all electoral bonds issued, tried unsuccessfully to delay disclosing details to the Supreme Court of India till after the recent parliamentary elections.

In ‘new’ Türkiye, politicised institutions include the Central Bank and Finance Ministry on the macro-economic side, the High Electoral Board in terms of elections, the police, the tax authority which was used to discipline the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSAİD), the Ministry of Justice and the judiciary which have been extensively used for politically partisan purposes, as well as the Ministry of Education through which education has been Islamicised.

In ‘new’ India, the until recently anonymous electoral bonds have also disproportionately benefited the ruling party financially. In ‘new’ Türkiye, the full power of the state and its resources continue to be used by the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or AKP) and its main conservative Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi or MHP) ally. To illustrate the extent of the skew, it is worth noting that in a recent election a minister who fought against a high-profile opposition CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi or Republican People’s Party) candidate was able to command

20 times as many campaigners as his opponent because of the significant imbalance in resources available to the two sides.

While there is opaqueness about whether the top leaders and/or their close families have personally benefited from corrupt practices and projects, both leaders and their political parties have clearly abetted and benefited from significant crony capitalism. The recently exposed electoral bonds scam in India shows quite clearly that the ruling party has repeatedly used the ED to extort money in addition to getting benefits from quid pro quo transactions with certain corporate entities and business enterprises. Examples of the latter in India include major private infrastructure and public works contractors who have benefited because of their electoral bond contributions to the ruling party. In 'new' Türkiye, the 'Big Five' pro-government contractors have also disproportionately benefited from their proximity to the AKP.

Such considerable and far-reaching rule of law, institutional and policy impact similarities at the domestic level should not come as a surprise because they are a consequence of the similar leadership styles of the two top leaders despite the fundamental historical, religious and population-mix differences between erstwhile Türkiye and India.

FOREIGN POLICY AND GEOPOLITICS

Foreign policy has also largely become a reflection of both leaders' personal preferences, domestic impulses and priorities rather than a well-considered set of policy choices based on serious, long-term, strategic, comprehensive global and regional, geopolitical and geo-economic analysis. To the extent that such analysis is done by relevant ministries led by the Foreign and External Affairs Ministers in 'new' Türkiye and 'new' India, respectively, their policy conclusions are often ignored or superseded by the personal inclinations and preferences of the top leaders. Moreover, domestic priorities dictate foreign policy and geopolitical priorities.

Both countries aspire for, and, indeed, have publicly claimed that they have attained strategic autonomy despite, for example, Erdoğan's increasing dependency on Putin's Russia (which recently helped him by postponing 'new' Türkiye's gas payments and weakening the political impact of the ill-considered

populist macroeconomic policies) while ‘new’ India’s military dependence on Russia and reliance on Russian oil discounts after its invasion of Ukraine is well known.

Regionally and globally, both leaders prefer illiberal electoral autocrats like themselves, but are not perturbed if they need to befriend dictators and oligarchs to achieve either their domestic or geopolitical objectives. In this context, President Erdoğan’s adviser about a decade ago, Yiğit Bulut, once went as far as to say that the world had only two-and-a-half leaders then: Putin, Erdoğan and half of Obama!

Both Erdoğan and Modi have been on record in their support for Putin in Russia and Trump in the United States. This should not come as a surprise since they share many leadership qualities and personal attributes with both. Many, especially hard-core followers, also identify their desire to resurrect a Hindu kingdom in ‘new’ India or Bharat or the Ottoman Empire in ‘new’ Türkiye with Putin’s desire to resurrect the Russian Empire.

Interestingly, both leaders aspire to be peacemakers in Ukraine, while remaining dependent on Russia. Erdoğan has tried and failed but has not given up, recently offering to host a Ukraine–Russia Summit. He has also not gone along with NATO embargoes on Russia. ‘New’ India sees itself as a ‘neutral’ interlocutor in negotiations to end the conflict despite its longstanding and close ties with Russia throughout the conflict.

The current Israeli-Palestinian crisis is another situation where both countries are visible but not necessarily in a similar or positive manner. Erdoğan’s early ambivalence towards Israel in the current Gaza conflict when ‘new’ Türkiye continued to trade with Israel has given way to sanctions and open support for the Palestinian struggle.

