



DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN INDIA: FROM ELECTORAL DEMOCRACY TO ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM?

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which India exhibits the characteristics of democratic backsliding and asks whether the country is moving from electoral democracy towards electoral authoritarianism. Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions, civil liberties, political competition, and constraints on executive power, often through formally legal procedures rather than a sudden coup. India remains a large, competitive, multiparty electoral system with a constitutionally protected franchise, federal elections, an active opposition, and a history of peaceful transfers of power. Yet, since 2014—and particularly after 2019—scholars and democracy-monitoring organisations have identified worrying changes in the quality of liberal democracy. This paper uses a qualitative, interpretive approach, drawing on democratic theory, comparative scholarship, public institutional developments, election outcomes, and assessments by organisations such as V-Dem and Freedom House. It evaluates five dimensions: electoral competition and political finance; executive dominance and institutional accountability; civil liberties and media freedom; religious pluralism and minority rights; and federalism, courts, and democratic resistance. The analysis considers developments including the 2024 general election, the Supreme Court's decision invalidating the electoral-bonds scheme in 2024, concerns about the use of investigative agencies against opposition figures, restrictions and pressure affecting journalists and civil society, and the continuing role of courts, state governments, voters, and social movements. The paper argues that India displays significant indicators of democratic backsliding, especially in the weakening of liberal safeguards and the unevenness of the political playing field. However, describing India as a fully consolidated electoral authoritarian regime risks overlooking the continuing uncertainty of electoral outcomes, opposition victories, and institutional contestation. The most defensible conclusion is that India represents a contested and uneven case: electoral democracy persists, but its liberal and pluralist foundations have been strained. The paper concludes that democratic recovery requires independent institutions, transparent political finance, equal application of law, protection of dissent, and stronger guarantees of citizenship equality.

Keywords: Democratic backsliding; India; electoral democracy; electoral authoritarianism; civil liberties; political competition; institutions; pluralism.



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1. Introduction

Democracy is not sustained by elections alone. Elections provide citizens with an essential means of choosing and removing governments, but a democratic system also requires civil liberties, political equality, an independent judiciary, accountable executive power, free media, and meaningful opportunities for opposition parties to organise. When these safeguards weaken while elections continue, a country may experience democratic backsliding. This process is especially difficult to identify because it often occurs gradually, through legislation, administrative decisions, selective enforcement, political pressure, and changes in political norms rather than through the abrupt abolition of constitutional government.

India is an important case for understanding this phenomenon. Since independence in 1947, India has maintained a constitutional parliamentary system, universal adult suffrage, competitive national and state elections, and a plural political landscape. The country's scale, social diversity, federal structure, and history of mass participation have made its democratic experience globally significant. At the same time, Indian democracy has long faced serious weaknesses, including caste hierarchy, communal tensions, unequal access to resources, criminalisation of politics, and uneven state capacity. It is therefore necessary to distinguish longstanding democratic deficits from more recent changes in the distribution and exercise of political power.

The election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under Narendra Modi in 2014 marked a major shift in national politics. The BJP won a single-party majority in 2014 and strengthened it in 2019. During this period, debates intensified over the centralisation of executive power, the treatment of dissent, media independence, religious nationalism, and the autonomy of public institutions. In the 2024 general election, however, the BJP won 240 seats—below the 272 required for a single-party majority—while the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) secured a parliamentary majority. The result demonstrated both the advantages enjoyed by the incumbent and the continuing capacity of voters to impose constraints on it (Freedom House, 2025).

This paper asks: To what extent does India exhibit the characteristics of democratic backsliding, and is it accurate to describe its trajectory as a movement from electoral democracy to electoral authoritarianism? It argues that India shows substantial evidence of backsliding in the liberal and institutional dimensions of democracy, but that the classification of the entire regime as electoral authoritarianism remains contested. The answer depends on whether one gives priority to the continued existence of competitive elections or to the wider conditions under which those elections take place.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

The main research question is: To what extent does India exhibit the characteristics of democratic backsliding? The paper addresses four subsidiary questions: (1) How have political competition and electoral fairness changed? (2) What evidence suggests weakening constraints on executive authority? (3) How have civil liberties, media freedom, and minority protections been affected? (4) What countervailing forces continue to sustain democratic competition? The objectives are to



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clarify the concept of democratic backsliding, evaluate relevant evidence, compare competing interpretations, and identify the conditions necessary for democratic renewal.

