

Fear and Loathing Under Modi's Second Term

Experts debate whether India is being Pakistanized, while protest against the BJP's corporate and religious pandering spreads

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The Pakistani feminist poet Fahmida Riaz, who moved to India from Pakistan in the 1980s to escape that country's Islamic fundamentalist military dictatorship, only to encounter growing Hindu fundamentalism in her new home, captured the experience in a poem (translated and abridged) that has become more prescient over time:

You turned out to be just like us, Equally stupid, wallowing in the past... Your
demon of religion dances like a clown,
Whatever you do will be upside down You too will sit deep in thought
Who is Hindu, who is not...

Pakistan was carved out of India in 1947 as a state for Muslims while India remained secular. But since 2014, under the rule of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the country has become increasingly dominated by religious fundamentalism that is tolerated and openly encouraged by the government. Mob lynching of Muslims and other minorities (80% of Indians are Hindu and 14% are Muslim) is common.

An election in the spring, which many expected to chip away at Modi's support, in the end produced an even stronger second majority for the BJP, giving the extreme nationalist party 302 out of 542 seats in parliament compared to 282 seats in the 2014 election. The main opposition Congress Party got only 53 seats.

Modi won at the polls in May despite a weakening economy marked by plummeting investment, record unemployment, a crisis in agriculture and a looming environmental disaster, which will see 21 Indian cities run out of water in 2020, affecting 600 million people. Modi's two main fiscal initiatives in his first term — demonetization and the introduction of a goods and services tax (GST) — were also badly received. Taking 86% of banknotes out of circulation caused massive losses to poor people, damaged economic growth and failed to remove illicit money from the economy as planned. The complexity of the GST led many small businesses to lay off staff.

But such problems were likely far from the minds of hundreds of millions of Modi's supporters, who are attracted "not through concrete economic policies but through the politics of emotion — negative emotion such as fear, anger, hatred for the neighbour, for minorities and women," according to Nikita Sud, associate professor of development studies at Oxford University and author of the 2012 book *Liberalisation, Hindu Nationalism and the State* (Oxford University Press). "During the campaign, the economy was barely mentioned,

nor was the agricultural crisis. Modi's campaign focused mainly on the threat of terrorism and national security and promoted the fear that if you do not elect us, terrorism will increase."

Modi's election campaign was helped greatly by the February 14 suicide attack in Kashmir. The Pakistan-based Islamist militant group Jaish-e-Mohammed Isa claimed responsibility for the incident, which killed 40 soldiers and shocked India. The BJP had lost elections in three key states in November 2018 and was leaking support to the Congress Party. The killing of Indian soldiers and India's retaliatory airstrikes into Pakistan reversed this political situation and ensured the BJP a majority.

As I've written in the Monitor before ("Modi and the criminalization of Indian politics," September/October 2014), Modi's hostility toward India's Muslim population is well-known. In a sworn statement to India's Supreme Court in 2011, a former senior police chief alleged Modi had "allowed" a bloody religious riot in Gujarat in 2002 when he was chief minister of the state, to let Hindus "vent their anger," an accusation Modi denies. At least 1,000 people were killed in the mob violence, most of them Muslims.

Sud tells me that Modi and the BJP's subversion of the media would have played a role in their second election victory. "[P]articular corporate houses close to the Modi government control large parts of the media, which ensures that economic matters that the government has failed at, such as demonetization, are not brought up," she says.

"There is a similarity in the politics of India and Pakistan now," she continues, echoing the poet Riaz. "[T]his othering of minorities, blasphemy accusations, sedition charges, and patriotism constantly being stressed. These are the similarities, but the big difference is that the Indian army does not have the kind of power that the Pakistan army does to totally dominate the country."

Sud says it's ironic how Modi is using hatred of Pakistan to make India more like Pakistan.

Mujibur Rehman, author of the 2018 book *Saffron Power: Reflections on Indian Politics* (Routledge) and an assistant professor of politics at Jamia Millia Islamia University in India's capital city of New Delhi, explains that

"the majority of Indian media appears to be compromised and work as the Modi government's wing of information and broadcasting."

If Indian voters gave Modi one more chance, he adds, it was "because they did not find his opponents credible."

Modi's main opponent was and is Rahul Gandhi, scion of the Gandhi family that has dominated Indian politics and the Congress Party since India's independence in 1947. Gandhi's electoral strategy was to attack Modi for being corrupt, but this had little effect coming from a party with its own history of graft in power. The election result has reduced Congress to its weakest point ever; the party is close to being wiped out in northern India.

“There are some similarities in the ways things are unfolding in India and Pakistan,” says Rehman. “But I would not say India is becoming like Pakistan. Similarities are in the domain of minority rights, religious freedom; we do see lots of violations in India in recent years, which resembles Pakistan’s state of affairs.

“But India still has its constitution and there are dissenting voices and political forces. Also, India is nowhere close to a situation where we could see [as in Pakistan] the overthrow of its democratically elected regime. I do not see any possibility of a military or dictator takeover of the Pakistan kind in India. India is still a democracy, but a democracy can also see violations, massive violations, which is what we are witnessing.”

The dramatic rise in mob lynching of Muslims, Dalits (also known as “untouchables,” the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system) and other non-Hindus are an example of the violations Rehman is talking about. Alarmed and in response to the violence, 49 Indian celebrities sent an open letter to Prime Minister Modi on July 23 condemning “a definite decline in the percentage of convictions” against hate crimes since his government first took office.

The letter points out that 254 religious identity-based hate crimes were reported between January 1, 2009 and October 29, 2018 “where at least 91 persons were killed and 579 were injured.” Muslims were the victims in 62% of cases and Christians in 2%, according to the Citizen’s Religious Hate-Crime Watch.

“About 90 per cent of these attacks were reported after May 2014 when your government assumed power nationally,” the celebrities write.

Kapil Komireddi, author of the 2019 book *Malevolent Republic: A Short History of the New India* (Hurst), has written that Modi’s second term “will take India to a dark place,” and that his party “has unleashed forces that are irreversibly transforming the country,” with Indian democracy “now the chief enabler of Hindu extremism.” In the *Guardian* (U.K.), Komireddi claimed shortly before the May elections that the normally incorruptible India election commission “functioned during this vote as an arm of Modi’s BJP, too timid even to issue perfunctory censures of the prime minister’s egregious use of religious sloganeering.” According to the writer, India’s military has been politicized, “and the judiciary plunged into the most existential threat to its independence since 1975, when Indira Gandhi suspended the constitution and ruled as a dictator for 21 months.”

Indian and foreign corporations have praised the BJP’s economic and state reforms, which are redistributing wealth upwards. At a cost of 500 billion rupees (about \$9.5 billion), the Indian election this year was the most expensive in the country’s — and world — history, topping the 2016 U.S. election by half a billion dollars. Much of this was financed by electoral bonds bought by corporations, with 84% of the money going to the BJP.

“The entire election process has been corporatized and the corporate sector is very much funding political parties,” says Sud, a sign of fascism “which is very worrying.”

Indian activist Xavier Dias, who has worked in support of the rights of Adivasi [Indigenous] communities in Jharkhand state for 45 years, tells me that the “fascist new liberalization” of India is being resisted on a significant scale.

“Despite a very heavy powerful state, in every corner of India the resistance movements are growing. The working class through their unions are on strike all over the country, resisting privatization and regressive changes in labour laws. Farmers are resisting also and demanding more help from the government. Women in villages are up in arms and Adivasis now too are better organized,” he says.

“But the damage to the country is so deep and wide- spread that even if the BJP is defeated, India will take at least 20 years to recover from the damage. The soul of India is drenched in blood.”

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