‘New’ India, under the leadership of Modi, on the other hand, has all but given up its support for the Palestinian cause which it globally led under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru decades ago. This is because Zionism and Hindutva (literally ‘Hindu-ness’, a right wing ethno-nationalist political ideology advocating Hindu supremacy in India) have much more in common than meets the eye. As a result, ‘new’ India under Modi has grown closer to the Zionist state under Prime Minister Netanyahu. In addition to ‘new’ India’s significant arms purchases

and sales to Israel there is growing closeness between Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad, and its Indian counterpart, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Their strategic partnership and increasing closeness have also led to a state-to-state labour agreement between India and Israel resulting in the export of Indian construction workers to replace Palestinian workers in Israel during the current conflict.

THE ECONOMY

On the economic front, both countries have improved their competitiveness. While the main suppliers in the world economy in 1995 were the West, by 2022 this had changed with China, 'new' India and even 'new' Türkiye becoming major global suppliers. Ironically, many Western and other countries appear to view 'new' India's economy today as 'new' Türkiye's was viewed 15 years ago—the best thing since sliced bread! While 'new' Türkiye has not been viewed this way for some time now, 'new' India may continue to be viewed favourably by default for a while because of its current and projected GDP growth rate (around 6 per cent per annum). Despite this, it is surprising that relatively little of the investment leaving China for different markets has relocated to 'new' India so far. While the country cannot be totally ignored because of the relative size of its domestic market, Simon Tisdall, the *Observer's* Foreign Affairs commentator recently wrote in *The Guardian* that the current foreign investment and broader interest in this 'new' India may be a short-term 'affair' rather than a long-term 'marriage'! (Tisdall, 2024).

'New' Türkiye, with a population of a little over 87 million in 2024 (compared to India's 1.44 billion) has much less poverty than India and a nominal 2023 per capita GDP (USD 13,110), approximately five times that of India (USD 2,612), while its estimated PPP per capita GDP for 2024 is estimated at USD 43,921 against India's USD 10,124, more than four times higher. 'New' India also has close to 10 times 'new' Türkiye's population (800 million) on welfare handouts for at least the next five years, with many of them in extreme poverty.

Economic lunacy has created an unnecessarily huge economic burden for 'new' Türkiye over the last decade. Erdoğan's stubborn insistence on using populist policies for the sake of

growth kept Central Bank interest rates very low for years despite high inflation, declining foreign exchange reserves and significant declines in the value of the Turkish Lira (TL). Erdoğan insisted, against economic orthodoxy, that high interest rates were ‘the mother of all evil’ and the cause of high inflation, while lowering rates was the way to cool inflation. The cumulative results of hyperinflation and the nosediving currency forced the country to the wall and Erdoğan had to agree to an embarrassing U-turn on interest rates in June 2023. The Central Bank has returned to economic orthodoxy since then, forced to hike interest rates by 40 per cent to the current level of 50 per cent. This is yet to make a dent on price and wage inflation which has remained 67 per cent over the last 12 months, only slightly lower than its peak of 85.5 per cent in October 2022. High interest rates have also failed to stabilise the currency. The TL has fallen a further 7 per cent since the start of 2024 to over 30 TL to the US dollar from 10 to the US dollar in September 2021 and a little over 3.5 to the US dollar at the end of 2016. As a result of inflation, minimum wages had to be increased by 49 per cent before the March 2024 local elections, threatening a wage price spiral. The sad state of the economy was clearly a major reason for the defeat of the AKP and Erdoğan in the March local elections. But ‘new’ Türkiye still refuses to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an economic stabilisation programme since this would be politically very difficult for Erdoğan given past vocal opposition to dealings with it. The population, therefore, will have to bear a greater degree of pain for a longer time frame if there is an attempt to stabilise the economy without IMF support.