3. Methodology and Scope

The paper adopts a qualitative case-study approach. It combines conceptual analysis with documentary analysis of academic scholarship, public institutional developments, election outcomes, and democracy assessments. It uses reports by V-Dem and Freedom House as indicators rather than as unquestionable verdicts. These organisations employ different definitions, datasets, and thresholds; their classifications should therefore be interpreted alongside country-specific evidence. Freedom House's 2025 report classified India as "Partly Free," assigning it 63 out of 100, and highlighted concerns about the use of institutions against political opponents, pressure on journalists, and discrimination affecting minorities (Freedom House, 2025). V-Dem's 2025 report places India within its broader discussion of electoral autocracy and democratic decline, although such classifications depend on its particular measurement framework (V-Dem Institute, 2025).

The analysis focuses primarily on the period from 2014 to the 2024 general election, while referring to earlier history where necessary. The paper does not assume that every criticism of the government proves authoritarian intent, nor does it treat every institutional controversy as evidence of regime change. Instead, it asks whether patterns across several dimensions cumulatively indicate a systematic deterioration in democratic safeguards. As a qualitative study, it does not claim to establish a single causal explanation for all political developments. Its findings are interpretive and should be tested through further comparative and empirical research.

4. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

4.1 Meaning of Democratic Backsliding

Democratic backsliding is the incremental weakening or elimination of institutions that sustain an existing democracy. Bermeo (2016) explains that contemporary backsliding often differs from older forms of democratic breakdown. Military coups and openly fraudulent elections have become less common in many settings, while executive aggrandisement and strategic manipulation of elections have become more prominent. Elected leaders may use legal authority to weaken oversight bodies, constrain civil society, reshape the judiciary, or disadvantage political opponents. Because these actions can be formally constitutional, the deterioration may be difficult to identify at any single moment.

Backsliding should be distinguished from a change of government, an unpopular policy, or ordinary political conflict. Governments may legitimately pursue controversial policies if they remain subject to constitutional constraints and can be challenged through open political processes. Backsliding occurs when the rules and institutions that make such contestation meaningful are systematically weakened. The key issue is not simply who wins power, but whether citizens and opponents retain a fair opportunity to challenge those who hold it.



4.2 Electoral Democracy and Liberal Democracy

Electoral democracy requires meaningful elections, broad suffrage, and the ability of parties to compete. Liberal democracy adds protections for individual rights, minority rights, judicial independence, rule of law, and constraints on executive power. The distinction matters because a country can retain elections while becoming less liberal. An elected government may continue to win votes even as critics face legal or economic pressure, media outlets become less independent, and accountability institutions lose autonomy.

Electoral authoritarianism describes a system in which multiparty elections exist but incumbents systematically manipulate the political environment so that competition is substantially unfair. Opposition parties may campaign and sometimes win, yet face structural disadvantages created by state resources, media control, legal harassment, or restrictions on organisation. The concept should be applied carefully: unequal competition does not automatically mean that elections are meaningless. A sound assessment must examine both the freedom of voters to choose and the conditions under which parties seek their votes.

4.3 Executive Aggrandisement and Democratic Norms

A central mechanism of contemporary backsliding is executive aggrandisement: the gradual accumulation of power by elected leaders at the expense of oversight institutions. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) emphasise the importance of mutual toleration and institutional forbearance. Mutual toleration means accepting political rivals as legitimate competitors; forbearance means exercising legal powers with restraint rather than exploiting every formal authority to defeat opponents. When rivals are treated as enemies and state powers are used aggressively against them, constitutional rules may remain on paper while democratic norms deteriorate in practice.

These concepts guide the analysis of India. The paper considers not only constitutional structures but also the practical operation of political competition, the protection of dissent, and the capacity of institutions to constrain the government. No single indicator is decisive; the argument rests on the cumulative pattern.

5. Historical Context: Democratic Continuity and Existing Deficits

India's democratic development has never been free from contradiction. Universal adult franchise was adopted at independence despite poverty, illiteracy, and deep social inequality. The parliamentary system, federalism, an independent judiciary, and a written constitution created a framework for political participation and peaceful government change. Congress dominance in the early decades did not prevent electoral competition, and regional parties gradually expanded the range of political representation. Coalition governments at the national level from the late 1980s and 1990s further demonstrated that power could move between parties and alliances.

