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NEO-AUTHORITARIANISM IN INDIA UNDER NARENDRA MODI

Growing force or critical discourse?

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As the world's largest electoral democracy in terms of population, India not only symbolizes the democratic potential of developing and post-colonial states, but also serves as a crucial test case for assessing the global influence of neo-authoritarianism. As India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has pointed out: "India is the largest democracy on earth. If you add up the next forty democratic countries you will just about reach the total of the electorate in India" (quoted in Price 2015: 14).

Within the Indian context, with its proud democratic heritage dating back to independence from British rule in the mid-twentieth century, the idea of authoritarianism is generally associated either with foreign countries, the pre-Independence colonial *raj* under which India was under the control of the British Empire, or the Emergency Decree of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1975–77). While the period of Congress Party dominance in Indian politics over much of the period from the 1950s to the mid-1990s was seen by its critics as a one-party monopoly (and even a one-family monopoly), the rise of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) as the major opponent of Congress on the national stage since the 1990s has ushered in an era of increased political competition. However, the BJP itself has an ambivalent relationship with democracy. As Amrita Basu (2013: 81) notes, "the BJP's relationship to democracy has been double edged. While it has deepened democracy in some respects, it has also undermined it through its explicit commitment to Hindu majoritarianism, its periodic engagement in anti-minority violence, and its close ties to non-elected undemocratic civil society organizations." The leadership style of Narendra Modi has also been characterized as "authoritarian populism" which "seeks to harness popular discontent against elite corruption with majoritarianism to create an antagonism between the 'Hindu people' and a 'corrupt elite' that panders to minorities" (Chacko 2018: 1).

Addressing these claims, this chapter examines whether neo-authoritarianism is truly on the rise in India or whether this is merely a claim made by critics. This chapter proceeds as follows. After first exploring the concept of neo-authoritarianism, it then focuses on media coverage of Narendra Modi's centralizing leadership style, his control of other government institutions, relationship with civil society, and the transformation of state-media relations with attention

to his rule as Chief Minister of Gujarat state, the transition period in 2014 when Modi first became India's Prime Minister, and Modi's re-election to that post in 2019. Noting how a sizeable number of democratic deficits were already present under previous Indian governments, the study nevertheless concludes that since 2014 neo-authoritarianism has been not only a critical discourse but also a growing force in India.

Neo-authoritarianism

Although multi-party elections are still regularly held in India, critics have questioned the democratic credentials of a country whose governing practices look increasingly authoritarian. To take just one indicator, India's low ranking on the 2019 World Press Freedom Index (140th out of 180 nations) is hardly suggestive of a strong commitment to democratic flows of information and communication (Reporters Without Borders 2020). But does this reflect a more systematic shift towards neo-authoritarianism? Answering this question requires us to unpack the concept of neo-authoritarianism. While traditional authoritarianism has been around for centuries and has legitimated its rule via historical myths and traditions, *neo-authoritarian* regimes are marked by the following four elements.

Firstly, they seek public legitimacy through 'development' and 'nationalism' (Sahlin 1977). The concept of neo-authoritarianism itself first emerged alongside decolonization in the 1970s from analyses of dictatorial regimes in sub-Saharan Africa, but this idea soon became prominent during the 1980s and 1990s in post-Maoist China where neo-authoritarianism was conceptualized as a vehicle for modernization under which single-party rule and limits on political pluralism could accompany a focus on rapid economic growth and industrialization for an interim period of time in order to later set up a foundation for establishing a functioning democracy (Petracca and Xiong 1990; Perry 1993). By emphasizing state authority over society plus political stability while seeking to advance "the simultaneous construction of a free enterprise system and centralized state power" (Sautman 1992: 76), neo-authoritarianism is politically conservative on the one hand yet economically market-oriented on the other hand (Fu and Chu 1996).

A second component of neo-authoritarianism is the role of strong leadership. As Chinese scholar Wu Jiaxiang has argued, "neo-authoritarians do not stress political structure, but the political leader" who is an "authoritative," "brilliant," and "far-sighted" strongman who takes "resolute and decisive actions" to "enhance capital accumulation, dispose of resources effectively and provide the law and order necessary for commodity trade" (Sautman 1992: 79). Leaders of this ilk embrace scientific and technological modernization while simultaneously resisting intrusions of Western cultural norms by identifying with traditional values "as the foundation of national spirit" (Petracca and Xiong 1990: 1106). To achieve these goals, the leader works to strengthen the bureaucracy and military and the leader applies severely coercive means to suppress crime and corruption and to mute political opposition (Sautman 1992: 86).

