As the growing backlash against globalization picks up pace, populists and nationalists are on the march, particularly in the US and Europe. Leaders in Asia can hardly escape this growing trend, even as they grapple with their own emerging domestic challenges and the evolving transformation in the regional order. We profile some of Asia’s key leaders and the mark they are making.

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India has long prided itself on being the world’s largest democracy, and one built on a population of remarkable religious, ethnic, cultural and racial diversity. More recently, the country has touted its growing economy as a sign that India is poised to take its place as a major emerging power.

But with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, the specter of Hindu nationalism has emerged as a potent force that could threaten the country’s democracy. Pratap Bhanu Mehta looks at the evolving effects of Modi’s leadership.

NARENDRA Modi became prime minister of India in 2014, with a consummate mastery of political communication and a superficial nod to democratic language. Two of his favorite phrases translated into something like this: “Summon the Power of 1.25 billion Indians,” and “Everyone Together, Everyone’s Progress.” Like a Napoleonic figure, he represented the people. It was a claim made more plausible by the strong sense of identification he produced in his supporters: a self-made, selfless leader of humble social and economic origin, with boundless commitment, devoted to nothing but the good of the nation and taking on old corrupt dynasties. In 2014, this narrative was appealing. India was facing an impending economic slowdown, rampant plutocracy and a sense of political paralysis. The then ruling Congress Party had no will to reform itself. Modi positioned himself as the ultimate savior, pitting his personal virtue against corruption, his energy against an enervated old regime and the promise of better days against the gloom of an economic slowdown. The contradiction between this inclusive rhetoric, and his deep political allegiances to Hindu Nationalism, was never far from the surface. But in the anxiety-ridden atmosphere of 2014, this tension became a source of strength for him rather than a liability. He deftly combined hope for the future, while mobilizing resentments over the past; he could spin dreams of a new economic prosperity, while emboldening his Hindutva base.

He rewrote the rules of Indian politics. For the first time in three decades, India’s elections became more presidential in character, centered on his persona. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority in the lower house of parliament, and its performance in subsequent state elections has made it the dominant national force. Such a mandate made Modi one of the most powerful prime ministers in recent memory.

But for all of Modi’s mastery of democratic communication, and his wish to have the people identify with him, he remains, in essence, an authoritarian figure. His remedy for all the great challenges of Indian society is more concentration of authority, more rigid control from above. He likes the imprimatur of democracy behind him and he derives his power from a sense of identification with the people. But his governing sensibility is anything but democratic. Liberal values, as we understand them — free expression, space for dissent, cherished diversity, suspicion of cultural majoritarianism, respect for institutions, concern with decentralization and the promotion of civility — do not come instinctively to him.

EARLY IDENTIFICATION

Modi was molded by a deep identification with Hindu Nationalism. In terms of political objectives, Hindu nationalism seeks to consolidate the power of the Hindu majority. It is a modern force in that it is a product of democracy: it wants to mobilize the numerical strength of Hindus behind a set of consolidated aims. The first aim is to ensure that India’s minorities do not get any special privileges or exemptions, and they become marginal to the political process. The BJP’s oft-quoted argument is that other political dispensations had given minorities a veto over Indian politics; they would like to make minorities irrelevant. The second is to ensure the cultural hegemony of Hindu identity, by consolidating it into one political movement. The visible symbols of this ascendancy will be enshrined in law (the ban on beef, for example, or the campaign to reclaim a Ram Temple at Ayodhya). But it is also manifest in a paranoid style of thinking, where Hinduism is seen as under threat from an assortment of intellectual forces. Both of these anxieties are exaggerated. It is certainly true that the ruling Congress Party had often given symbolic concessions to minorities, even as the actual social and economic conditions of Muslims deteriorated. But the idea that Muslim minorities controlled Indian politics is pure fiction: their representation and political power have been steadily declining. It is also a flight of fantasy to suggest that Hinduism is so weak that it will crumble at the slightest intellectual critique. The significance of these objectives is not any truth they might rest on. The significance is that they commit Hinduva politics to a paranoid suspicion of diversity and difference. It is a sensibility that says, all Hindus, if they are to be counted as such, must march to the same tune; it is a sensibility that sees enemies to Hindu cultural pride lurking everywhere. More than anything else, Modi’s singular effect has been to empower those who think this way. It has created an atmosphere of violence and intimidation where many intellectuals and journalists have been targeted by organizations that loosely claim allegiance to the BJP.

The third objective of Hindu Nationalism is to ensure that lower caste resistance to Hinduism’s deeply hierarchical social order is articulated within a Hindu idiom; the quest for social justice does not lead to a wholesale critique of Hinduism itself. Modi’s biggest political success was to transform the BJP from a dominantly upper caste party to a party that has a diverse social base. His extraordinary ability to position himself as someone who has risen from a backward caste has helped in this identification. Unlike many strong leaders, Modi has not launched a frontal assault on all values and institutions. Rather, he has encouraged something far
more insidious: a climate of fear, even as the formal institutions of the state seemingly stay the same. There are two principal targets of this fear campaign. Since this government came to power, there has been a marked increase in the lynching of Muslims, on the pretext that they are smuggling cows. This lynching has served two political purposes. They are a regular reminder to minorities to mind their place, and they produce local communal tension between Hindus and Muslims. But what makes it so insidious is that the state is enabling this. This lynching has served two political purposes. They are a regular reminder to minorities to mind their place, and they produce local communal tension between Hindus and Muslims. But what makes it so insidious is that the state is enabling this.

