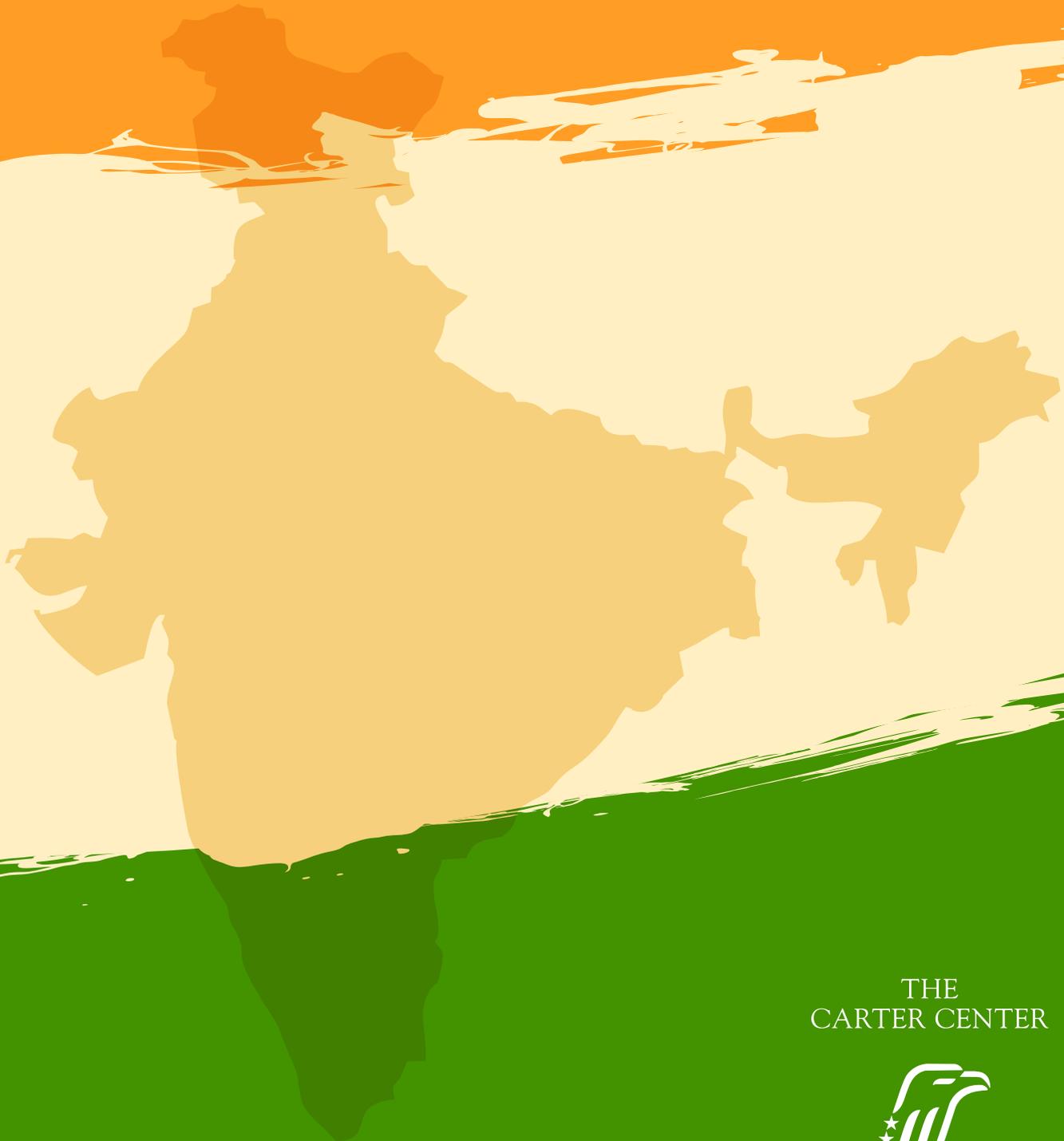


INDIA POLICY  
COMMENTARY

# What Democratic Backsliding Means for India: A Q&A with V-Dem's Director and Program Manager

*By Staffan Lindberg and Natalia Natsika*  
*February 10, 2023*



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Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) brings together close to 4,000 country experts, researchers, and project coordinators to assess the health of democracy in almost every country and territory around the world. V-Dem's research findings, in both country briefs and yearly democracy reports, synthesize a staggering amount of data from around the world.