Despite the return to economic orthodoxy, ‘new’ Türkiye’s Central Bank remains anything but independent as evidenced by Erdoğan’s firing of numerous Central Bank Governors over the last decade with five different people holding this post since 2016, one of whom lasted only four months in 2020–21. There have also been five Ministers of Finance since 2015 and five Presidents of the Turkish Statistical Institute since 2016.

In ‘new’ India, the surprise 2016 demonetisation of large banknotes with no advance notice literally shortchanged approximately 90 per cent of the population and many micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) which were largely reliant on the cash economy.

‘New’ India’s macro economy is still considerably healthier than ‘new’ Türkiye’s on almost all major indicators in spite of its relatively high, stubborn food inflation and demonetisation’s continuing negative impacts. There is considerable underemployment or informal employment, however. In addition to large numbers of unemployable people, there are also very large absolute numbers and percentages of unemployed youth (over 40 per cent in the 20–24 age group). The labour force participation rate especially for women is low in both countries but considerably lower in India, where very significant numbers of adults are neither studying nor in the job market, and many workers, disproportionately women, not even looking for jobs. These high figures may yet be understated because of increasing data suppression, obfuscation or manipulation in the last decade. Moreover, ignoring the ILO definition, India appears to have decided to categorise unpaid informal labour as employed, thereby inflating the employment numbers, especially for women and youth. All these trends contribute to ‘new’ India’s once-in-a-lifetime demographic dividend being unnecessarily squandered.

As one way to buy votes, muffle social unrest and whitewash unsustainable situations, both leaders provide welfare handouts as ‘gifts’, not as constitutional rights. In ‘new’ India, an astonishing 800 million people (almost 60 per cent of its population) are on such handouts, guaranteed by Modi for the next five years. These ‘gifts’ in both countries have been linked to one individual and political party, not to the state. In India they are now openly referred to as ‘Modi ki Guarantee’.

FUTURE CONSEQUENCES

There are both short and long-term negative consequences for both countries. The political economy of both countries has resulted in a continuing drain of brain, innovation and money. As many as 2.5 million Indians migrate overseas annually. This is the highest annual number of migrants in the world and was the leading source of migrants to OECD countries in 2021 and 2022, according to the latest reliable data. In 2022, India also had a net outflow of 7,500 high net-worth individuals (HNWIs) with an investible USD 1 million or more, while at least 6,500 were expected to leave in 2023 (the final data on this number was not

available at the time of writing). This is second in the world only to China. In 'new' Türkiye, the number is much lower because of English language inability and other reasons, but the negative impact of brain drain is similar. The government estimated the figure to be around 140,000 in 2022 while independent estimates have placed it higher at 160,000 per year over the last few years.

While these numbers do not have much political impact in either country, they have a negative demographic dividend, citizen quality, innovation and intellectual impact far exceeding the actual numbers. For example, in 'new' Türkiye, even government estimates placed those aged 25–29 years as the biggest group, while in India, a previous Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Dr Raghuram Rajan, speaking at a conference in Washington DC, on 17 April, highlighted the large number of young Indian innovators going overseas, mainly to Singapore and Silicon Valley, in the US, to set up businesses because they are unhappy in India. He also said, 'I think we are in the midst of it (demographic dividend), but the problem is we are not reaping the benefits' and that India's 6 per cent GDP growth is much below where China or South Korea were when they reaped their demographic dividend.²

The East–West geographic divide in 'new' Türkiye has widened for decades based on religious conservatism in the East and secularism in the West. Similarly, the North–South geographic divide in India, while always there, has increased significantly primarily due to educational and economic advancement in the South and the increasing fracture of federalism within the country. These fault lines in both countries have the potential to become much more serious in the next few years unless there is a significant change in policies, institutions and leadership styles.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

About 80 per cent of 'new' Türkiye's population lives in cities, in comparison to just under 36 per cent in 'new' India in 2022. This demographic fact alone provides much greater hope for 'new' Türkiye's secular future than 'new' India's because history has shown that secularism is more likely to take root in urban centres. Moreover, aggressive Atatürk style secularism, because of its emphasis on the clear separation of state and religion, appears

to have left significant parts of even ‘new’ Türkiye with a more genuinely secular population. The close proximity to Europe on the western side also consolidated secularism there since the 20th century.

