THE INDIA FORUM
A JOURNAL-MAGAZINE ON CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

September 22, 2026

India's Democratic Resilience in a Majoritarian Setting

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Opposition parties confronting majoritarian challenges require more than electoral arithmetic. They must develop coherent ideological alternatives, manage factionalism, and cultivate durable relationships with civic actors.

Across a swathe of countries ranging from India and Turkey to the United States of America, ethnonationalist leaders have won power electorally and deployed electoral power to destroy democratic institutions and deliberative traditions (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Mukherji 2020). This hybrid competitive authoritarian (CA) situation, as we term it, has two faces in India. Autocratic consolidation driven by state power impacts Parliament, the Supreme Court, the Election Commission, the media, and constrains civic space (Mukherji and Zarhani, 2023, Mukherji 2024). Yet the competitive elements of a CA regime in the form of elections and some civic rights persist (Brownlee, 2009).

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The clear and imminent danger of autocratisation notwithstanding, threats to the very existence of the political opposition can create incentives for the dispersed political opposition and counter-majoritarian social forces to pay the price of cooperation and unite to reverse the trajectory (Mukherji 2024).

What are the pathways away from autocratisation when democracy is under a majoritarian threat? State-level politics in India in states such as Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Karnataka can be instructive. Why for example has the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) come to dominate Madhya Pradesh in recent years? Or why did the Congress win Karnataka from the BJP in the last election? We proffer three reasons for the resilience of the Congress in Karnataka compared with its decline in Madhya Pradesh.

First and foremost was the normative commitment of the party in Karnataka. The Congress has not always committed to the secular ideal with the same degree of commitment. Some leaders were willing to make concessions under a majoritarian assault. The second relates to how a counter-majoritarian party manages its internal factions and external coalitions.

Finally, we look at the question of how well the party connects with civil society on the ground. Can the political party embed itself with social forces such as minority communities and the oppressed classes, who can form a broad social coalition with substantial chunks of the majority community? These social forces do not become the political party. But they can embed themselves to it in the form of a political force that supports a counter-majoritarian party.

We are not arguing against the threat of autocratisation and the real and imminent danger that faces CA regimes like India. We are only pointing to how that danger can be averted in a hybrid regime, especially as the threat to the counter-majoritarian opposition escalates.

Party Ideology

Opposition parties sometimes assume that limited concessions to majoritarianism can attract the majority-community voters. Yet, when the Congress in MP opted for a strategy of mimicking Hindu nationalists to draw on the Hindu vote, it lost the 2023 state elections to the BJP. In Karnataka, on the other hand, the INC projected a clearly secular frame combined with a substantial welfare agenda in elections the same year. They were rewarded by an electorate that comprised a majority Hindu population (84 %). Clearly, a normative commitment to counter majoritarianism is a significant factor for victory.

How did the story play itself out? In MP, Congress leaders followed a copycat Hindu nationalist mode of electoral campaigning: visiting temples and religious figures and appealing to Hindu religious symbols. Despite these efforts, the majority of upper caste and backward caste Hindus voted for BJP. The BJP garnered 48.5 % (163 seats) of the vote while Congress secured 40.4 % (66 seats) of the mandate (Sisodia, 2024). While Muslims, Adivasi and Dalit groups voted for the Congress, there was a view that the Adivasis felt that the party's leadership was not paying heed to their special needs. It stands to reason that the Congress would have been more convincing for the marginalised and minority groups-its traditional voters-had the party differentiated its agenda more clearly from that

of the BJP.

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The ideological position of the Congress in Karnataka during the 2023 elections in that state was exactly the opposite. Like in MP, the BJP was the incumbent party in Karnataka. The BJP's attempts to create a solid Hindu vote bank by attacking Muslims was a clear political strategy. There were attacks on Muslim women wearing headscarves. Spurious narratives about Tipu Sultan, a Muslim ruler who was martyred by the British, were being pedalled to demonize Muslims as anti-Hindu. School textbooks were changed to portray the minority community in a communal light. Shops owned by Muslims were vandalized. There was also desecration of church property (Mukherji, 2024). All these actions aimed toward polarization were in-line with BJP's well-tested electoral strategy.

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However, Congress in Karnataka eschewed competitive Hindu nationalism. It took a clear secular position during the election campaign, especially at a time when the BJP was consolidating the Hindu vote through aggressive ethnonationalism. The Congress' relatively secular normative position was backed with a strong social democratic face. Timely and clearly spelt out financial support through direct transfers were pledged to women, unemployed educated youth, and other vulnerable segments of the population.

Secularism and welfare won the mandate in a Hindu majority state, despite an ethnonationalist incumbent. Defying prediction of most pollsters, the Congress garnered a majority in the state legislature, its seat count of 135 nearly double that the BJP's.

The electoral victory was a morale booster for all parties in the secular opposition at the national level. Consequently, the anti-BJP Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) was launched from Karnataka's capital city Bangalore in December 2023, on the eve of the April 2024 Parliamentary elections. The Karnataka mandate turned out to be consequential for national politics because the INDIA coalition was able to deny the BJP an absolute majority in the 2024 national level Parliamentary elections.

Securing the Organisation and Allies

Parties committed to secularism must manage both internal factions and competing parties that can divide the vote. Where inter- and intra-party conflicts remain unresolved, elections can tilt towards the opponent.

The Congress in the run-up to the 2023 Karnataka elections successfully managed the factions and curbed infighting. There was a popular and charismatic leader with a secular and progressive bent in Siddaramaiah. But there was also a competitor in the influential D.K. Shivakumar who could raise funds. The national leadership could resolve factional feuds, deciding on Siddaramaiah as the chief ministerial candidate. The Congress was also able to neutralise parties that could cut into its votes, like the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, which has a presence amongst Muslim voters. (Mukherji, 2024).