In February 2016, V-Dem released a report surveying the trajectory of Indian democracy from 1900 to 2014. The report notes substantial strides in Indian democracy following the country's independence in 1947, noting consistently free and fair elections. While India tends to rank high with regard to electoral democracy, other metrics of freedom and democracy have witnessed a decline since 2014. A 2022 V-Dem report on [the global state of democracy](#) calls attention to rising autocratization around the world and in India, which is now classified as an "electoral autocracy."

In this interview, India Policy speaks with Natalia Natsika, program manager at the V-Dem Institute, and the institute's director, Professor Staffan I. Lindberg, about their latest assessments of developments in Indian democracy.

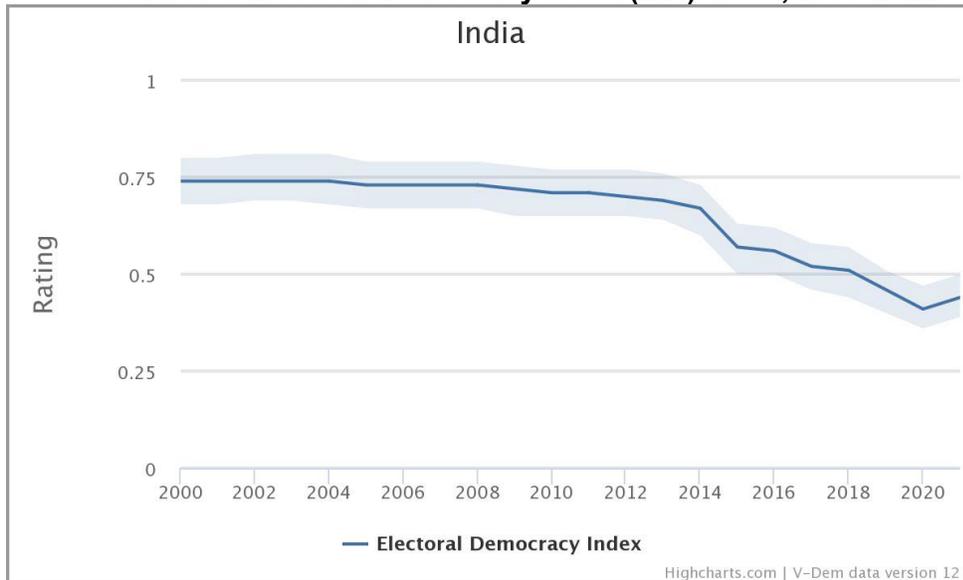
**India Policy:** *According to the report, electoral autocracies are the most common regime type worldwide; in these systems, "there are institutions emulating democracy but falling substantially below the threshold for democracy in terms of authenticity or quality." What are the largest contributing factors leading to India's reclassification from democracy to an electoral autocracy, and what would need to change for the country to regain its status as an electoral democracy?*

**Natalia Natsika and Staffan I. Lindberg:** India was [downgraded](#) from a democracy to an electoral autocracy in 2020. Electoral autocracies are regimes that hold multiparty elections but their quality or conditions around them are not sufficient to be classified as an electoral democracy.

V-Dem's [Electoral Democracy Index measures](#) the quality of elections; the actual degree of freedom of expression and the media; associational freedom, including civil society; suffrage; and the degree to which power is actually vested in elected political officials. No country's democracy is perfect, but a sufficient degree of these qualities is necessary for a country to be an electoral democracy. V-Dem measures these aspects with many different indicators to ensure that the full picture emerges.