The Emergency of 1975–1977 remains a crucial historical warning. Civil liberties were suspended, opposition leaders were detained, and press freedom was severely restricted. The 1977 election then enabled voters to remove Indira Gandhi's government. This episode showed that democratic institutions could be damaged from within, but also that electoral accountability could contribute



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to recovery. It provides a useful comparison for assessing contemporary developments: democratic breakdown is not inevitable, and voters and institutions can sometimes reverse executive overreach.

Longstanding weaknesses complicate the assessment. Political finance has often lacked transparency; criminal charges against politicians are common; caste and religious inequalities affect access to justice; and public institutions have not always operated equally across regions. The existence of these older problems means that contemporary backsliding should not be explained as a simple transition from a previously perfect democracy. The more precise question is whether recent political developments have deepened existing deficits, weakened safeguards, or made democratic correction more difficult.

6. Electoral Competition and the Fairness of the Political Playing Field

6.1 Elections Remain Meaningful

The strongest argument against describing India as a fully authoritarian system is the continued importance of elections. National and state elections attract mass participation, multiple parties compete, and opposition parties continue to win power in states and parliamentary constituencies. The 2024 general election is particularly significant. The BJP's seat total fell from 303 in 2019 to 240 in 2024, preventing it from governing alone. The NDA retained a majority, but coalition partners became more important to the government's parliamentary position. This outcome indicates that voters can impose real costs on incumbents and that electoral competition retains consequences.

The result also demonstrates the importance of India's federal structure. State elections provide separate arenas in which regional parties and opposition coalitions can challenge the national ruling party. Political competition is not uniform across the country: the balance of power differs between states, and regional histories, leadership, welfare policies, and social coalitions shape outcomes. These differences make it difficult to treat India as a completely closed political system.

6.2 Unequal Conditions of Competition

However, competitive elections do not by themselves establish a level playing field. Democratic quality depends on access to campaign resources, media visibility, impartial administration, and freedom from intimidation. The incumbent government has advantages in publicity and access to state institutions, as governments commonly do, but those advantages become democratically troubling when state resources or investigative powers are used selectively. Opposition parties and civil society organisations have raised concerns about the timing and pattern of investigations, arrests, and financial restrictions affecting opposition figures. Such allegations require case-by-case scrutiny, but their cumulative effect can be to raise the costs of opposition activity and weaken public confidence in impartial enforcement.

The arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in March 2024, shortly before the national election, and the freezing of Congress party bank accounts in the same period became prominent examples in the debate over whether investigative and tax authorities were being used in a



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politically selective manner. The government and its supporters have argued that law-enforcement agencies should investigate corruption regardless of political affiliation. The democratic issue is not whether politicians should be immune from investigation; it is whether investigations are evidence-based, procedurally fair, consistently applied, and subject to effective judicial review. Selective enforcement, if established, can distort electoral competition without formally cancelling an election.

6.3 Political Finance and Electoral Bonds

Political finance is another major concern. Parties require resources to organise, communicate, and contest elections, but opaque funding can create unequal access and reduce voters' ability to identify who may influence public policy. The electoral-bonds scheme, introduced in 2017, allowed eligible donors to purchase bonds and donate them to political parties while donor identities were not publicly disclosed in the ordinary process. In February 2024, the Supreme Court declared the scheme unconstitutional, finding that it infringed the right to information and that unlimited corporate contributions raised concerns about political equality. The subsequent disclosure of bond-related data made the relationship between corporate donations and party finance a major public issue.

The judgment is important for two reasons. First, it shows that a constitutional institution could still check executive and legislative choices. Second, it illustrates how opaque financing can weaken electoral accountability: citizens cannot fully evaluate possible conflicts of interest if the sources of political funding are hidden. The ruling should not be interpreted as proof that all election finance is corrupt, but it underscores the need for transparent disclosure, enforceable spending rules, and equitable access to campaign resources.

