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USA-India

# India's Modi Receives Royal Treatment from Biden

- IV Online magazine - 2023 - IV581 - June 2023 -

Publication date: Wednesday 28 June 2023

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**IN A SURPRISE state visit, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Washington D.C. on June 21 for an official state visit and dinner. He was only the third world leader to get such royal treatment by President Joseph Biden since his election in 2020.**

Modi, who tries to avoid unscripted moments and has presided over a steady decline in press freedom in his country, has never held a solo news conference and often avoids questions by deferring to others on stage with him.

Biden and Modi each answered the same two questions – one from an Indian journalist who asked Modi about climate change, the other from a Wall Street Journal reporter who pressed Modi on human rights concerns. It was the first time Modi had fielded a question at a news conference since he came to power in 2014.

Biden said the United States had passed a major climate change plan in Congress but ignored the question about India's human rights situation.

The news conference was a scaled-down affair compared to those that usually are held as part of a state visit. Even so, Modi's advisers were far from thrilled with the idea. Administration officials advised his team that taking questions from the media was standard protocol for White House state visits.

Modi took full advantage of the pomp and circumstance to strength India's world stats without ever giving any concession to Biden's foreign policy and goals. At an unusual press conference for both, Modi welcomed Biden's bow to India by reconfirming his own positions on issues like Ukraine (for neutrality and negotiations) and not in support of U.S. "rules-based democracy." He falsely claimed India is a "democracy" that does not discriminate against ethnic or caste minorities.

## Modi/BJP's Rightwing Policies

Some twenty years ago, Modi was denied a visa to enter the United States for his anti-Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat where he was chief minister. The ban was only lifted in 2014 when his party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party or India's Peoples Party) took control of Parliament.

The BJP's rightwing policies adhere to Hindutva, Hindu nationalist ideology. It has close ideological and organizational links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), formed in 1925.

The RSS rejects secularism, which it claims is a foreign, Western concept. Its initial objective was to provide character training and instill "Hindu discipline" in order to unite the Hindu community and establish a Hindu nation. It identified with fascist movements in Europe such as Italy's Mussolini's Fascist Party.

The RSS sought to spread the ideology Hindutva to "strengthen" the Hindu community and promotes an ideal of upholding an Indian culture and its civilizational values. Hindutva is cultural nationalism that extends to all Indians regardless of religion. [What does "extends" mean? Rule over?—MM]

# U.S. Goal: Get Modi to Support Anti-China Containment

The Biden administration ignored this history and current reality. Its focus is getting India on board of the US-Indo-Pacific goal of containing China.

While India (now the world's most populous country) and China have had border conflicts for decades and are economic competitors, both have solid ties with Russia. Russia is India's largest oil provider as of 2023 and is its main supplier of military hardware.

Both giants are members of BRICs (the developing economies of Brazil, India, Russia, and China) and support the policies of the Global South, which seeks ways to go around the U.S. and Western imperialism's domination of finance and trade.

Modi made clear India has no intention of changing its global policies particularly toward Russia and China. However India has already banned Huawei and Tik Tok. Modi does not back the aggressive U.S. policy regarding Taiwan and in fact has no official relations with Taiwan.

Biden announced some economic deals that are normal during state visits. For example, India airlines are buying new Boeing airplanes. The deal was first announced in February and is its largest order ever in South Asia. Biden commented that this will build the U.S. economy.

Biden also said GE will build jet engines for India's military jets. This was a big win for Modi since GE agreed for the first time to transfer its technology to Indian firms. It comes as the United States targets Chinese tech companies for "stealing" U.S. technology. Yet Congress must approve the deal.

## Who is Mahendra Modi?

In an opinion piece by Maya Jasanoff, a Harvard professor of history and Indian American, writing in the June 22nd New York Times described Modi's government as an electoral autocracy. The share of wealth held by the top one percent now stands at 40.5%, thanks to crony capitalism. Meanwhile basic food prices and unemployment rises.

Modi developed a reputation as a business-friendly "reformer" with no patience for either the red tape or the corruption that had rotted the Indian bureaucratic state. But it is the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat and his party's role in it while he was the party's chief minister that reveals the real face of Modi.

The violent riots that were clearly organized by supporters of the BJP and followers of the RSS led to over 1,000 Muslims deaths, the massive rape of women and girls and over 150,000 people displaced, homes and mosques destroyed. What led to the riot, the death of Hindu pilgrims on a train, was eventually ruled as an accident. Yet Modi blamed Muslim terrorists.

The British government investigation said that Modi was "directly responsible" for the "climate of impunity" in which the violence took place.

Although BJP was turned out of office in the 2004 state elections, neither he nor the party was held accountable.

Today, Modi is the twice-elected prime minister of the world's most populous country. He has vast public support from the Hindu population, which is 80 percent of the country.

His government has enacted laws and policies that target Muslims, including changes to citizenship rules that disadvantage Muslims. His government revoked the special status of Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region contested by India and Pakistan. In August 2019 when the new order was imposed Modi urged more Hindus to move there.

But it would be a mistake to think only Muslims are under threat in India. Modi has attacked the rights of other non-Hindus. His government has used emergency powers to hold dissidents under murky antiterrorist laws.

Modi's supporters argue that it is no coincidence that India is reaching its zenith after eight years of muscular, Hindu-centric rule. Modi will almost certainly run for office again in 2024. If he wins and serves a third term, he will become the longest-serving prime minister since India's first, Jawaharlal Nehru, and his daughter, Indira Gandhi. (It was Nehru who set the blueprint for a secular, democratic, multiethnic India.)

## Modi's Diplomatic Win

During the Biden-Modi news conference, the chants of protestors could be heard, but both ignored them. Modi insisted there was no discrimination in India and argued that democracy is in India's DNA.

"There's absolutely no space for discrimination," he insisted, which must have been news to his detractors.

Two most prominent Muslim members of Congress, Detroit's Rashida Tlaib, a Palestinian American, and Minnesota's Ilhan Omar, a refugee from Somalia, refused to attend Modi's speech to Congress and the state dinner. Cori Bush of Missouri as well as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman from New York also boycotted his speech to Congress.

In her New York Times analysis Jasanoff compared the problems facing the United States and India:

"Similarities abound: an out-of-touch elite, widening economic inequality, easily mobilized ethnic grievances, a changed information landscape. One especially sobering area to compare is the resilience — or lack thereof — of a once independent judiciary, which Mr. Modi has been angling to undercut.

"Like the United States, India is an extraordinary, diverse, plural democracy with incredible talent and potential — and there is much, in principle, to unite these nations for the good. But as the president of one stumbling democracy joins hands with a prime minister bent on hobbling another, the project of global freedom seems one step closer to collapse."

Source: [Against the Current](#).

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