Thirdly, while the advent of neo-authoritarianism is often associated with ex-totalitarian regimes softening their degree of authoritarianism as in post-Communist Russia (Becker 2004; Umland 2012), neo-authoritarianism can also emerge in reverse fashion when democratically elected leaders introduce creeping centralization and strong-armed measures to neutralize opponents (e.g., Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Either way, the primary legitimation of neo-authoritarian governance rests on prospective economic outcomes as opposed to a democratic procedural basis and it often appears to be driven by a *logic of late industrialization* since it is difficult for post-colonial states to enter the ranks of "first world" nations given intense international

competition vis-à-vis a large number of already advanced economies (e.g., Kohli 2004). For example, Rodan's (1989) study of Singapore found its leaders were incentivized to adopt an economic strategy reliant upon high levels of state autonomy, civil servant loyalty, inducements to foreign capital, control over labour unions, and minimization of welfare expenditures. Yet, while economic objectives may be its primary drivers, a neo-authoritarian political state is compatible with either neo-liberal or developmental state approaches to capital accumulation.

A fourth significant feature of neo-authoritarianism is that the state's prioritization of rapid capital accumulation inhibits its commitment to competitive political pluralism. Thus, neo-authoritarian regimes allow some space for civil society associations to organize independently and occasionally critique the government but they also use an array of direct and indirect means to limit the political capacity of autonomous organizations from being able to dislodge or challenge the ruling clique or coalition (Petracca and Xiong 1990). This involves both muting domestic rivals and going after foreign-funded non-government organizations who are depicted as "agents of influence" and portrayed as interfering in domestic politics (Umland 2012: 30). When it comes to the media, neo-authoritarian states also tend to use drift-net laws, libel and defamation suits, denial of press credentials, intrusive auditing, and condoning or tolerating violence against opposition journalists and editors to bring about "self-censorship, the most common and important limit on journalistic activity" (Becker 2004: 150). Neo-authoritarians also usually place stronger controls over electronic and broadcast media than print media which may be independently owned as well as "relatively autonomous, accessible to the population and highly critical of the regime" (ibid.: 150).

To sum up, neo-authoritarianism is a system that combines media management and intimidation, civil society curtailment, centralization of state power, and prioritization of market-based economic growth over the promotion of social equality. Under this system, there is a limited degree of political pluralism combined with an unbalanced playing field as common under hybrid regimes featuring 'electoral authoritarianism' (Schedler 2006) or 'competitive authoritarianism' (Levitsky and Way 2010). The neo-authoritarian justification for this imbalance, however, is that a meaningful democracy requires "a high standard of living and experienced officials" and that neo-authoritarianism is a means to eventually achieving this state (Sautman 1992: 94).

Chief Minister Modi

We now begin to address the question of whether neo-authoritarianism is on the rise in India under Narendra Modi by examining his leadership style during his long tenure from 2001 to 2014 as the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat. Modi, a career politician who earned correspondence Bachelor's and Master's degrees in political science from Delhi University and Gujarat University respectively, had been involved with the state's politics dating back to the 1970s. Formerly a full-time missionary (*pracharak*) for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which is one of the most important organizations promoting Hindu nationalism in India, Modi ended up developing a reputation as a formidable behind the scenes political organizer. For instance, during Indira Gandhi's 1975 Emergency decree, when

Tens of thousands of opposition leaders and activists were imprisoned and the RSS was again banned. Modi narrowly avoided going to jail himself and took to wearing elaborate disguises as he travelled around distributing clandestine propaganda and helping to organize peaceful protests demanding the restoration of democracy.

(Price 2015: 33)

[Modi] set about compiling lists of contacts who could be trusted to carry out clandestine tasks and then used their knowledge of another wider circle of sympathizers and democrats to arrange accommodation for activists who needed places to hide. He also began raising money to pay living expenses of political refugees and activists, and arranged for disbursement of funds.

(Marino 2014: 42)

Continuing his work as a key operative for the BJP, Modi developed a “growing reputation as a back-room genius” (Price 2015: 37) and in October 2001 was appointed interim chief minister of Gujarat. A few months later in early 2002, Gujarat became engulfed in massive rioting and violence after a train with Hindus aboard was set on fire resulting in about two thousand people (mostly Muslims) being killed in retaliatory communal violence across the state of Gujarat (see Yagnik and Sheth 2005). Modi was repeatedly blamed by NGOs, politicians, and the media for not taking swifter and more decisive action to stop the violence and prosecute the perpetrators. As a result, for the next 12 years he “was refused entry to the United States as a religious extremist and frozen out diplomatically by Britain, the European Union and many other western countries” (Price 2015: 1). Yet, despite heightened controversy over Modi’s role during the carnage, a reputation for being anti-Muslim, and a perceived willingness to condone communal violence as a strategy to gain political popularity, Modi’s charismatic leadership style brought him repeated electoral victories in 2002, 2007, and 2012 sustaining him in the position of chief minister.