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The Congress in MP, on the other hand, was marred by unresolved factional feuds. Leading the charge was former cabinet minister Kamal Nath, followed by former chief minister Digvijay Singh (1993-2003), and Ajay Singh, the son of the late senior national leader Arjun Singh. Factional rivalry has been expensive for the party; in 2018, a faction led by Jyotiraditya Scindia defected to the BJP, bringing down the Congress government led by Nath. Scindia, a former union cabinet minister, had been a close associate of Rahul Gandhi, and his late father Madhavrao Scindia, an ex-royal, was a senior Congress leader. Shortly after the 2023 election loss, Nath too was rumoured to be on the verge of joining the BJP. Internal factions in MP thus made the Congress its own worst enemy.

Creating a coherent opposition also required bringing like-minded opposition parties together. The Congress declined an alliance offer by the Samajwadi Party, which might have garnered the backward caste vote that went substantially to the BJP. (The BJP's incumbent chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan belonged to a backward caste group.)

Political Parties and Civic Space

Inspired by Karl Polanyi's idea of "embeddedness," party-society embeddedness turns out to be a key factor in the resilience mechanism. Polanyi viewed markets as embedded in social and political relations, arguing that separating them is an economist's abstraction rather than social reality (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Likewise, political parties are embedded with the civic space.

It is pertinent to examine how counter-majoritarian parties mobilize civic energy for secular democratisation. Party-society embeddedness emphasizes that political parties are built on a broad social base encompassing ethnic, economic, and ideological interests. The extent to which a counter-majoritarian party embeds itself in this space and channels civic activism for mobilisation is crucial for political outcomes.

The party that chose the more popular leader who could connect with civil society was able to secure the mandate. The Congress's choice in Siddaramaiah over Shivakumar in Karnataka was a positive step that helped connect the party's aspirations with a wide range of like-minded civic associations. In MP, the Congress national leadership preferred Kamal Nath, an experienced leader and fund raiser, over the more charismatic Digvijay Singh, who had served as chief minister for two terms between 1993-2003.

> The 'cockroach' student protests is a clear demonstration that the civic space can unite against the majoritarian party on issues of governance such education, employment and corruption.

The Congress in Karnataka also enjoyed a more vibrant connect with the civic space that took on the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) and the BJP. This civic space comprised many organisations such as the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, the Dalit Sangharsh Samiti and farmers organizations. The Jamaat in Karnataka played a significant role in bringing together even dominant Hindu caste groups and Christians and Sikhs. What was significant about the new social formation christened as Eddelu Karnataka (Wake-Up Karnataka) was its character as an independent civil society movement for fighting ethnonationalism. Members of this group were not part of the Congress even though they came together to defeat ethnonationalism by taking on the BJP and the RSS.

Eddelu Karnataka worked intensively in 103 closely fought constituencies, where bringing the last voter out mattered for the final electoral outcome. Of these 103 constituencies, the Congress won in 73. It appears that this network also played an important role in persuading AIMIM to withdraw candidates who would have cut into the Congress' Muslim votes (Mukherji, 2024).

Social media campaigns and posters highlighted corrupt governance, inflation and the politics of hate. While mainstream media had become subservient to the BJP, smaller TV channels such as Eedina, Peepul TV and Vartha Bharathi helped the opposition's cause.

Cultural icons such as Devanura Mahadeva, a respected Kannada writer drew on the Indian traditions and diverse intellectual sources like Vivekananda, Gandhi, and Ambedkar to provide a fundamental critique of the RSS's ideology and its idea of a Hindu India.

MP presented a stark contrast. The civic space in MP was clearly favourable for ethnonationalism. The ruling BJP had captured the Jan Abhiyan Parishad-created by the Congress in 1997-to promote the BJP's agenda. The Chief Minister's Fellowship Programme was deployed to penetrate the society. These platforms enabled the RSS to become a more potent force within MP.

A vibrant progressive civic space had existed in MP, exemplified in the 1990s by the Narmada anti-dam movement led by Medha Patkar, which drew global support and even influenced the World Bank's approach to funding large dams. Yet prolonged BJP rule since 2003 had weakened these social forces. The Gandhian Ekta Parishad worked on land rights among Adivasi communities. Its cadres may have been discouraged by the normative positioning and faction fighting within the INC. Unlike in Karnataka, there were no persuasive intellectuals in MP capable of mounting a powerful ideological challenge to the RSS (authors' interviews, March 2025). MP's progressive civic groups thus lacked the solidarity of the Eddelu Karnataka movement.

Lessons

What lessons can one glean from this comparative reflection as state level elections approach Karnataka and MP in 2028 and the national elections coming up in 2029?

> It is when social actors are disgusted with justifying poor governance with Hindu nationalism that they are likely to fight for their causes rather than for a particular party.

Our limited probe suggests that normative commitment, party coordination and party-society embeddedness all matter for the electoral success of the counter-majoritarian party. The phenomenal support received by the 'cockroach' student protests, spearheaded by the Cockroach Janata Party, is a clear demonstration that the civic space can unite against the majoritarian party on issues of governance such education, employment and corruption.

Counter-majoritarian parties such as the Congress should embed themselves with the protesters in a manner that respects their autonomy and allows them the connect voluntarily with the party. The glue needs to embed the civil society actors without threatening their autonomy. It is when social actors are disgusted with justifying poor governance with Hindu nationalism that they are likely to fight for their causes rather than for a particular party.

In sum, opposition parties confronting majoritarian challenges require more than electoral arithmetic. They must develop coherent ideological alternatives, effectively manage both intra-party and inter-party factions, and cultivate durable relationships with civic actors capable of mobilizing voters beyond formal party structures.

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