7. Executive Power and Institutional Accountability

7.1 Centralisation of Decision-Making

Democratic government requires an executive capable of governing, but it also requires institutions that can scrutinise executive decisions. Critics of the Modi period point to a growing centralisation of decision-making in the Prime Minister's Office, strong party discipline, and the limited space for parliamentary deliberation on some major policy decisions. Centralisation may produce policy coordination and decisive action, but it becomes a democratic problem when legislatures have insufficient time to examine legislation, committees are bypassed, or public consultation is weak. Parliamentary democracy is more than the numerical majority of the ruling party. It requires deliberation, access to information, opposition participation, and the possibility of revising proposals. When legislation is rushed or opposition voices are marginalised, the legislature risks becoming a mechanism for ratifying executive choices rather than an independent forum of accountability. These concerns must be assessed across specific bills and parliamentary sessions rather than assumed in every case.



7.2 Investigative Agencies and the Rule of Law

A core principle of the rule of law is that legal powers should be exercised impartially. Investigative agencies are essential for addressing corruption and financial crime, and political office should not shield individuals from lawful investigation. Yet, when investigations appear concentrated on opposition figures, while comparable allegations against ruling-party politicians receive different treatment, citizens may reasonably question institutional neutrality. Freedom House's 2025 assessment highlighted concerns about the use of government institutions against political opponents and noted reported patterns involving leaders whose cases changed after they joined the ruling party (Freedom House, 2025). Such reported patterns are indicators for investigation, not a substitute for judicial findings in individual cases.

The institutional danger is broader than the immediate fate of a particular politician. Legal uncertainty, repeated summons, arrest, lengthy proceedings, or restrictions on party finances can consume organisational resources and discourage political participation. Even when courts ultimately provide relief, delayed remedies may arrive after an election or after political damage has occurred. A robust democratic system therefore needs transparent criteria for investigations, timely hearings, independent prosecutorial judgment, and public accountability for procedural abuse.

7.3 Election Commission and Institutional Independence

The Election Commission of India is central to democratic legitimacy. Its credibility depends on administrative competence and the public perception that electoral rules are applied impartially. Changes to the process for selecting election commissioners have prompted debate about whether the executive has gained excessive influence over appointments. During the 2024 election, opposition parties and civil society groups also questioned the Commission's response to alleged violations of campaign rules and the timing of certain public disclosures. The Commission and the government have defended the legality of their actions, and not every criticism establishes bias. Nonetheless, public confidence in election management is a democratic asset that requires visible impartiality, reasoned decisions, and consistent enforcement.

Independent institutions matter most when they are asked to adjudicate disputes involving powerful incumbents. Formal independence is not enough if appointment procedures, budgetary dependence, political pressure, or selective enforcement undermine practical autonomy. Conversely, the existence of public criticism, legal challenges, and institutional disagreement indicates that contestation remains possible. The relevant conclusion is therefore mixed: institutional independence is under strain, but it has not disappeared entirely.

8. Civil Liberties, Media Freedom, and Civil Society

8.1 Freedom of Expression and Journalism

Freedom of expression enables citizens to evaluate government performance, expose corruption, and organise alternatives. Independent journalism is therefore not an optional supplement to elections; it is part of the information infrastructure that makes elections meaningful. Reports by press-freedom organisations and Freedom House have documented concerns about threats, legal



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cases, raids, online harassment, and pressure on journalists and media organisations critical of the government. Some private media outlets remain vigorous and publish investigations, while digital platforms allow alternative voices to reach large audiences. Yet, fear of legal or economic retaliation can encourage self-censorship even without a formal ban.

The distinction between censorship and chilling effects is important. A government need not prohibit every critical report to reduce the space for dissent. If journalists anticipate defamation claims, criminal proceedings, loss of access, advertising pressure, or online abuse, they may avoid sensitive topics. This can narrow public debate and reduce the information available to voters. Media concentration and close relationships between political, corporate, and media elites can add further pressure on editorial independence.

8.2 Civil Society and Protest

Civil society organisations, student groups, trade unions, human-rights advocates, and social movements provide channels through which citizens express interests outside elections. Restrictions on foreign funding, tax investigations, registration, public assembly, or online communication can affect their capacity to operate. Some regulation is legitimate, particularly where organisations violate financial or legal obligations. The democratic question is whether rules are proportionate, transparent, and applied consistently, or whether they are used selectively to silence critical organisations.

