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THE ROAD AHEAD TO STRENGTHEN INDIA'S DEMOCRACY





of 59 percent in 24 countries say they are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in their country, with half or more in 17 countries holding this view.

While the enthusiasm for representative democracy might have dipped, autocratic regimes continue to remain unpopular. In all but five of the countries surveyed, the majority reject it. Nevertheless, support for a strong leadership model of government has increased in eight of 22 nations (including India) surveyed since 2017.

The report says, ‘Support for this system is especially common among respondents with less education and those with lower incomes. Additionally, people on the ideological right are often more likely than those on the left to support rule by a strong leader.’

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democratic index of 2023 states that the global average index score fell to 5.23 from 5.29 in 2022. In all 50 countries came under the category of 'flawed democracies' and 59 countries were classified as authoritarian regimes.

Out of 108 countries, India ranked 41 with a score of 7.18/10 (up 5 points) from 2022 when its score was 7.04. India fell in the category of flawed democracies with the following score in the 5 categories: Electoral processes: 8.67/10, government functioning 7.86/10, political participation 7.22/10, political culture 6.25/10 and civil liberties 5.88/10. From the above score, it's clear that India needs to improve in the last two categories.

There are several definitions of democracy given by various people and organisations. Be that as it may, there is universal acceptance that democracy (despite some flaws), is still the best form of government in the present-day world.

One of the most important ingredients of democracy is free and fair elections. When citizens elect a government, they expect it to deliver based on the founding principles of their country's constitution. They expect good governance, which as per the UN's definition, should be participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follow the rule of law.

There are many agencies which analyse and assess various factors to ascertain the health of democracy at a global level. The Pew Research Centre, in its recent study, found that a median

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India's rank in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index is 161 out of 180 countries. This reflects a significant decline in press freedom in India. India's ranking has fallen 11 places since last year when it was ranked 150th in the Index

Transparency International's 'Corruption Perception Index' of 2023 analyses 180 countries with a ranking of 0 (very corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Two-thirds of the country's score is less than 50/100.

In 2023 India ranked 93/180, a drop from the rank 85/180 in 2022. India's score decreased from 40 in 2022 to 39 in 2023.

India suffers from tremendous economic inequality. As per the World Inequality Report 2022, the top 10 percent of the population and the top 1 percent hold 5 percent and 22 percent of the total national income, respectively, whereas the share of the bottom 50 percent population is 13 percent of the national income. 64 percent of the GST collection comes from the bottom 50 percent population and 4 percent from the top 10 percent.

Having seen where India stands on various parameters that help us gauge the health of a democracy, it is important to ponder on the way forward. Undoubtedly since independence, India has made progress in the economic sphere. Today, it ranks as the fifth largest economy in the world (\$ 3.7 trillion) and is projected to reach \$7.3 trillion by 2030 and \$10 trillion by 2035.



It is important to accept that to realise the vision of India becoming an economically developed country by 2047, democracy has to be strengthened, the standard of living of the common man has to improve, and inequalities of income and corruption have to be removed on a war footing.

For this to happen the political system needs urgent reform. Political funding is the fountainhead of corruption. Political parties have to be transparent and accountable to the public. Unlike the current law which requires disclosures of political donations exceeding Rs 20,000, all political parties should be mandatorily subjected to disclosing for public scrutiny complete details about their income, expenditure, donations and funding received by them, irrespective of the amount donated and full details of donors making donations to them.

Civil society plays an important role in this regard. Several organisations are working in India towards a more vibrant and stronger democracy. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has been working in the area of electoral and political reforms for the last 25 years intending to reduce money and muscle power in the Indian political system.

The growing acceptability of politicians with criminal antecedents is a dangerous phenomenon that undermines the quality of our democracy as crime and money, rather than merit/performance drive electoral choices.

According to an ADR analysis, a candidate facing criminal charges had a 15.5 percent chance of winning the 2019 Lok Sabha elections against a 4.7 percent chance for a clean candidate.

In the 17th Lok Sabha, 2019, 43 percent (233) of elected MPs had declared criminal cases against them (an increase of 44 percent since 2009). Speaking of winning based on assets, there were 21 percent chances of winning for crorepati candidates contesting elections against a 1 percent chance of candidates with assets below Rs 1 crore.

As a result, several lawbreakers become lawmakers. Governance will not improve merely with cleaner candidates and representatives. A lot more needs to be done. Political party reforms and greater voter awareness are a must. The

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public discourse built by ADR over the years on these issues is significant.

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The ADR has successfully filed many Public Interest Litigations (PILs) in the Supreme Court and obtained landmark judgements which upheld the citizens' right to know. These PILs have also resulted in collective pressure on the political institutions to deliver better governance.

Some of the ongoing petitions of ADR are related to matters of urgent importance such as bringing political parties under RTI, seeking direction for the inclusion of 100 percent VVPATs in all EVMs, a ceiling on the political parties' expenditure during elections and challenging amendments to the 'Foreign Contribution Regulation Act', 1976 and 2010. All these issues are at the heart of free and fair elections and directly impact the health of our democracy.

To reverse the global shift towards authoritarian norms, democracy advocates working for freedom in their home countries will need robust solidarity from like-minded allies abroad. Democracy is remarkably resilient and has proven its ability to rebound from repeated blows.

Most free countries have strong values and civil society which resist further decline. Even in repressive environments, ordinary people, media, activists and civil society continue to express discontent on subjects ranging from corruption, inequality, concentration of power, and rights of the vulnerable and the marginalised.

It would be appropriate to end with the quote of Justice Felix Frankfurter:

"No office in the land is more important than that of being a citizen."

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