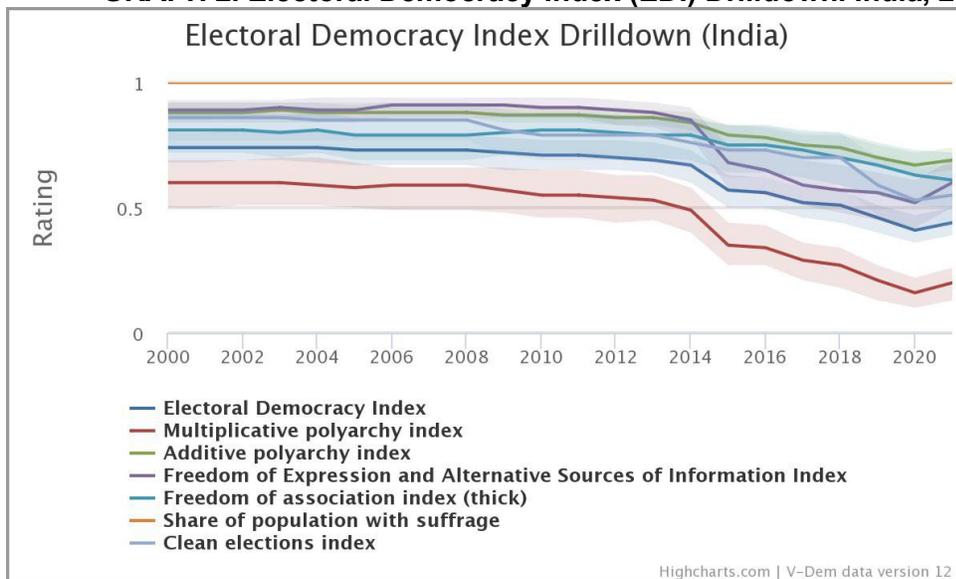
India's autocratization process [started](#) with Narendra Modi and the BJP's accession to power in the 2014 elections. India's [classification as an electoral autocracy](#) in 2020 is a result of the decline of several core democratic institutions.

**GRAPH 1. Electoral Democracy Index (EDI). India, 2000-2022.**



In particular, the electoral democracy indices that were most affected were clean elections, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, and freedom of association.

**GRAPH 2. Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) Drilldown. India, 2000-2022.**

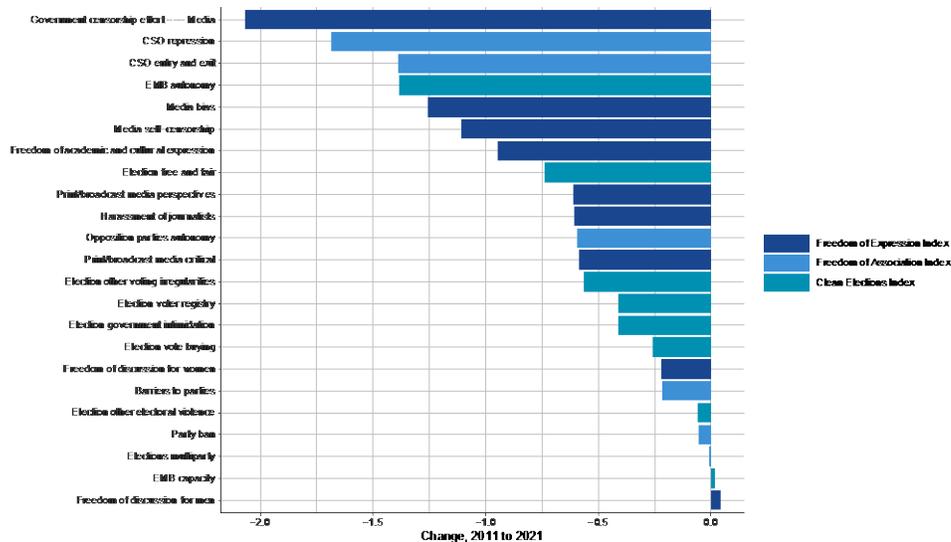


If we look at the specific indicators for the [clean elections index](#), the ones that have deteriorated the most are autonomy and capacity of the election management body (EMB), the general freedom and fairness of elections, voting irregularities, the voter registry, government intimidation, and vote buying. The corrosion of these factors occurred mainly during the last elections, held in 2019.

In the [Freedom of Association Index](#), restrictions on and repression of civil society organizations are the strongest drivers of the decline, followed by barriers to political parties.

