



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Photo Credit: India PM Office

Modi's Route To Centralized Government And Its Implications For Rural Development – OpEd

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By Maida Malik

Two decades ago, India was the only country in the South Asian subcontinent to receive Freedom House's designation of "free" out of its three-category [assessment](#). In 2021, the rating dropped to "partly free" for the first time since India's Emergency [Period](#), a 21-month curtailment of civil liberties under former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

This reversal of India's freedom assessment is largely due to the [centralization](#) of India's political system under Narendra Modi, the current Prime Minister under the Bharatiya Janata Party. While it



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is **contested** whether his move to centralize power has affected democracy levels, the retraction of powers from institutions such as the Supreme Court, bureaucracy, and the police threatens civil liberties and ultimately contributes to the reduction of democracy in the Indian state.

The Supreme Court of India once held the status of the most powerful apex court in the world and one of India's most trusted institutions. It was regarded as a "watchdog" for the government, but its decline as a counter-majoritarian force since 2014 has decreased

its willingness to challenge the prime minister and the legislature. The court's **reluctance** to hear cases that challenge crucial government policies, its weak defense of civil liberties, and its tendency to back the ruling party are all effects of incremental policy changes under Modi.

In 2014, efforts to create a new National Judicial Appointments **Commission** were introduced, which would have allowed the government to play a dominant role in appointments to the Supreme Court. Modi has also attempted to delay **appointments** for collegium recommendations and has protected and rewarded judges who support the Bharatiya Janata Party.

Further, Modi has centralized the Indian government by overseeing the direct **appointment** of key bureaucrats and removing state-specific administrative culture from the civil service. Reforms such as the reconstitution of the **Appointments** Committee of the Cabinet and **PRAGATI** under his rule have undermined bureaucratic independence and heightened centralization. In addition to this, Modi has centralized the police force by subjecting officers to serve partisan **interests** and, in doing so, has stifled criticism, suppressed free speech, and ultimately reduced enumerated civil liberties.

The party's efforts to centralize government have also directly impacted its democracy, as seen by a drop in the Freedom House Scale. The regime has threatened freedom of speech through tactics to silence critics, such as enactments of colonial-era sedition laws, specifically the **Unlawful** Activities Prevention Act. The national government has also begun to infringe on civil liberties through religion, most notably through the **Citizenship** Amendment Act of 2019, which delegates paths to citizenship based on religious identification. Hindu nationalism, the BJP's party organization, and Narendra Modi have played unique roles in political centralization, heightened by efforts to mainstream **Hindutva** ideology.

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Because India's population is so diverse, it faces challenges for development when democratic functions and development efforts are too centralized. India, being the most populated country in the world, is primarily composed of Indo-Aryans and Dravidians. It houses over two thousand ethnic groups, over 122 spoken languages, and six politically represented religions. In India, the rural local government, named the Panchayati Raj (PRI), is a council elected directly by the adult population of villages.

The 73rd and 74th constitutional **amendments** established this system of decentralized governance, with the addition of block and district-level governments. While the amendments aimed to transfer some functions and strengthen bottom-up planning, there was a clear incomplete **devolution** of powers on three fronts: functions, funds, and functionaries. The majority of state governments have not delegated sufficient **powers** to local governments, giving PRIs 21.3 functions out of the 29 listed under the Constitution. The central government has also failed to provide them with adequate resources such as infrastructure, staff, and funding.

To address incomplete devolution to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), the central government should define common **criteria** for activity mapping and cover centrally sponsored schemes to understand how funds flow to lower tiers of government. Further, PRIs should be granted greater

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and more flexible tax powers, as well as the ability to hire and fire staff from professionals, institutions, and civil society groups. Lastly, the Devolution Index must be monitored regularly to track the progress of decentralization across the country, with civil society groups playing a leading role. Not only would these reforms be beneficial in empowering India's diverse local communities, but they would also enhance the legitimacy of Modi's governance.

In India, challenges such as corruption and inadequate monitoring systems can hamper the effectiveness of these schemes and limit their impact on rural development. To ensure transparency, accountability, and people's participation in the implementation of rural development, providing livelihood opportunities to rural people through migration has resulted in empowerment. India's MGNREGS and social security NSAP schemes have provided employment and monthly allowances to rural families, but the lack of infrastructure and monitoring of these programs has left them short of their full potential.

Narendra Modi's efforts to centralize the Indian government through various mechanisms have left the process of decentralization and rural development incomplete, as the erasure of civil liberties and the politicization of nonpartisan entities have ignored the needs of local communities. To combat this, the government needs to dedicate more resources to the already-established tiers of governance and support local needs through devolution. India, a widely diverse and massive country, requires greater implementation of decentralization to ensure civil liberties, nonpartisan institutions, and sustainable community development.

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