

Modi, Putin and the future of India: Does truth still triumph?

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If great minds think alike, then so too must great dictators. As the world emerged from pandemic lockdowns in December 2021, Russia's President Putin made Narendra Modi of India the subject of only his second international visit in almost two years, and the first in a subsequent line of appearances in autocracies across Central Asia, China and the Middle East. What is notable is not only that Modi was the first of these – a major sign of Russia's confidence – but that he is in no way out of place.



To say that Modi is a controversial figure, and leader, is an understatement. First coming to prominence as Chief Minister of Gujarat at the turn of the millennium, he has ruled India since 2014 with his political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), winning successive landslides in votes that were as much about Modi himself as the party he represented. Genuinely hugely popular in India across his tenure, Modi sees himself squarely in the Trumpist model of a right-wing populist reaching parts of the electorate that other politicians cannot (albeit that he did it first), rather than a Putin- or Xi-style dictator who rules with an iron fist. The truth is that the former invariably leads to the latter, and Modi's repression and marginalisation make him the ideal bedfellow for his cohorts. His track record, and plans for India's future, will make sobering reading for those planning to invest in India.

While Modi has always attempted to portray himself as an anti-elitist, all-welcoming 'everyman', nothing could be further from the truth. The BJP, and his role at the forefront of it, are the ultimate expressions of a dedicated Hindu nationalism that has been growing for the past century and provides an ideological foundation for centring power in the hands of just one group – moreover, one which is far better able to dominate both the social and institutional discourses than comparable regimes (in, say, Brazil), given the underlying tenet that one is either entirely with Modi on the Hindu nationalist page, or entirely against him.

Being re-elected in 2019 with a bigger majority than in 2014, allowed Modi to ramp up the nationalist rhetoric on the argument that this was plainly what the people wanted, while at the same time, he has been able to weaken democratic norms and draw the institutions of the media, judiciary and so on, closer to the BJP through relentless 'othering' and intimidation.

Indeed, by the metrics of ongoing erosion of civil liberties, deepening repression against minorities and opposition movements, and the assumption of ever-greater powers to a political and institutional elite that was supposedly anti-elitist, some institutions – not least Sweden’s influential V-Dem Institute – have asserted that India can no longer be called a democracy.

The endpoint of the BJP’s Hindu nationalism so far, has not only been to corral the religion- and culture-driven rhetoric of ‘us vs them’ into a blank cheque for further autocracy, but in both actively contributing to human rights abuses in the contested province of Kashmir (with its Muslim majority) and in passively doing nothing to stop the public riots against, and vigilante killings of, India’s Muslims. This is not just nationalism, but exclusivism – setting a dangerous precedent for India’s future path, not only as a moral issue on its own terms but as an exemplar of the kind of insular, demonising nation that Modi’s India, in actuality, is. The great-grandson of Gandhi himself, Tushar, has asserted that “*Modi’s success has been built on hate*” – destroying the inclusivity and non-violent tenets that were his ancestor’s driving principles – and pointed out that Mahatma’s murderer was, himself, a Hindu nationalist, of the very same mindset as that which Modi espouses and which is the country’s governing policy.

It is thus plain to see why Putin and Modi are so in tune: both local politicians somewhat unexpectedly thrust to national dominance, both skilled at exploiting divisions and creating a culture of fear against ‘the others’ to exercise their will as the continuation of the national imperative, and both becoming increasingly strident in their repression in the face of international outcry. India has been resolutely neutral on the invasion of Ukraine in its dialogue with the UN and QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, between India, Japan, Australia and USA) has agreed to trade in their national currencies rather than dollars, and maintains arms, oil and coal trades with Russia (the latter two of which rose significantly *after* the war began), in addition to Moscow’s funding of billion-dollar infrastructure projects during Modi’s regime – which in some cases, such as oil refineries in Modi’s home state of Gujarat, being used by Russia to launder both money and product alike.

And yet despite this, Putin does not have it all his own way. America views India as a key regional element of its anti-China strategy in the Asia-Pacific, and to that end is making renewed overtures to court Modi into the self-proclaimed ‘liberal nations club’ despite his obvious unsuitability. While Russia’s importance on the global stage looks set to only recede further and China’s position as the bulwark of anti-Western sentiment is confirmed, India may decide its long-term interests will be better served with the dragon, rather than the bear.

Modi is aware that India, as the leading BRIC member and a key developing economy (to say nothing of its youthful, highly educated technologically adept population) is a valuable proposition for global business and has proven himself willing to sell his country to the forces of profit and ideology, no matter how corrupt or controversial they may be. Whether India leans closer to Russia or China, ultimately makes little difference to the international investor all the while he is in charge. There may be many passages to India, but all roads lead to Modi.

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