Nehruvian and Gandhian secularism in India over the first six decades, on the other hand, was pluralistic, allowing worship of all faiths and traditions to coexist with the state without explicitly demarcating clear boundaries between the two. This more nuanced secularism, inclusive and more desirable in many respects than aggressive secularism, should be more sustainable in the long-run but is now fighting for its very survival in the face of open and aggressive Hindu nationalism. As a consequence of India’s historical and existing high functional illiteracy and predominantly rural population, secularism has also not established widespread roots, having been internalised by a relatively small percentage of the population.

A challenge for the return of vibrant and secular democracies in both countries is the lack of an effective, united and secular opposition with a charismatic grassroots people-centric leader. In both ‘new’ India and ‘new’ Türkiye, displays of opposition unity happen for short periods just before elections or around specific events. More often than not, the opposition remains fragmented and competing with each other. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in ‘new’ Türkiye led the CHP and broader opposition alliance to defeat in 2023. Similarly, Rahul Gandhi in ‘new’ India led the Congress and opposition alliance to a crushing defeat in 2019.

Segments of the opposition are also opportunistic. In ‘new’ India, for example, Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) in Bihar has opportunistically and unethically shifted from the ruling to the opposition alliance and back so many times that he has earned the nickname ‘*Paltu* Kumar’—person flipping sides. He has recently done it again, rejoining the governing party alliance in 2024 after being a founder of the opposition INDIA alliance!

PROSPECTS FOR THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY AND SECULARISM

‘New’ India’s federal system has many benefits but also major drawbacks when it comes to producing truly national opposition parties and leaders. The Congress party, a truly national party

with a commitment to democracy and secularism for much of its existence still has appeal in many parts of the country but is clearly not what it was in its heyday. Most other parties in the INDIA alliance are only regional in nature. In contrast, the CHP remains truly national and the result of the March local elections in which it received 37.7 per cent, the highest popular vote, was a victory for both democracy and secularism in 'new' Türkiye.

The attempt by Erdoğan to erase the memory of Kemal Atatürk has failed even after 22 years of efforts. The 2023 Centenary of the Republic showed that Atatürk remains ingrained in the memories of most Turks, including the new generation, as seen in life-size posters and the impressive Atatürk Mausoleum in Ankara. Erdoğan has, therefore, despite his best efforts, been forced to own Atatürk as the liberator and creator of modern Türkiye even though he is still trying to denigrate his legacy by disowning him, his secularisation, modernisation and other achievements thereafter, focusing only on his own achievements over the last two decades.

In 'new' India, there are similar attempts by Modi and his close advisers to erase Nehru and Indira Gandhi's achievements, especially focused on the former, saying little was achieved in India till the last decade under Modi. There is also an ambivalence about Mahatma Gandhi by the ruling dispensation, with co-optation of some aspects of his legacy even though Godse, his murderer, came from the same Savarkar lineage as the current BJP hard core.

But there is genuine and realistic hope in the charismatic and people-centered leadership of Ekrem İmamoğlu, after his second successive win as Mayor of Istanbul. He could give Erdoğan real competition in the next presidential election, so there is better hope for the return of democracy and secularism in Türkiye in the 2028 presidential election than for India in its 2024 parliamentary elections because India's opposition still lacks a charismatic, grassroots leader to compete with Modi. This is despite the jaded 'routinised charisma' of Prime Minister Modi which is now less persuasive except with a relatively small blind cult for whom his charisma will never fade. The INDIA alliance will need to produce a democratic, secular, charismatic and people-centered opposition leader with broad national

appeal before ‘new’ India’s people can enjoy the full benefits of the country’s remarkable Constitution, created by a Drafting Committee led by Babasaheb Ambedkar, that has stood the test of time thus far but whose principles and values are being violated and tested by the party in power as never before.

Of late, a transformed Rahul Gandhi is beginning to show the authenticity, substance, courage, commitment to social justice issues, mass following and even charisma that a democratic and secular national opposition leader in India will need to demonstrate, but it may be too late to have the impact desirable in the 2024 elections.