Whereas a growing number of supporters viewed him as a champion of *vikas* (development) referring to improved standards of living, Modi was labelled an authoritarian ruler and schemer by critics who alleged that under his rule land was being “sold to industrialists at throwaway prices” with life “a daily struggle for many Muslims still living in closed, segregated communities twelve years after the riots” (Marino 2014: 210, 223). In response, Modi’s supporters sought to reframe him not as a demon but as demonized. As one of his biographers noted,

Modi is an uncomfortable example for the Congress and other ‘secular’ parties like the SP, BSP, JD(U), and the Left. His programme of empowerment is a challenge to their own model of entitlement and an alternative development path for India...Few Muslims had voted for him in December 2002. But in December 2013, 31 per cent did.

(*ibid.*: 118, 162)

While not all agree on whether Modi was an authoritarian chief minister, he clearly ruled in a populist style and prioritized market-led and private investment-led economic growth over social equality and political pluralism (e.g., Joshi and McGrath 2015). As one biographer put it, “Modi operates with ruthless efficiency by appealing directly to the people over the heads of other politicians” and by transferring officials who did not work efficiently or in support of his plans (Marino 2014: xix). While reportedly taking a strong stand against corruption, “the criticism that Gujarat’s administration was authoritarian remained. Critics said nothing moved without Modi’s go-ahead. He held several ministerial portfolios and, despite the attempt at empowering bureaucrats, micromanaged all important decisions” (*ibid.*: 175).

In a nutshell, while serving as chief minister in Gujarat, Modi’s apparent one-man dominance over the bureaucracy, extensive efforts at information management, promotion of private investment over political pluralism or social equality, and emphasis on native culture to the

point of appearing to tolerate communalism and discrimination against foreigners and minorities (particularly Muslims) fuelled Modi's reputation of being neo-authoritarian.

Prime Minister Modi

In May 2014, India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the New Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition campaigning in the parliamentary election with Modi as its prime ministerial candidate won a landslide victory over the incumbent Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The BJP was able to capture 282 of the 542 seats in the Lok Sabha (LS), the House of the People, while its broader coalition, the NDA got 336 seats. Congress won only 44 seats. Now holding an outright majority of LS seats, the BJP was able to form the first Indian government at the national level in nearly two decades without requiring the help of regional parties as coalition partners (Jaffrelot 2015). Yet, despite Modi's popularity and decisive win at the ballot box – no doubt facilitated by a colonial relic, namely, a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system generating a manufactured majority since the BJP had only won 31% of the national vote – there were creeping accusations of Modi shifting India as a whole in the direction of neo-authoritarianism, depictions similar to those when he ruled in the state of Gujarat. Many feared Modi's goal was to make the BJP the “natural party of governance” and to stay in power for a long time (Marino 2014: 274).

In the aftermath of the 2014 election, news media likened Modi's leadership style to that of Indira Gandhi who famously pulled the plug on Indian democracy in 1975 with her “Emergency Decree” which ushered in two years of dictatorial rule as she was unwilling to let go of her position as prime minister. For instance, journalist Indrajit Hazra likened Modi's role in the 2002 Gujarat riots to Indira Gandhi's role in the 1984 attack on the Golden Temple in Amritsar.

The irony of Modi being in the same political mold as Indira Gandhi...Both are intensely popular politicians transcending the political affiliations of most Indians. Both are authoritarian figures, one blooming from the Nehru–Gandhi gene pool while the other stemming from the RSS factory...And both are associated today with two calendar years – 1984 and 2002 – mentioned aloud only on the anniversaries of two respective carnages.

(Hazra 2014)

Jairam Ramesh from the opposition Congress Party likewise described Modi in ways similar to many descriptions of Indira Gandhi.

He is in complete command of both the administration and the party. His is the only voice that is heard and that counts. This may give an impression of cohesion and coherence in governance but it has already established an extreme centralization of power...He was cheered wildly by corporate India. But strangely, he has decided to choke its access both to himself and to his colleagues.

