

DEMOCRACY IS NOT JUST ABOUT NUMBERS

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Growth & Development - Demographic Economics & Various Indexes

India has slipped on the EIU's democracy index. But just as this form of governance is not about poll statistics, our democratic credentials can't be crunched into a score either

It would not take an all-India opinion poll to assert that Indians take democracy for granted. For all its infirmities, this form of governance is the best known bet for human advancement. Going by an all-adult consensus could mean no decision ever gets taken, while dictatorship deprives people of any say in their collective destiny and subjects them to the tyranny of whimsy, or worse. So, when the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the research and analysis division of the Economist Group, reports a notable deterioration in the state of Indian democracy, we cannot afford to let it go unnoticed. India slid 10 ranks on the global chart based on the EIU Democracy Index for 2019, which covers political systems across 165 countries and two territories. India is now ranked No. 51 on a list that has Norway on top and North Korea at the bottom. Of the broad criteria used for the analysis, we appear to have more or less held our past record on political participation and culture, as also electoral processes and pluralism, but suffered a decline on civil liberties. There are worse performers on the chart, such as China and Hong Kong, both of which have fallen sharply, and the report suggests that democracy seems to have weakened on average across the world.

India, of course, is the world's largest democracy, and holds regular elections involving larger numbers than the populations of the chart toppers put together. But it is clear from a cursory glance at the EIU's findings that it does not see democracy as a function of the number of voters, or anything numeric, for that matter. The parameters in play are unquantifiable. This being the case, the method by which it has crunched the complexities of this vast country into a score that allows a rank ordering could be debated. General observation does confirm that India has not escaped global trends that democrats have been watching with dismay over the past few years. Power appears more centralized than before and complaints have been aired of dissent losing space. Political conversations, too, seem to have coarsened, with divisive rhetoric being resorted to in some instances. The EIU report points to Jammu and Kashmir and Assam as places where state actions have chipped away at the country's democratic credentials, in its view. These two, however, are what might be called "headline events". What it seems not to have taken into account are the popular voices of support for the constitutional values and democratic principles of equality, liberty and justice.

As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has argued, Indians are an inherently argumentative lot, and our traditions of debate and discursive problem-solving go back millennia. Modern modes of granting us agency over our future are arguably even more intrinsic to the understanding of our political selves today. The country's response to the suspension of civil liberties during the Emergency of the mid-1970s testifies to that. It is hard to argue that Indians at large are not better informed and keener on empowerment now than they were then. Anyone who doubts it should have a chat with a random sample of young Indians, especially millennials. If eternal vigilance is the price to be paid for freedom, many say they are ready for it. Let us take them for their word. Democracy is far more than the periodic ritual of exercising our franchise, yes, but it cannot be reduced to an index reading either.

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