Protest is also a constitutional democratic practice. Peaceful demonstrations allow citizens who lack access to formal decision-making to contest public policy. The treatment of protests over citizenship, agriculture, labour, and other policy questions has therefore been central to debates about democratic space. Authorities have legitimate responsibilities to maintain public order and protect citizens from violence, but restrictions should be necessary, proportionate, and open to judicial review. Treating dissent as inherently disloyal weakens the distinction between opposition and subversion that a pluralist democracy must preserve.

8.3 Digital Space and Surveillance Concerns

Digital platforms have expanded political participation but also created new tools for surveillance, disinformation, harassment, and content restriction. Internet shutdowns and restrictions on online communication, especially in areas experiencing conflict or political unrest, can limit access to information and disrupt livelihoods. The government may invoke security and public-order grounds, but prolonged or broad restrictions raise questions of proportionality and accountability. Digital misinformation can also distort debate, particularly when political actors amplify polarising narratives. Protecting democracy therefore requires both freedom of communication and transparent, rights-respecting safeguards against genuine threats.

9. Religious Pluralism, Citizenship, and Minority Rights

India's Constitution establishes a framework of equal citizenship and religious freedom. Its democratic legitimacy depends on the ability of people from different religious, linguistic, caste, and ethnic backgrounds to participate as equals. The rise of majoritarian political rhetoric has raised concern that citizenship and national belonging are increasingly associated with the



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religious identity of the majority. Critics argue that such rhetoric can make minorities feel less secure and can reduce the willingness of institutions to protect them impartially.

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), implemented through rules in 2024, became a major focus of this debate. The law provides a route to citizenship for specified non-Muslim religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan who meet the statutory criteria. Supporters describe it as a humanitarian measure for persecuted minorities in neighbouring countries. Critics argue that its religious classification departs from a secular understanding of citizenship because Muslims are excluded from the specified groups, and they express concern about how the law might interact with other citizenship measures. The controversy illustrates how a formally legislative process can still raise fundamental questions about equality and constitutional identity.

Communal violence and hate speech also matter for democratic quality. Where members of a minority group face threats, discriminatory enforcement, or inadequate protection, their formal right to vote may not translate into equal political freedom. Minority rights are not a veto over majority rule; they are a condition that prevents majority rule from becoming domination. A democracy should allow majorities to govern while preserving equal citizenship, due process, and security for those who lose elections or disagree with dominant cultural narratives.

These issues should be approached with empirical care. India is socially diverse, and political behaviour varies considerably by state and locality. There are also minority leaders, voters, organisations, and elected representatives who participate actively in political life. The analytical concern is not that all citizens have identical experiences, but that discriminatory rhetoric or uneven protection can erode the constitutional principle of equal status over time.

10. Federalism, Courts, and Democratic Resistance

10.1 Federalism as a Democratic Safeguard

Federalism distributes power between the Union and the states, creating multiple centres of political authority. State governments can develop alternative policies, provide platforms for opposition leaders, and challenge central decisions through political and legal channels. The continued electoral success of regional parties and opposition coalitions is an important counterweight to national concentration. However, federalism can be weakened when central agencies are perceived to be used against state leaders, when governors become involved in partisan disputes, or when fiscal and administrative powers are distributed in ways that disadvantage opposition-governed states.

Federalism does not automatically guarantee democracy; state governments themselves can undermine rights or centralise power. Its value lies in preventing any single political actor from monopolising authority and in allowing citizens to compare governing alternatives. The 2024 national election, alongside state-level competition, demonstrates that India's political geography remains plural. The future of this safeguard depends on respect for constitutional boundaries, impartial institutions, and the ability of states to govern within their lawful powers.

10.2 The Judiciary: Constraint and Contestation

An independent judiciary protects constitutional rights and resolves disputes between branches of government. The Supreme Court's 2024 electoral-bonds judgment is an example of judicial review



constraining a major policy framework. Courts have also heard challenges involving civil liberties, citizenship, federalism, and administrative action. Such decisions show that judicial autonomy and constitutional remedies remain meaningful elements of India's institutional system.

At the same time, scholars and civil-society organisations have raised concerns about delays, inconsistent urgency in politically sensitive cases, bail and pre-trial detention, and the broader ability of courts to provide timely remedies. Judicial independence should not be measured only by whether judges occasionally rule against the government. It also depends on whether rights claims are heard promptly, whether judgments are implemented, and whether legal protection is accessible to citizens with limited resources. Courts can be a source of democratic resilience while still facing important limitations.