(Ramesh 2014)

Even a senior member of Modi's own party, L. K. Advani, expressed similar views.

‘Forces that can crush democracy are stronger today,’ Mr Advani said in an interview with The Indian Express ahead of the 40th anniversary of the Emergency, which

was imposed on June 25, 1975. Congress and AAP leaders asserted that Mr Advani's observations were targeted against Mr Narendra Modi, who, according to them, was not following democratic norms while running the government.

(United News of India 2015a)

As these excerpts reveal, news media reported on Modi's style of ruling as concentrating power in himself while disempowering countervailing forces.

Modi was also portrayed as exercising a strong degree of control over parliament and the cabinet due to many BJP newcomers joining the Lok Sabha in 2014. This influx of "inexperienced candidates with little or no voter recognition" (Price 2015: 170) was seen by many as a deliberate tactical move to make the new MPs loyal only to Modi. Critics observed how legislative bills were not being assigned to parliamentary standing committees for scrutiny plus items were smuggled into bills at the last minute (Ramesh 2015). Modi also introduced proposed legislation to amend the constitution, to change how judicial appointments are made, and his government was accused of interfering with state governments by not following basic norms of federalism, for instance, in appointing Tathagata Roy as governor of Tripura.

First, Mr Modi has undoubtedly centralized all authority and decision-making. In the process, he has reduced all but one or two ministers at most to non-entities. He operates directly with the top bureaucracy across ministries and departments, very often without the knowledge of the ministers concerned, and has now started direct interactions with top civil servants in the states as well.

(Ramesh 2015)

Other seemingly neo-authoritarian actions included efforts to sideline the cabinet and parliament through executive orders called ordinances which bypass ordinary parliamentary voting procedures. Such ordinances were related to land acquisition, increasing FDI limits in insurance, opening up coal mining to private companies, and regularizing illegal colonies in Delhi (*Deccan Chronicle* 2014). Though only meant for extraordinary circumstances, Indian governments have issued about ten ordinances per year since Independence, whereas Modi's government passed nine ordinances alone in December 2014 (*United News of India* 2015b; see also Panda 2015). As one sympathetic biographer portrayed the situation:

Sloth in the bureaucracy has been replaced by punctuality...In the Modi government, Ministers sort out inter-departmental queries promptly. Bureaucrats have specific timelines. Delivery and results are key. Once timelines and budgets are set by the PMO, strict adherence to both is monitored.

(Marino 2014: 283)

Another aspect of neo-authoritarianism is restrictions on civil society and an increasingly shrinking space for civil society activities. Shortly after Modi's election, this became a prominent issue of concern as captured in the following criticism.

Modi is a democratically elected authoritarian. Within a year of taking power, he is showing the same authoritarianism that marked his regime in Gujarat. His government has attacked Greenpeace, Action Aid, Amnesty International and other international NGOs as being "anti-development". Vociferous critics and campaign groups

are liable to go on a blacklist, and be blocked from receiving any foreign funding – even while their leader goes abroad touting for international investment.

(Chakraborty 2015)

Aside from intimidation and tighter regulations, others expressed alarm that civil society membership and discourses were being shaped by a government-led agenda. For example, the composition of the Indian Council of Historical Research and film censorship boards were altered by new appointees supposedly affiliated with the Hindu Right (*Deccan Chronicle* 2015). Meanwhile student groups such as the Ambedkar Periyar Study Circle (APSC) at IIT Madras experienced de-recognition supposedly for expressing critical views of Modi (*Press Trust of India* 2015). Such actions have led to a palpable fear that “civil society activities will not be tolerated if they question the official establishment line. Most of these institutions are now on the defensive and apprehensive” (Ramesh 2015).

There have also been suspicions that the Indian government has been intentionally creating or at least indirectly supporting divides within the civil society through communal mobilization (*Deccan Chronicle* 2015). As one observer has complained, “There is no question that the Prime Minister, for the most part, has resisted making incendiary and inflammatory statements, but then he has allowed his colleagues to do so as part of a deliberate strategy” (Ramesh 2015). Perhaps most irksome to his opponents has been Modi’s unwillingness to condemn communalist behaviour attributed to the Hindu Right (such as lynching and other forms of violence) and efforts by his fellow partisans to convert or ‘reconvert’ Indians to Hinduism (Yechury 2014).