Only time will tell if these two countries can regain the democracy and secularism that was so hard-fought for by those who sacrificed so much personally to successfully lead their independence movements, especially Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the case of the ‘old’ Türkiye and Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in the case of the ‘old’ India.

ADDENDUM

At the time of writing this article, the 2024 Indian elections had not been held and their outcome was not known. At that point the predictions were of a clear win for the ruling BJP, with many apprehensions including about the rewriting of the Indian Constitution. Then, on 4 June, the pleasantly surprising results of the Indian elections raised the hope that Indian democracy and secularism were alive and well. This addendum is being written in an attempt to make an early assessment of whether that is indeed the case.

ELECTION WINNERS, LOSERS AND SOME IMPLICATIONS

The first thing which needs to be said about the Indian election results is that despite the fact that the election process was not fair, Indian democracy and the ordinary Indian citizen were the main winners on that day—not the BJP government nor the opposition.

While recognising this, the election outcome is also a victory for the opposition INDIA coalition. It is particularly important to acknowledge this because of how skewed and stacked the playing field and key institutions, including

the Election Commission of India (ECI) were against them throughout the electoral process and well before it.

These are losses for the BJP and its ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). But they should also be viewed as direct, personal losses for Modi since the entire BJP campaign was run promoting him. This result demonstrated that many Indian citizens voted with their conscience. Despite complaints of voters lists being manipulated and local violence at some polling booths, most voters found their own voice.

The rewriting of the Constitution is now off the table. This is a huge victory and relief. While the BJP will, no doubt, continue to try to undermine many aspects of the Constitution, the election results make clear that the words ‘socialist, secular, democratic republic’ will remain in the Constitution as will its emphasis on India’s federal structure which, for the moment, remains safe because of the opposition’s convincing wins in many states.

Another issue which is likely to be off the table is a revised country-wide National Register of Citizens (NRC), while an Uttarakhand style Uniform Civil Code Act 2024 (UCC) is unlikely to be enacted and implemented across the country as Modi desires. This can only be good news. Implementation of the anti-constitutional Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) is also likely to stall in many states. The Supreme Court must now speed up its review process and declare it unconstitutional, which it clearly is, given its exclusion of all Muslim refugees from the countries covered by the CAA.

The Lok Sabha which has been a dysfunctional rubber stamp for the BJP in the last few years should now also return to being a forum where healthy debate and some accountability for the ruling dispensation is restored, given the much greater numbers and strength of the opposition INDIA bloc in its chambers. An urgent top priority of a strengthened INDIA bloc in Parliament should be to prevent the implementation of the three new laws, the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam, which went into effect on 1 July 2024. These should be re-submitted to parliament for review and discussion given their hurried passing last year, due to the absence of the majority of the opposition from the Lok Sabha.

The election result also shows that a country with all of India's diversities and complexities cannot be ruled by one man. In this context it can be said with some level of confidence that the cult of Modi is finished for good, despite a relatively small, loud and often unscrupulous group of pure *bhakts* (devotees). Even the 'routinised charisma' of Modi, which I had referred to in the article, has diminished significantly after the election outcome.

In addition, fear of Modi, Shah and other members of the Prime Minister's close cohort should significantly diminish as a result of the drubbing the BJP suffered in the elections. By contrast, as also indicated in the article, a transformed Rahul Gandhi is a rising star after the election outcome, as is his sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. Her popularity and impact will only increase if she wins the Wayanad, Kerala, by-election. This will also mean that all three Gandhis will be in parliament together as a formidable force for both the Congress Party and the INDIA bloc.

What are the early signs from the BJP leadership about how seriously they are taking the electorate's feedback? Have they understood, for example, that this result was significantly caused by escalating inequalities, food inflation and unprecedented degrees of unemployment, under-employment, ill-suited employment (e.g., PhDs and college graduates applying for jobs of peons and construction workers), growing informal employment (much of it unpaid, especially for women in agriculture) and high levels of unemployability which currently exist in India?

Have they understood that the clear message from Ayodhya was that Hindutva and religious divisiveness do not resonate with the ordinary Indian citizen? Rather, displacement, lack of proper compensation for people losing their homes and businesses, and daily bread and butter issues determined the vote there.

