**India`s illiberal `democracy`**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-03-10

ON Friday, the US-based think tank Freedom House released its annual report ranking countries based on their fulfillment of and support for democratic principles such as freedom of speech, belief, thought, access to government institutions and political participation. One of the surprises in this year`s report was that India, ranked as a free country until now, was demoted to 111th place among 162 countries and was now only `partly free`.

The report went to some lengths to explain why India had been demoted to a partially free country.

They include the widespread crackdown on dissent and discrimination against Muslims that has been a hallmark of Prime Minister Narendra Modi`s administration. The report noted that things had gotten progressively worse since the re-election of the Modi government in 2019. Since then, the state had been involved in a crackdown on journalists reporting on the farmers` protests, using the colonial-era sedition laws.

The journalists included major media personalities such as Rajdeep Sardesai, a well-known anchor, Vinod Jose, executive editor of the Indian political and literary magazine Caravan, and also noted legislator and historian Shashi Tharoor. The Modi government has alleged that the journalists provoke d the crowd f or their own per sonal or political gain by spreading false and misleading information on the internet. Anand Sahay, the president of the Press Club of India, noted it was no coincidence that the charges against the journalists had only been registered in states that are ruled by Prime Minister Modi`s Bharatiya Janata Party.

A similar crackdown is also being waged against climate activists; the 22-year-old climate campaigner Disha Ravi was arrested simply for editing and developing a `tool kit` that was tweeted by climate activist Greta Thunberg. In 2020, the report states, hundreds of journalists were also arrested for their reporting on the coronavirus pandemic because they were not toeing the line and pushing propaganda.

Then there is the demonisation of minorities.

The Freedom House report notes that the government has been spreading false information during the Covid-19 pandemic by saying that Muslims were somehow responsible for transmitting the disease. The report takes particular notice of the `love jihad` laws that have been designed to victimiseMuslim men under trumped-up charges of forcibly converting Hindu women. In Uttar Pradesh, where the laws are in effect, several Muslim men have been arrested on dubious charges.

In essence, the laws exist as a tool to further demonise Indian Muslims on the whim of BJP operatives wielding state power. Even bigger problems have been created by the new citizenship laws, which use clever documentary requirements to prevent poor Muslim minorities in border states from retaining Indian citizenship.

So successfully has the Modi administration demonised Muslims in India that it has adopted the same sort of tactics against the Sikh population.

Even though the farmers` protests have beendirected at three different laws related to how farmers sell their products, the government line has been that the Sikh farmers are really separatists demanding secession. The government has even alleged that Ravi, the climate activist booked on sedition charges, had connections to these secessionist groups among the protesting farmers.

The shocking thing is that all these authoritarian power grabs in India have gone unchallenged.

One reason for this is that the Modi administration has worked systematically to erode the very constitutional checks and institutions that would have helped prevent such abuse of power. The Modi government`s support for Hindu supremacy has relied on the fact that 80 per cent of Indians are Hindu and that attaching privileges to that religion would be popular with them. This might explain the enduring support for Modi and his party among a large segment, even though the administration has not been able to deliver on promises of economic prosperity and global ascendancy.This last bit about India`s aspirations to global ascendancy is the reason why India`s demotion is worthy of discussion. When Prime Minister Modi came into power, India was doing well and was expected to outperform China in the march towards superpower status, not least because unlike China it was seen as having a robust liberal democratic and constitutional government. With so much of its future relying on these sorts of global perceptions, it seems antithetical that the Modi government has chosen to transform India into an illiberal democracy.

Some respite from being judged harshly for being an illiberal democracy may have been provided to India during the tenure of the Trump administration. Like Modi, Trump was no fan of liberal or constitutional norms or checks on his power. That era is over, and in its place has come the Biden administration, which, given its own problems dealing with the detritus left behind by the Trump administration, will only look harshly on wannabe fascists.

It is notable that unlike the Trump administration, which regularly allied with Indian-Americans who supported the far-right Hindutva movements, Biden`s Indian Americans, from the surgeon general Vivek Murthy to the associate attorney general Vanita Gupta, do not have such connections, nor do the Kashmiri-Americans who have also been nominated for important posts in the administration.

Reports like the one published by Freedom House are hardly the last word on which countries are free. However, quibbles with the report would have more credence if India had not been so proud of its ranking in earlier years. In the end, it appears that the Modi administration made the fatal mistake of putting Modi first and India second. The consequence is a weakened country used to being told lies about its own progress with an authoritarian leader who has neutralised all those who would dare criticise him. India may not find this shameful, but the rest of the democratic world is likely to feel quite justified in looking down on a country that was once completely free.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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