Deterioration of the [Freedom of Expression and Alternative Sources of Information Index](#) is driven primarily by government efforts to censor the media, attacks on academic freedom and cultural expression, harassment of journalists, and restrictions on freedom of discussion for women and men under Prime Minister Modi's rule.

**GRAPH 3. Degree of change on indicators of EDI. India, 2011-2021**



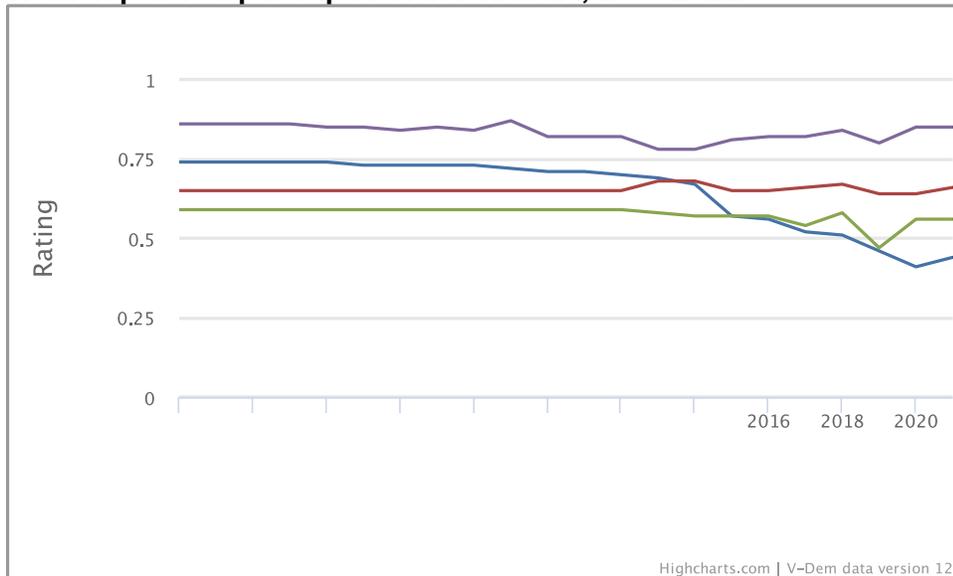
India must substantially restore these fundamental democratic qualities to become a democracy again. Not least must India allow for free, independent media and full freedom of expression in the public sphere, and civil society should be able to function democratically and uninterrupted.

**India Policy:** *What is the link between the recent decline in India's democracy and the female rights index?*

**Natsika and Lindberg:**

V-Dem provides [three indices](#) capturing women's rights in the public and private sphere: The Women Civil Liberties Index (which measures freedom of domestic movement for women, freedom from forced labor for women, property rights for women, and access to justice for women), the Women Civil Society Participation Index (which measures freedom of discussion for women, CSO women participation, and percent female journalists), and the Women Political Participation Index (which measures power distributed by gender and female legislators in the lower legislative chamber). The graph below shows that women's civil liberties and political participation remain somewhat stable after 2014 and have not been affected much by autocratization. Yet, women's rights and abilities to participate in civil society register some setbacks during autocratization, with the most severe drop occurring in 2019. Overall, restrictions on civil society have contributed to Indian democracy's decline.

**GRAPH 4. EDI, Women civil liberties index, Women civil society participation index, Women political participation index. India, 2000-2022.**



Overall, India’s democratic decline is not mainly driven by a targeted attack on female rights, although there have been some significant negative developments in this regard.

**India Policy:** *V-Dem has said that countries can demonstrate “democratic qualities” without being democracies. What “democratic qualities” does India currently exhibit that might obfuscate its recent decline as a democracy?*

**Natsika and Lindberg:**

While India is an electoral autocracy, it still possesses some degree of democratic traits as all electoral autocracies do. One of the [V-Dem methodology’s](#) unique characteristics is that it views and conceptualizes democracy as a matter of degree and not in a dichotomous way. Therefore, a country can possess democratic qualities to varying degrees.

