



INDIA – A DEMOCRACY IN PERIL

By

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The pandemic has changed the world: both for better and worse. However, in case of democratic values the world has witnessed decline during the last year. Authoritarian regimes have used this pandemic as a tool to curb basic human freedoms and to increase their foothold in their countries. It has particularly affected the democratic nature of governance. A recent report, *Freedom in the World 2021* by a US-based think tank highlights that the democratic decline has now assumed global nature in the aftermath of the pandemic.¹ It states that 75 percent population of the world now lives under circumstances facing deteriorating democratic conditions.² India's ranking has declined in the report as compared to last year. It has fallen from "Free" to "Partly Free"³ in the recent *Freedom in the World* report. It came out as a big surprise for many who considered India as one of the most populous and flourishing democracies across the globe.

¹ Freedom in the World 2021," *Freedom House*, accessed March 10, 2021,1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-02/FIW2021_World_02252021_FINAL-web-upload.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 2.



Image source: *Freedom in the World 2021 annual report*

Freedom House rates people's access to civil rights and liberties in its annual Freedom Report. The 2021 edition covered developments in 195 countries and 15 territories from January 1, 2020, through December 31, 2020. Its large measures are derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. They believe that certain freedom standards apply to all countries irrespective of their geographical location, economic development, and ethnic or religious demographic composition. Their core standards assume that freedom for all is best achieved in democratic societies. The most pertinent feature of the Freedom House analyses is that they assess the rights enjoyed by individuals in the real-world rather than just the mere provision of rights in the legal documents of those territories. Afterward, countries are awarded scores for their political and civil rights and are then categorized as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free based on their status.

This year's report is unique for the pandemic provided an opportunity for robust surveillance to the authoritarian regimes in many parts of the world. Resultantly, many basic freedoms like the freedom to assemble and move have been arbitrarily violated by both the governments and non-state actors. It posed a serious threat to political liberties and provided opportunities for anti-democratic forces to consolidate power at home rendering the democratic apparatus in such countries weak. India is a pertinent example in this regard where violations of basic human freedoms became new normal in the wake of the pandemic.

In the recent Freedom House report, India has fallen under the category of “Partly Free”, highlighting a democratic decline in the country. The report suggests that since Modi came into power in 2014, civil rights and liberties have deteriorated in the country. The situation was further aggravated after Modi’s re-election in 2019.

LARGEST ONE-YEAR GAINS AND DECLINES IN 2020

Gains in aggregate score reflect improvements in conditions for political rights and civil liberties.