10.3 Opposition Parties, Voters, and Public Mobilisation

Opposition parties are indispensable to electoral democracy because they provide voters with alternatives and scrutinise those in office. The 2024 election showed that opposition coordination can matter, especially where parties share candidates or campaign around common concerns. Yet opposition parties also face internal divisions, leadership disputes, uneven organisational capacity, and public credibility challenges. Democratic recovery cannot depend only on criticism of the incumbent; it requires credible programmes, internal party democracy, and the ability to represent a broad range of social interests.

Voters are not passive recipients of elite competition. They may reward welfare delivery, local leadership, economic performance, identity-based appeals, or dissatisfaction with incumbents. A government's electoral victory does not itself prove authoritarianism, just as an opposition victory does not by itself prove that all democratic institutions are healthy. The 2024 outcome is best understood as evidence of continuing electoral accountability within a political environment where the fairness of competition remains contested.

11. Counterarguments: Why the Authoritarian Label Is Contested

A balanced assessment must consider arguments against the thesis of democratic backsliding. First, India continues to hold regular multiparty elections with large voter participation. The 2024 result constrained the BJP's parliamentary power and increased the importance of coalition partners. Second, opposition parties govern several states, criticise the Union government, and mobilise voters. Third, the judiciary has issued decisions that constrain government policy, including the electoral-bonds ruling. Fourth, independent journalists, academics, lawyers, activists, and civil-society organisations continue to document abuses and shape public debate. These facts distinguish India from closed authoritarian systems in which opposition activity is prohibited or electoral outcomes are predetermined.

Supporters of the government also argue that many measures criticised as authoritarian are lawful responses to corruption, security threats, separatist violence, or administrative disorder. They point out that every democracy regulates political finance, foreign funding, public assembly, and criminal conduct. They may also argue that electoral success reflects genuine public support for the BJP's policies, leadership, welfare initiatives, or cultural agenda. These arguments cannot be dismissed merely because they come from the ruling party. Governments have legitimate authority to enforce law and pursue their manifestos.



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The response is that legality and electoral popularity are necessary but not sufficient conditions for liberal democracy. A measure may be legally enacted yet still weaken accountability or impose disproportionate restrictions on rights. The appropriate test is whether rules are general, transparent, proportionate, reviewable, and fairly applied. Similarly, majority support does not remove constitutional obligations to protect minorities and opposition rights. Backsliding is best identified through patterns, not by assuming that every government action is illegitimate or that every electoral victory validates the entire political system.

The evidence therefore supports a qualified conclusion. India has not become a closed dictatorship, and elections remain consequential. But democratic quality can deteriorate substantially before electoral competition disappears. The key question is whether opposition parties can compete under reasonably fair conditions, whether citizens can criticise government without disproportionate risk, and whether institutions can independently enforce constitutional limits. On these measures, there are credible and serious warning signs.

12. Findings and Discussion

The analysis produces five main findings. First, India continues to exhibit meaningful electoral competition, but the fairness of the political playing field is disputed. The 2024 general election showed that voters can limit the incumbent's power, while controversies over political finance, campaign enforcement, and investigative agencies point to structural inequalities that may disadvantage opponents.

Second, the institutions that constrain executive power face pressure. Centralisation, limited legislative scrutiny in some contexts, appointment debates, and concerns about selective enforcement raise questions about institutional autonomy. However, the Supreme Court's electoral-bonds decision and the continued activity of opposition-led state governments show that constraints remain operational, though unevenly so.

Third, civil liberties are a central area of concern. Pressure on journalists, legal actions against critics, restrictions affecting civil society, and the potential chilling effects of surveillance or online restrictions can reduce public debate. Such practices are particularly damaging because they affect the information and organisational conditions under which elections take place.

Fourth, majoritarian rhetoric and disputes over citizenship and religious equality challenge the pluralist foundation of the constitutional order. Democracy requires not only the numerical participation of minorities but also equal protection and a credible sense of belonging. Where religious identity affects public status or protection, formal electoral rights may coexist with unequal citizenship in practice.

Fifth, India retains significant sources of democratic resilience. Federalism, regional parties, social movements, constitutional litigation, independent reporting, and voter mobilisation provide opportunities for contestation and correction. These institutions are not guaranteed to succeed, but their continued existence makes the trajectory open rather than predetermined.

