**[G20 with a hope and a prayer](https://www.dawn.com/news/1775416/g20-with-a-hope-and-a-prayer)**

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published September 12, 2023

THE inveterate Hindu in him spurred the British prime minister to take time off from the G20 summit to offer prayers at Delhi’s riverside Akshardham temple. In so doing, he picked up a politically handy applause from the hosts even if the trade pact both eyed has apparently hit the doldrums.

Rishi Sunak could have more usefully nudged his Catholic friend from the US to attend the Sunday mass at Delhi’s British-era Sacred Heart Cathedral Church. After all, according to a worrying new survey last week, two-thirds of the polled Democrats don’t want Joe Biden as their presidential candidate next year. It could be his age, the fumbling in Vietnam, or [his son’s legal troubles](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764268).

More astutely, it could be the war in Ukraine he has invested so much in. He can’t not be aware that his probable would-be rival is promising the geographically blinkered American electorate an end to the brutal conflict with the snap of his fingers. Clearly, Biden was in greater need of divine help if anyone was among the leaders gathered in Delhi. Whatever his reasons for flaunting his religious preference, Rishi Sunak bucked a quaint trend in his country where more and more people are turning away from religion, that too without excessively troubling the Anglican Church.

Where seeking divine help is concerned, Narendra Modi would perhaps need to work harder on propitiating the divine hand. Merely hoping to inaugurate the Ram temple before the May 2024 general elections could become tricky, the many pats on the back for hosting a powerful summit notwithstanding.

A clutch of by-polls in key states, crucially including Uttar Pradesh, found the prime minister’s party trailing behind the [newly minted ‘INDIA’ alliance](https://www.dawn.com/news/1765451). Of the seven seats up for grabs, four were wrested by the alliance while only three remained with the BJP.

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In the multicultural jamboree the G20 was, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia played it spiritually safe. As the leaders were being escorted to a guided tour of Mahatma Gandhi’s shrine, Mohammed bin Salman it seems followed the rule of his forebears and dodged the Indian protocol for visiting dignitaries. The late King Abdullah was the chief guest at Delhi’s Republic Day military parade in 2006, after a diplomatic hiatus of 50 years, when he decided to forgo the mandatory visit to Gandhi Samadhi, citing religious reservations.

Fellow Muslim Pervez Musharraf had not quite seen it that way, so he visited the shrine in July 2001. It’s another matter the overture did not eventually assure him success at the Agra summit. The Quaid though an ardent critic of Gandhi had grieved when he was killed by a Hindu assassin. Musharraf, by offering flowers at Gandhiji’s shrine not only disagreed with the puritan view supported by the Saudis, but the act also critiqued Mr Modi’s followers who revile Gandhi and hero-worship his killers.

That said, the two more visible issues that stood out at the G20 summit require a closer look. The inclusion of the African Union into the fold is laudable but needs discussion. And the concern expressed on the [Ukraine war](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774982) appeared to be acceptable to everyone except Ukraine. Let’s examine both decisions closely. The quest to include the African Union as a G20 member found Mr Modi positioning himself as the voice for the Global South.

A few weeks earlier, the BRICS summit in South Africa had also [extended the membership](https://www.dawn.com/news/1771856/brics-nations-agree-to-expand-developing-world-bloc) to a wider representation of Africa.

While Mr Modi moved to reinvent the wheel, his claim of inclusiveness was the way Jawaharlal Nehru had always positioned India’s foreign policy. Nehru saw Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere and Gamal Abdel Nasser among the revered African leaders as India’s close comrades.

The [Non-Aligned Movement](https://www.dawn.com/news/746845/reinvigorating-nam) was conceived by these leaders as a platform to not only reject big power loyalties; it also opposed the continued exploitation of their countries by the industrial West, their former colonisers.

Nehru did one better. He saw Asia as the lynchpin of his embrace of the Third World, and it saw him flying ace pilot Biju Patnaik to secretly rescue Indonesian president Sukarno from the colonial plot that toppled him. He saw South Asia as an oasis of fellowship of postcolonial societies, and he spoke of a South Asian confederation ahead of the EU.

Mr Modi, on the other hand, has single-handedly subverted the fellowship by undermining Saarc, mostly, it is suspected, to pander to his narrow political constituency at home. One can be certain that G77, which was founded in 1964 as a club of developing nations and currently includes 130 adherents, continues to represent members from Africa, Latin America, and a host of Asian nations. The G77 members are having their summit in Cuba on Sept 15-16. That’s where Brazilian President Lula was headed after taking the G20 gavel from Mr Modi.

However, that’s not the priority for the Modi administration evidently. The Indian foreign minister backed out from the Cuba meeting at the last minute. According to reports, a special session of the Indian parliament starting on Sept 18 was given as the reason for India not to send the foreign minister to Havana. The [undisclosed agenda](https://www.dawn.com/news/1774324) has kept the foreign minister from travelling to a Global South event.

This leads to a different understanding of the Delhi summit. Remember that the Davos Economic Forum was a platform for global capitalism and spoke generally for G7 countries. Its critics set up the World Social Forum that prescribed an equitable and sustainable economic order that shared little with private profit. G20 seeks to blur the contradiction with G77.

As for the Ukraine war, the G20’s acceptance of the compromise was anticipated by analysts well ahead of the summit. Among them, former Indian diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar pointed this out in an analysis for *NewsClick* on Sept 8. It was titled, ‘Ice-cracking sounds on frozen lake of US-Russia relations’. Prayers are in order.

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