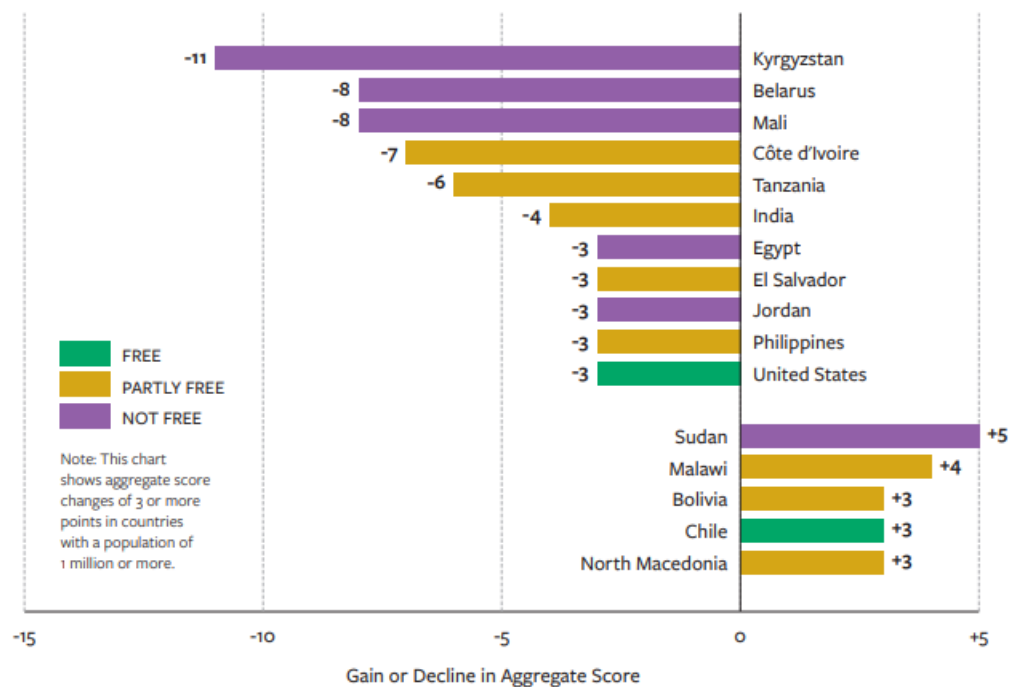


Image Source: *Freedom in the World 2021 annual report*

The report further highlights that democratic institutions like the judiciary are also under attack in Modi's India. The damage to the judicial freedom is evident from the incident of transferring a judge for “reprimanding police for taking no actions during riots in Delhi that left over 50 people, mostly Muslims, dead.”⁴ The report further takes notice of the “Love-Jihad”⁵ law that prohibits forced conversions through interfaith marriage. The law is criticized for dis-incentivizing interfaith marriages, which will consequently affect pluralism and diversity in the country. Under the new law, many Muslims have been arrested for “forceful conversions” of Hindu girls.⁶ Moreover, Modi's handling of the Covid pandemic has also been severely criticized in the report. Modi’s government enforced a lockdown after the pandemic which left millions of workers without daily wages. This

⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Apoorvanand, “India’s ‘love Jihad’ Laws: Another Attempt to Subjugate Muslims,” *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/15/indias-love-jihad-laws-another-attempt-to-subjugate-muslims>.

hasty decision exposed many workers to life-threatening conditions by restricting their survival opportunities and leaving them to their own devices without any recourse from their government during the worst pandemic of recent human history. Owing to these disastrous measures, overtly damaging the minorities and underprivileged, the report contends that “under Modi, India appears to...(be) elevating to Hindu Nationalist interests at the expense of its founding core values of inclusion and equal rights for all.”⁷

This report is just a recent reminder of the altered face of new fascist India run by the RSS-BJP nexus. Crackdown on dissent is not an unfamiliar territory for the Indian government. Previously, the Austria-headquartered International Press Institute (IPI) and Belgium-based International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) —in a joint letter to PM Modi urged Prime Minister Modi to take urgent action against the rising use of draconian sedition laws and other legal sanctions to threaten and silence journalists in India.⁸ However, all of this was to no avail. Contrarily, the human rights violations continue ratcheting up in India to a point that Amnesty International was forced to suspend its operations in India⁹ after its bank accounts were frozen in a government “witch-hunt.” Addressing the issue, Julie Verhaar, Acting Secretary-General of Amnesty International said that “sadly, this enormously important work standing up for victims has been met with the heavy-handed tactics that Indian civil society has become increasingly familiar with – part of the government’s drive to silence critical voices and stoke a climate of fear.”¹⁰

Last year, in another incident a popular jewelry brand Tanishq was forced to withdraw an ad portraying an interfaith marriage. The social media backlash against the ad was so vehement that the brand not only withdrew the 45 seconds long short film promoting a jewelry line called “Ekatvam” (Hindi word for unity)¹¹ but also publicly apologized for running such an advertisement. The crackdown on diversity and dissent in India did not end here. It was only last month that a 22-year-old climate activist, Disha Ravi was arrested and charged with sedition for extending her support to the farmers’ protest.¹² Her only crime was raising her voice against the ruling party.

⁷ “Freedom in the world,” 8.

⁸ “IPI, IFJ Urge India to Stop Using Sedition Laws to Silence Journalists,” *International Press Institute*, October 21, 2020, <https://ipi.media/ipi-ifj-urge-india-to-stop-using-sedition-laws-to-silence-journalists/>.

⁹ “Amnesty International India Halts Its Work on Upholding Human Rights in India Due to Reprisal from Government of India,” *Amnesty International*, accessed March 11, 2021, [https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/amnesty-international-india-halts-its-work-on-upholding-human-rights-in-india-due-to-reprisal-from-government-of-india/.x`](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/09/amnesty-international-india-halts-its-work-on-upholding-human-rights-in-india-due-to-reprisal-from-government-of-india/.x)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Tanishq: Jewellery Ad on Interfaith Couple Withdrawn After Outrage,” *BBC News*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-54520390>

¹² “Why Indian Police Arrested a 22-year-old Climate Activist,” *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/16/why-indian-police-arrested-a-22-year-old-climate-activist>.

These are to name a few incidents symptomatic of the melody running currently in Modi's India. Gruesome mob lynching, forced conversions, the crackdown on dissent and rising ill-treatment of minorities are now the new facets of communal life in India. All these incidents lend credence to the claim that gone are the days of diversity, pluralism, and tolerance in India, – the very features necessary for a vibrant democracy.