There have also been accusations of neo-authoritarian practices in state-media relations. Notably, freedom of expression in the mass media and the expression of views counter to that of Modi have reportedly come under threat as documented by Reporters Without Borders, an international NGO. In 2017, they found:

With Hindu nationalists trying to purge all manifestations of “anti-national” thought from the national debate, self-censorship is growing in the mainstream media. Journalists are increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns by the most radical nationalists, who vilify them and even threaten physical reprisals. Prosecutions are also used to gag journalists who are overly critical of the government, with some prosecutors invoking Section 124a of the penal code, under which “sedition” is punishable by life imprisonment. No journalist has so far been convicted of sedition but the threat encourages self-censorship. The government has also introduced new foreign funding regulations to limit international influence.

(<https://rsf.org/en/india>; accessed on April 1, 2018)

The threat of defamation suits has also provided the Modi government with a vehicle to intimidate and potentially retaliate against critics. As Liang (2015: 389) argues, there has been an increased use of tactics “by the religious right who has perfected the art of harassment by law” requiring those accused of defamation or incendiary speech to “incur extensive travel, time expenditure, harassment, and high legal fees to defend themselves”. In addition to perceptions of widespread practices of censorship and self-censorship especially in film, broadcast media, and social media (e.g., *India Today* 2015), there has been growing fear that the public sphere is becoming saturated with messages favourable to the government while drowning out or muting competing/alternative voices. According to Jairam Ramesh of the Congress Party,

The Prime Minister has maintained an extraordinarily tight control on public communication. He has displayed a pronounced bias in favour of social media in conveying what he wishes to convey. His chief ministerial tenure had been marked by a conspicuous absence of occasions on which he could be questioned and this tradition of a monologue has continued.

(Ramesh 2014)

Meanwhile, journalist Ajaz Ashraf has commented about Modi that

He is an excellent communicator, boasting a philosophy of his own. Its principal thrust is to saturate the popular consciousness with his images, leaving no space for others... His twitter handle has 12.6 million followers, more than any newspaper in India boasts. He has a message out at every conceivable opportunity, communicating directly with people to tell them what he thinks is important, what his side of the story is.

(Ashraf 2015)

In similar fashion, the Aam Admi Party's Yogendra Yadav proclaimed that "Modi today symbolizes three things, authoritarian rule and development at any cost and rule of the majority community" (*Times of India* 2014). As these passages illustrate, critics had become convinced that Modi's government was overstepping the proper separation between the government and an autonomous civil society and media sphere while contributing to intimidation and harassment of dissidents and people belonging to certain minority communities.

Discussion

After becoming prime minister, news media reporting on the incoming Modi regime's treatment of parliament, civil society, and the media was clearly suggestive of neo-authoritarian practices exercised in multiple spheres of Indian governance. There were also quite a range of people depicting the Modi government as authoritarian although many of these figures were members of the political opposition especially from Leftist parties whom one might expect to be dissatisfied with an anti-secular right-wing government.

Against this background, it is worth considering whether the neo-authoritarian characteristics of Modi's government are all that different from the previous UPA government. After all, some aspects of democracy were deficient or in decline in India prior to Modi becoming prime minister. For instance, the Lok Sabha had experienced "a sharp decline in sitting days and duration of sitting hours" plus high rates of absenteeism, lost working hours due to disruption, parliamentary questions ignored by ministers, and a declining number of bills passed between 1952 and 2012 (Verma and Tripathi 2013: 157; see also Rubinoff 2013). Scholars had also documented various democratic deficits in India including governments' disregard for following proper parliamentary procedures (Verma and Tripathi 2013), intimidation and restrictions on civil society (Jaffrelot 2015), government influence over mass media and social media (Liang 2015), and severe underrepresentation in Indian politics of women, youth, and the working class (Joshi 2012, 2015; Kalra and Joshi 2020).

Relatedly, media commentators have pointed out how all governments in India (regardless of party composition) have exhibited authoritarian tendencies and that when given a chance whichever party is in control would try to suppress dissent in parliament and civil society (Chisti 2015). As for mass media, broadcast media in India has long been subjected to censorship and has functioned as a significant source of propaganda in favour of the ruling party especially

during the period of Congress Party dominance from the 1950s through the 1980s. Others have also noted how the problem of “paid news” in India where “stories appearing in the media that appear to be independent but which have, in fact, been paid for” is “nothing new, and had been going on for years” (Price 2015: 161). However, as in other neo-authoritarian systems, Indian print media (unlike radio and television), is “not under the direct control of the government” and arguably “enjoys a fair share of political freedom” (Karan 2009: 199) though this has also come into question in recent years.