When it comes to core democratic institutional features, India still holds multiparty elections, government power is vested in elected officials, there is some degree of freedom of association and expression, and media are circulating even if more and more controlled by the government.

It is therefore the deterioration and not the complete absence of these qualities that has led to India’s declassification from democracy to an electoral autocracy.

**India Policy:** *In your [Democracy Report from 2022](#), you cite that “[d]emocracies are much less likely to engage in war and civil war than autocracies, as shown by the fact that after India turned into an electoral autocracy, the statistical odds of a militarized dispute with Pakistan are 3 times*

*higher than 10 years ago (Hegre et al., 2020).” How does democracy decrease the chance of war inside and outside of India?*

**Natsika and Lindberg:**

Rigorous [studies demonstrate](#) clearly that democracies do not fight wars with each other and are less likely than autocracies to engage in any type of conflict. One explanation for this is the presence of institutional constraints in democracies. Free media that avoid the spread of disinformation limit governments’ incentives and capacity to engage in violent conflict.

More specifically, free and fair multiparty elections [restrict](#) elected politicians from engaging in war because democratic leaders are interested in maintaining their voters’ satisfaction, and most people, most of the time, do not like the idea of dying in a war. Horizontal accountability (checks and balances, veto powers, division of powers) [puts constraints](#) on the executive by the government, the legislature, and other state institutions. This leads to more deliberative decision-making processes and discourages rash, irrational, and riskier behavior. Thirdly, social accountability enabled by a strong civil society [can pressure](#) governments in democracies to communicate their actions to citizens, or to hold them accountable in case of unwanted political decisions. Civil society is particularly important given that elections are periodic and that civil society has the ability to restrict leaders between elections.

India’s downgrading to an electoral autocracy indicates that all these accountability mechanisms have been severely weakened, and the risk of war has increased substantially.

**India Policy:** *For a country as large and diverse as India, it seems an almost impossible task to capture every facet of democratic participation and governance. What, if anything, is left out of V-Dem assessment of Indian democracy, and why? What additional tools would be needed to capture these factors?*

**Natsika and Lindberg:**

In terms of the core institutions, rights, and freedoms of democracy, V-Dem’s measures capture essentially all aspects — at the national level. There is probably substantial variation across states, ethnicities, and other aspects in such a large, federal state as India, just like in the United States of America, Nigeria, and Brazil, for example. V-Dem’s measures do not capture such variations very well.

**India Policy:** *Since V-Dem is at the forefront of cross-national research on democracy, the institute’s reports have been used to inform analysis and commentary from [leading think tanks](#) in the United States. By translating and distributing research from academia, the Case for Democracy program has helped policymakers articulate the impact of democracy on strategic interests like security, trade, and poverty alleviation. In many ways, the body of research about “the dividends of democracy” is still rather underdeveloped – for instance, only in recent years have scholars begun to publish rigorous research on [the connection between democracy and economic growth](#). Do you see any connection between India’s democracy scores and its growth as an economic power? How could improved democratic institutions improve economic outcomes for India and its allies?*

**Natsika and Lindberg:**

The debate about the relationship between democracy and economic growth has been going on since at least 1960. But recent [research](#) has come close to a consensus demonstrating that

democracies on average produce higher growth than autocracies; countries that democratize [get](#) economic growth 20 percentage points higher than they would have had if they stayed autocracies; and that democracies [avoid](#) the worst economic crises while autocracies do not. These studies show that both electoral and liberal democratic features drive economic development. In particular, clean elections, and to a lesser extent, freedom of expression and legislative constraints on the executive, [drive](#) economic prosperity in the long run. Erosion of these institutions jeopardizes the perpetual growth effect of becoming a liberal democracy. In the long run, democracy does not just have a temporary but a [permanent growth effect](#).

India's decline in both electoral and liberal democratic institutions is likely to affect its economic growth. All the indicators that drive economic growth have significantly declined in India in recent years. The effect, however, will probably not be visible in the short run, the same way that democratization and becoming a liberal democracy takes time to deliver positive economic outcomes. However, based on these findings, India's growth as an economic power is likely to be jeopardized.

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Learn more about The Carter Center's [India Policy](#) initiative.

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