

Strengthening India's institutions

The late political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson called the nation an imagined community, which brings together people who find common cause to forge a new identity. That entity functions because of its institutions. These institutions are not made only of bricks and mortar, though those are necessary; they become meaningful if they represent the collective will of the people, drawn from values that underpin the idea of that nation. Physical structures, like parliaments and courts, matter; how they function matters even more.

The legislature, the army, the judiciary and the media are important structures of the nation. The first sets the rules, the second defends the state, the third determines what is right and what's wrong, and the fourth blows the whistle when things go wrong. They have their roles and boundaries. Institutions are strengthened or weakened depending on how the individuals temporarily in charge of the institutions act.

During a campaign speech in Himachal Pradesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to the opposition Congress party as termites, asking voters to "wipe them out". At a time when a minister refers to journalists as prostitutes and the ruling party's stormtroopers call any dissident "anti-national", Modi's remarks may not seem surprising. But words have consequences. Modi is not the first politician to use such language—Congress president Sonia Gandhi had referred to him as "maut ka saudagar", or a trader of death, and in a robust democracy such language may be seen as part of campaign rhetoric. The late Bal Thackeray's speeches were no different. But as American academic Susan Benesch argues, the impact of such language on a gullible population may have devastating consequences. Political demagogues have often used language that dehumanizes the opponent to undermine them. If repeated, in extreme cases, it can lead to mass violence, as happened in the case of the sustained, hateful propaganda of Radio Mille Collines in Rwanda in the 1990s. Alert to such consequences, the UN human rights high commissioner criticized Katie Hopkins, a British columnist, after she referred to refugees as "cockroaches".

In a recent article in The Indian Express, Ramachandra Guha was surprised that the army chief, General Bipin Rawat, called for a Bharat Ratna for Field Marshal Cariappa, India's first army chief. "If others can get it, I see no reason why he should not," the newspaper quoted him as saying. Whether Cariappa deserves the honour or not is not the issue. Rawat may genuinely believe he does; others can argue for other generals. But the right forum for the general to express that view is through private correspondence with the appropriate authorities. Democracies have clear roles and responsibilities for the civilian government and the military leadership. When those roles get confused, as India has seen in its neighbourhood—Pakistan and Bangladesh in particular—the consequences can be disastrous. In democracies, the army should be visible sparingly—at parades, and only occasionally, to help with emergency disaster relief, and heard from even less.

Latin phrases come to mind while thinking of the judiciary. *Nemo iudex in sua causa*, or no man shall be a judge in his own cause, and *quis custodiet ipso custodes*, or who will guard the guardians. The astonishing events at the Supreme Court on 10 November were a salutary reminder of the dangers a court faces when litigants are concerned about its impartiality. The case in question is complicated, involving corruption charges against a retired high court judge. Two litigants wanted a special investigations team to inquire into the case. While one judge appointed a panel of five judges to hear the case, the chief justice intervened and assigned the case to another bench. On Tuesday, the court dismissed the petition, and warned the litigants not to go forum shopping. There is no suggestion of any wrongdoing here, but the manner in which the matter was heard and disposed of is profoundly disappointing, if what was reported—lawyers not being party to the case speaking before the court, and the lawyer making the submission not being able to argue his case—is true.

There is another guardian, the media, which can hold all these institutions accountable. But peculiarly enough, the broadcast media seems to misunderstand its role; instead of the government, it enthusiastically and vociferously holds the opposition to account for the government's failures. After the Emergency was lifted, Lal Krishna Advani said the press was asked to bend, but it crawled. Forty years later, without being asked to bend, much of the broadcast media crawls.

During the Emergency, V.S. Naipaul travelled through India and wrote a scathing indictment of what had become of India. In *India: A Wounded Civilisation* (1977), Naipaul wrote: "The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest; it has been generated from within. India cannot respond in her old way, by a further retreat into archaism. Her borrowed institutions have worked like borrowed institutions; but archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament, and courts. The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead."

Naipaul's critique is harsh, but it is up to India to prove him wrong, because it has the intellectual means to do so. All it needs is popular will.

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