In this respect, the Modi government may be simply continuing a variety of pre-existing trends, but the influence of neighbouring China over the past two decades should perhaps not be underestimated in shaping Indian thinking on governance amidst a rising trend of authoritarianism globally (e.g., Joshi and Xu 2017). As Twinning (2014) notes, “with an eye on the threat posed by India’s northern neighbour, Modi has increased defence spending by 15%. He has signalled his determination to revitalize India’s economic growth, not only to advance domestic welfare, but to provide the resources to propel the country’s military modernization.”

Moreover, since getting elected, more and more people (not just opposition party politicians) have also been labelling Modi as authoritarian. For example, distinguished historian Gyan Prakash has noted how compared to the previous UPA government, power concentration has taken place within the ruling BJP party, among institutions of government, and additionally Narendra Modi’s government has been able to deploy extremist Hindu nationalist forces “on the ground to intimidate the opposition” (IANS 2018). A federal minister who quit Modi’s government wrote him in a letter that “the Union Cabinet has been reduced to a rubber stamp, simply endorsing your decisions without any deliberation. Ministers have become figureheads as virtually all decisions are taken by you, your office” (Reuters News 2018). The former head of India’s state media has similarly noted the prime minister’s office exercising strong control over all personnel appointments resulting in “board positions at more than 70 state enterprises... lying vacant for 2–3 years because of the backlog of files in Modi’s office” (Reuters News 2018).

Reflecting a neo-authoritarian mould, intolerance has been on the rise and dissent (especially against Modi and his government) has been increasingly labelled as anti-national, defamatory or seditious with the “investigative agencies and security apparatus” seemingly deployed “to silence its critics” (Bhushan 2019). Moreover, government personnel working in or heading various public agencies such as the Reserve Bank of India and Central Bureau of Investigation have been apparently removed or prompted to resign for not being loyal to Modi (Reuters News 2018).

India’s 2019 parliamentary elections and their aftermath seem to have only reinforced these neo-authoritarian tendencies. Getting 37% of the votes, the ruling BJP increased its LS seats to 303 (56% of LS seats) compared to only 52 (10% of LS seats) for the Congress Party who received 19% of the votes. That year, the central government’s takeover of the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir, census registry in Assam state whereby nearly two million people (many of whom are Muslim) were not counted as citizens, and the Citizenship Amendment Act which would make Muslims (who cannot conclusively prove that they are already Indian citizens) ineligible to obtain Indian citizenship, not to mention police brutality against Muslim student protesters conveyed a strong impression of state-directed Islamophobia that is widely at odds with India’s post-Independence secular tradition (e.g., Mody 2019).

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the public discourse associating Narendra Modi and his government with neo-authoritarianism, in particular how his government has approached parliament and

the cabinet as well as concerns that there has been shrinking space for civil society and changes in government–media relations which have imperilled the free-flow of public information. As demonstrated here, during his tenures as both chief minister and prime minister, there is no question that opposition party leaders have regularly framed Modi as authoritarian, especially around the time of the 2014 and 2019 national elections.

Thus, on the one hand, the findings here suggest that the current Modi government reflects “the conventional Indian belief that once your party was in power, you could get away with whatever you liked: rules were now for other people” (Marino 2014: 166). As a former chief election commissioner stated in 1980: “Political parties make strong demands for the conduct of free and fair elections to legislative bodies, but choose to ignore the application of the same principles when it comes to the functioning of their own party organs” (*Kashmir Monitor* 2014). While the Modi government has demonstrated clear signs of neo-authoritarian behaviour, one must remember that Indian politics has long been beleaguered by corruption, cronyism, criminalization, nepotism, clientelism, caste-ism, sexism, and dynasticism, practices which many would view at odds with a well-functioning liberal democracy (e.g., Kohli 1990; Chhibber 2012; Chandra 2016).

On the other hand, as this study has observed, while India today is not (yet) as authoritarian as it was during the 1975–1977 Emergency Decree, India has clearly been moving in a neo-authoritarian direction under Narendra Modi. Thus, in the absence of strong and active resistance, neo-authoritarianism may increasingly become a mainstay of Indian politics if Modi or other rulers with authoritarian tendencies are able to successfully perpetuate a climate of fear, intimidate civil society, neutralize political opponents, and flood the public sphere with their own particular self-serving discourses to the relative exclusion of competing discourses. Yet, there is also potential for a democratic resurgence like India experienced in 1977, after Indira Gandhi’s Emergency Rule ended and it is perhaps ultimately up to India’s masses and its elites to decide whether such a turnaround will be occurring again soon.

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