The electorate also made it clear in Banswara that inaccurate and divisive anti-Muslim hate speeches of the type that the Prime Minister spewed there, in violation of the electoral Model Code of Conduct, is not acceptable to the people, even if the ECI remained silent on such BJP violations.

That the Prime Minister lost many lakhs of votes in Varanasi, his own constituency, also gives food for thought, showing that all is not well for him and the BJP even in this holy Hindu heartland.

WILL MODI 3.0 BE DIFFERENT FROM MODI 2.0?

Based on the BJP's early post-electoral decisions and responses it does not seem that its leadership is adequately reflecting on this and other feedback from the election results. Nothing fundamental to the analysis provided in the article I wrote before the elections has changed. Modi's majoritarian tendencies, just like Erdoğan's in Turkey, remain unchanged. If anything, there are early signs that there is a doubling down under Modi 3.0 and that things may get worse on political corruption, human rights, freedom of speech and autocracy.

An important visible sign of the status quo ante is the reappointment of the same troika of key decision-makers largely responsible for the BJP's humiliating defeat: the Prime Minister, Mr Modi; his very unpopular Home Minister, Mr Shah; and the shadowy National Security Adviser, Mr Doval. These were the only consequential decision-makers in the previous government. On this evidence alone, one can be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that nothing is likely to change in Prime Minister Modi's third term. Who becomes Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha, a post that has been vacant for many years, will indicate whether the opposition has been able to flex their renewed muscles early in the new term of Parliament. The BJP's coalition partners in the National Democratic Alliance, particularly Mr Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party and Mr Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) appear not to have had any consequential influence regarding the choice of Speaker of the Lok Sabha or other key appointments in the new Government.

There was hope that there would be more political space for freedom of speech and a greater respect for human rights. But the early signs are disappointing and indicate a movement in the opposite direction on the second front. A disturbing example of this, so early in the Prime Minister's third term, is the recent charging of internationally famous author, activist and Booker Prize winner Arundhati Roy and Sheikh Showkat Hussein, previously a professor in Kashmir, under the UAPA, which is essentially an anti-terrorism law.

THE CONTINUING LONG-TERM FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES

The continuing and longer-term fundamental challenges in India also remain the same as elaborated in the article. The Hindutva

ideology will need to be expunged or at least greatly softened if communal harmony and some level of trust is to be restored, not only between Hindus and Muslims but also between Hindus and Christians and other minorities, at least to the level it was before 2014.

The bigger societal challenges also remain. Will the mainstream media show the courage to speak independently even though it is now, more or less completely owned by billionaire cronies of the Prime Minister? Will the judiciary now show more independence and courage? Will they roll back the CAA and the current application of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) as unconstitutional? Will the corporate sector CEOs who were cheering for a Modi victory in the name of financial and economic stability be willing to speak out? Will the co-opted and compromised state institutions and their senior bureaucrats from the ECI, ITD, CBI, ED, SBI and government ministries show more courage, non-partisanship and independence? There are no definitive answers at present to these and many other questions.

There is one remaining question that deserves some clarity. Some prominent Indian mainstream news commentators now argue that India is not an electoral autocracy at all. They imply that contrary to India's classification as an electoral autocracy by Sweden's V-Dem Institute in 2018, the election results have demonstrated that India is a vibrant democracy. It is, however, too premature to jump to this conclusion and reclassify India. But what the large majority of ordinary Indian citizens have demonstrated through their vote of conscience is that India is not yet an electoral autocracy of the worst kind like Russia and Iran.

Despite the better than expected 2024 election outcomes in both Türkiye and India, their struggles to restore real democracy and embed and deepen secularism's roots in the majority of their respective populations is far from over. As the Portuguese saying goes: '*a luta continua*'—the struggle continues.



* This article was written prior to the recent election for the Indian parliament. The addendum was added after the election results were declared.

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NOTES

1. V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy). 2024. *Democracy Report 2024*, <https://v-dem.net/publications/democracy-reports/>.
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