The second target is dissenters. Again, superficially there is a lot of criticism of government. But Modi’s ideology thrives on the need to invent enemies, against whom he can position himself as a savior. These enemies could be left-leaning students declared anti-national; intellectuals or media challenging Hindutva or protesting state oppression. Similarly, television media have been controlled by granting new licenses only to channels that march to the government’s rabble-rousing tune on behalf of nationalism. Electronic media have been effectively turned into the ideological vanguard of the state. The modus operandi is similar: not a mass clampdown or arrests, but careful targeting of individuals to send out the message that the government can act against individuals if it wants to. The mark of authoritarianism is how much fear it produces, Modi gets high marks.

DEMOCRACY? HARDLY.

Modi does not believe in democracy but he does believe in the power of government. He has brought that sensibility to economic governance as well. In some cases, this power has served him well. He inherited a broken economy: corruption was rampant, the public sector banks were in deep crisis and investment was slowing down. But Modi’s first economic act was an act of colossal hubris. In November 2016, the government demonetized large denomination currency notes. The ostensible purpose was to flush out black money by bringing all the cash in the economy into the formal system. But the policy itself was a symptom of Modi’s style of leadership. It was, in miniature, a window onto his self-belief and power. At one level, there was an astonishing audacity to this move. It was the largest exercise of its kind in history; millions of people had to stand in queues for rationed cash; small, informal businesses that relied on cash were badly affected. But people identified with his promises simply because he spoke the language of sacrifice. He directly asked them to sacrifice on behalf of the nation. The long-term effects of the policy are still being debated: there is little evidence that it has reduced the usage of cash; its effect on black money has been negligible. It might have accelerated the formalization of the economy, but at an inordinate cost. Growth slowed down by two percentage points as a result. But it was a demonstration of the power he could mobilize, even if the actual economic reasoning behind what he did was quite faulty.

MIDDING ECONOMIC GRADE

Has Modi’s concentration of power restored economic dynamism? The answer is mixed at best. In the last quarter, India’s growth once again touched 8.2 percent, although the five years of the Modi government delivered weaker growth performance than the first term of the United Progressive Alliance government. He has some major reforms to his credit. Unlike many authoritarian populist leaders, Modi is not reckless when it come to the macro economy: he has not let the fiscal deficit balloon beyond a manageable 3.3 percent. Inflation has been low, and the government deserves some credit for keeping food prices low, even though the terms of trade for agriculture are now having adverse effects on farmers. The Goods and Services Tax, which creates an integrated market, was a major reform even though its implementation was made needlessly complicated by bureaucratic hubris. The second significant reform was the enactment of a Bankruptcy Code. For the first time, India at least has an instrument where loan defaulters can be dispossessed of their companies. This is still a work in progress, but if enacted, it will increase the productive efficiency of capital. But the government was a bit slow in responding to the single biggest challenge for this government: fixing the public sector banks that are burdened
by a mountain of non-performing assets. India looks well positioned compared to many other emerging market economies. But with rising oil prices, no export growth and no serious acceleration in gross capital formation, it is still far from being in a zone where one can be euphoric about its prospects.

But for all Modi’s power, the striking thing has been how conventional his economic thinking has been. He has also, as an electoral strategy, concentrated largely on projecting the idea that he, like an omniscient father figure, can take care of all basic needs. Some of this is for the good. The Modi government rolled out a much needed scheme to make cooking gas available to the poorest households, who often had to rely on very polluting fuels such as wood and kerosene. The government has just rolled out an ambitious health care insurance program for the poorest households. It also has promised housing for all. To his credit, he has tried to use the prime minister’s office as a bully pulpit to put a focus on sanitation. These schemes come with a political aesthetic: the ubiquitous presence of Modi as a provider of all things. But it would be difficult to argue that the overall performance in the delivery of services has been transformative under Modi. It has, like previous governments, been a mix of successes and failures.

But Modi has not, despite extraordinary centralization of power, seriously reformed the Indian state. He still relies on his personal energy and superintendence to deliver on his policies. But this is not a sustainable proposition for a complex country like India. So it is not an accident that many of his flagship schemes, such as “Make in India,” which was meant to increase exports, or “Clean Ganga,” meant to restore the health of India’s premier river, have largely been failures. Environmental regulation and the judicial system all languish in neglect. The one object lesson is that centralization of power and strong leaders are no guarantee that a more efficient state will be created.

Modi’s authoritarianism seems less of a danger compared to his global competitors. India’s capacity for surveillance, repression and control cannot match China’s; it is not an adventurous kleptocracy like Russia; its diversity makes it difficult to mold the country into the kind of state Turkey is aspiring to be. India’s romance with electoral democracy, the social complexity of its population and the intricate maze of its institutions, make India hard to centralize. Modi is facing discontent. But the opposition is still not energized. The sentiment that authoritarians so often tap into, the yearning for a singular figure who can provide deliverance from the pangs of existence, still remains high.

The feebleness of the challenge to Modi could still ensure that he returns to power. But what should have been a moment where India credibly projected its leadership of the free world, is turning out to be a moment where anxieties over the quality of India’s democracy still remain deep and pronounced.

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