

Narendra Modi's Cricket Coup

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What a coup. Nakedly amoral but utterly self-serving in its saccharine minted glory. India's showman Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who otherwise appears to have clerkish, desk-bound qualities, had what he wanted: an accommodating, possibly clueless guest in the form of the Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese; a common interest in India's national sport cricket, and a show illuminating him as supreme Hindu leader presiding over a new age of politics. For Albanese, this was ill-fitting and disturbing but all in keeping with the occasion.

This month, Albanese, who has been held to the bosom of great powers of late, found himself at the mercy of cricket diplomacy at the Narendra Modi stadium in Ahmedabad. He had been placed upon an improvised golf car with Modi prior to the start of the fourth cricket test between Australia and India. But Albanese was not merely Modi's guest; he was also appearing in a stadium named after the prime minister he was keeping company with. Modesty had been exorcised; pomp and narcissism had taken its place.

The cricketers of the national sides were not spared florid manipulation and flowery exploitation. In India, cricket makes the god fearing, beer swilling followers of soccer look like mild agnostics of some reserve and domestic sensibility. In the Indian cricket canon, players are sanctified from across the globe, added to a sanctuary of permanent adoration in something reminiscent of ancient tradition. Much like the deities of the Roman Empire, all great cricket players, from Antigua to Sydney, find their spiritual holy ground on Indian soil, forever assimilated.

For Modi, this all meant opportunity and glory. He is the classically dangerous politician for those of the broadly described West who think they understand him. Supple, gentle, oleaginous, Modi is both unscrupulous and prone to wooing. And Albanese was there to keep him company. The teams of two great cricket nations were effectively shoehorned into the show, with Modi and Albanese giving the captains of their respective countries [their caps](#) before the game's commencement.

The nexus of power in world cricket – and its link Modi – was also affirmed by the presence

of officials from the enormously powerful Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). They were on hand to give Modi that most vulgar of gifts: a gaudily framed photo of himself.

The scenes should have made Albanese feel uncomfortable. While Australian officials, business types and opportunists dream of market opportunities in India, it is also worth appreciating what Modi is. This is only relevant given the mighty, moral bent Canberra takes on such matters: the Chinese and Russians are seen as barbarians hammering away at the rules-based order and shredding human rights - or some such - and there lies India, promising, vast and nominally democratic.

Things, however, are not well in the world's largest democracy. Only in February, the BBC offices in Delhi and Mumbai were paid a less than friendly visit from tax officials [intent](#) on conducting a "survey". This came just weeks after the organisation's release of a documentary that shone a light less than rosy upon the dear leader.

For all this, Australian governments can hardly complain: the Australian Federal Police engaged in similar acts against the national broadcaster in June 2019, and even went so far as to suggest that two journalists from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation might be prosecuted for national security violations.

Modi also had a superb distraction to be used against the Australian PM. He could chide his guest and prod him about what was happening regarding recent acts of vandalism against Hindu temples in Melbourne. "It is a matter of regret that attacks on temples have been regularly reported in Australia over the last few weeks."

These have primarily featured slogans of support for the pro-Khalistan Sikh separatist movement. The wall of the ISKCON temple located in the suburb of Albert Park, for instance, [featured the words](#) "Khalistan Zindabad (Long Live the Sikh Homeland)", "Hindustan Murdabad (Down with India)", and "Sant Bhindranwale is martyred". Another incident at Carrum Downs featured, according to Victorian Police, damage that "included graffiti slogans of what appear to be [of] a political nature."

Albanese, caught up in the role of being the good guest, [could only say](#) that such acts had "no place in Australia. And we will take every action through our police and also our security agencies to make sure that anyone responsible for this faces the full force of the law. We're a tolerant multicultural nation, and there is no place in Australia for this activity."

In India, on the other hand, there is more than enough space for intolerance when PM Modi and the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) authorities egg it on. The rights of Muslims, for instance, have been [curtailed](#) by the Citizenship Amendment Act, an instrument that enables non-Muslim communities originally from Pakistan, Bangladesh or Afghanistan to apply for Indian citizenship if they had arrived in India prior to December 31, 2014.

Violence against Muslims and Islamophobic statements from officials has also become more common, with India's Supreme Court warning that mob attacks risked being normalised in the current environment.

None of this came up in the Modi-Albanese discussions. Nor did the conduct of India's premier port-to-power conglomerate, the Adani Group, which has extensive mining, rail and port interests in Australia. To add to its inglorious environmental report card, Adani [was](#)

[found](#) by the activist short-seller Hindenburg Research earlier this year to be allegedly responsible for accountancy fraud and stock manipulation. To keep that off the agenda was yet another mighty coup for the Indian leader.

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