Taken together, these findings suggest that India exhibits several characteristics associated with democratic backsliding, especially in liberal constraints, civil liberties, and institutional neutrality. Whether it should be classified as an electoral authoritarian regime depends on the conceptual threshold used. V-Dem's classification reflects a broad, multidimensional understanding of democracy, while other frameworks give greater weight to the continued competitiveness of



elections. Rather than treating one label as conclusive, researchers should specify the dimension being measured and explain the evidence behind the classification.

13. Recommendations for Democratic Renewal

First, political finance should be transparent. Donations, corporate contributions, party accounts, and campaign expenditure should be disclosed in a timely and accessible form, with independent auditing and proportionate penalties for violations. Rules should apply equally to all parties and avoid creating advantages for incumbents.

Second, law-enforcement institutions require safeguards against partisan use. Decisions to investigate, prosecute, freeze assets, or arrest political actors should follow clear standards, be documented, and remain subject to timely judicial review. Institutional performance data should be made public in ways that permit comparison across parties and regions without compromising legitimate investigations.

Third, the independence and credibility of the Election Commission should be strengthened through transparent appointments, adequate resources, consistent enforcement of campaign rules, and clear public explanations of decisions. A trusted election authority is essential even when allegations of bias are ultimately rejected.

Fourth, freedom of expression and association should be protected. Restrictions on media, civil society, peaceful protest, and online communication should meet constitutional standards of necessity and proportionality. Journalists and human-rights defenders should be protected from violence, and legal processes should not be used to impose punishment through delay alone.

Fifth, parliamentary scrutiny should be strengthened. Bills of major constitutional or social importance should receive adequate debate, committee examination, public consultation, and reasoned responses to opposition concerns. Parliamentary committees and opposition members should have access to relevant information so that scrutiny is substantive rather than symbolic.

Sixth, equality and minority protection must remain central to citizenship. Governments should respond consistently to hate crimes, protect vulnerable communities, and ensure that administrative decisions are not influenced by religious or caste identity. Constitutional secularism need not deny the social importance of religion; it requires that the state treat citizens as equals regardless of belief.

Finally, democratic renewal requires action by political parties and citizens. Parties should strengthen internal democracy, disclose funding, reject political violence, and recognise opponents as legitimate participants. Universities, professional associations, the press, and civil-society organisations should promote civic education and evidence-based debate. Democratic institutions endure when citizens defend fair procedures even when those procedures produce outcomes they dislike.

14. Conclusion

To what extent does India exhibit the characteristics of democratic backsliding? The evidence examined in this paper suggests that the extent is substantial but uneven. India retains constitutional government, competitive national and state elections, a large electorate, active opposition parties, and institutions capable of challenging executive decisions. The 2024 general election demonstrated that electoral accountability remains real: the BJP lost its single-party majority and became more dependent on coalition partners. These features make it inaccurate to describe India as a fully closed authoritarian system.



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At the same time, the persistence of elections does not settle the question of democratic quality. Concerns about political finance, the perceived selective use of investigative agencies, pressure on journalists and civil society, contested institutional independence, and the treatment of religious minorities indicate that the liberal safeguards surrounding electoral competition have weakened. Such trends can produce a political system in which citizens continue to vote but do so within an increasingly unequal informational, legal, and organisational environment.

The phrase “from electoral democracy to electoral authoritarianism” captures a serious possibility, but it should not be used as a substitute for analysis. India is best understood as a contested case in which electoral competition persists alongside substantial pressures on liberal democracy. The precise classification varies across scholarly frameworks and measurement systems. What is less disputed is the importance of the underlying questions: whether the opposition can compete fairly, whether citizens can speak freely, whether institutions apply law impartially, and whether minorities enjoy equal citizenship.

Democratic backsliding is not necessarily irreversible. The electoral-bonds judgment, opposition performance in 2024, and continuing federal and civil-society contestation show that corrective mechanisms remain available. Their effectiveness will depend on institutional independence, transparent political finance, timely legal remedies, parliamentary scrutiny, media freedom, and a political culture that accepts disagreement as legitimate. India’s democratic future will be determined not only by who wins elections, but by whether the rules and rights that make electoral choice meaningful are protected for everyone.

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