

# [***In face of Modi juggernaut, India's opposition appears increasingly weak***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BVF-MTX1-JBSS-S000-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

April 21, 2024 Sunday 2:19 AM GMT

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**Length:** 2042 words

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**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Under the searing New Delhi sun, more than a dozen of [*India's*](https://www.cnn.com/world/india) top opposition leaders joined hands in a rare show of unity imploring voters to "save democracy."

Standing before thousands of supporters at the city's historic and politically important Ramlila Maidan, the March 31 rally marked the opposition's strongest attempt yet to sway voters against electing [*Prime Minister Narendra Modi*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/15/india/modi-profile-india-election-intl-hnk-dst/index.html) to a third straight term.

The consequence of continued Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rule, they say, would be the erosion of the very foundation upon which modern India was built: democracy.

"This [*election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/india/india-election-2024-hnk-intl-dg/index.html) is for saving democracy and we must fight united," main opposition party Indian National Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge told the crowds, who were waving the party flag of orange, white and green. "There is no level playing field in this election."

It echoed a similar rally more than 40 years earlier on the same spot, when opposition leaders fired up huge crowds to help change the course of the 1977 election - ending the 10-year rule of India's powerful third prime minister and political scion Indira Gandhi.

Gandhi had imposed a state of emergency, jailed key opposition leaders and curtailed civil freedoms. To some, India's future was perched on a needle point between autocracy and democracy. She lost the election and, in the eyes of many, India's democracy was saved.

To many supporters in the crowd three weeks ago, India is now at a similar crossroads with this [*high-stakes election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/india/india-general-election-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html) deciding which path the country follows.

"Our democracy is being murdered, India is becoming a dictatorship," Hazari Lal Rajput, a resident from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, told CNN at the Ramlila Maidan.

Democracy under threat?

Unless there is a major upset, Modi's BJP is set to win its third straight five-year term thanks to his potent, populist mix of [*economic empowerment*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/india/india-general-election-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html) and Hindu nationalism.

According to 2023 Pew research, about eight in 10 Indian adults have a favorable view of Modi, including 55% who have a very favorable view. Such levels of popularity for a two-term incumbent prime minister defy all modern conventions, both in India and throughout much of the democratic world.

But India's opposition leaders accuse Modi's right-wing government of becoming an electoral autocracy by attempting to rig the vote, weaponizing state agencies to stifle, attack and arrest opposition politicians, and undermining democratic principles ahead of elections, which began on April 19 and run until June 1, with results counted on June 4.

They also warn Modi's brand of Hindu nationalism is uncorking dangerous religious divides in a country with a long and tragic history of sectarian bloodletting.

Modi and the BJP have denied political interference, with one [*senior party leader saying*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/21/india/india-arvind-kejriwal-arrest-corruption-allegations-intl/index.html) it was a "process of law" to take "appropriate action against corruption."

To counter the BJP, the opposition has formed a 27-member bloc - the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or INDIA.

But so far that alliance has proved lackluster, observers say. It has been beset by ideological differences, has seen a host of defections to the BJP and, even with the election in full swing, has yet to even name a prime ministerial candidate.

"What kind of a democracy can you have if you don't have a vibrant opposition, a robust opposition that can question the government?" asks Arati Jerath, an independent political commentator and journalist.

"That's why it's not really a question of whether Modi wins or not, it's a question of keeping the opposition alive to fight another day so that democracy in India survives."

'Scorched earth'

Among those leading the charge for the opposition alliance is Rahul Gandhi, longtime face of the Congress and the latest member of his family to bid for power.

He is the son of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. His grandmother Indira was India's first female leader, and his great-grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the country's founding prime minister.

"If the BJP wins these fixed elections and changes the constitution, the country will be on fire. Remember this," Rahul Gandhi told the crowd in Delhi last month.

The BJP and its allies are gunning for a supermajority of more than two-thirds of the seats in India's parliament, the Lok Sabha. A rising fear among critics is that this would give the BJP the power to change India's constitution, which is rooted in the democratic principles of justice, liberty, equality and - crucially - secularism.

The BJP has repeatedly denied it has plans to change the constitution.

"When I say that I have big plans, no one should be scared. I don't take decisions to scare or run over anyone, I take decisions for the wholesome development of the nation," Modi said in an interview with Indian news agency ANI earlier this week.

But the party has already begun [*publicly pulling India's government away from its secular foundation*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/22/india/modi-inauguration-india-ayodhya-temple-intl-hnk/index.html) and leading BJP figures have openly advocated for the country to be declared a Hindu nation.

"There shouldn't be ***politics*** on the basis of religion in any country, they should talk about real issues. Until people's financial situation improves, there won't be any social reform," said voter Mohammad Irfan at the opposition rally in Delhi.

Opposition parties have found themselves facing a slew of legal and financial challenges in the run-up to this year's election.

Gandhi's Congress - the largest party in the INDIA alliance - has accused the BJP of "tax terrorism" and crippling its ability to campaign after its accounts were frozen by the tax department, leaving it unable to use some $20 million in funds. It has also been landed with a $218 million tax bill.

Then came the [*arrest of Arvind Kejriwal*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/21/india/india-arvind-kejriwal-arrest-corruption-allegations-intl/index.html), Delhi chief minister and head of the popular Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Kejriwal's detention on graft allegations came after the announcement of the general election last month, sparking protests in the capital. Analysts say it's the first time in post-independence history that an Indian chief minister has governed from behind bars.

Kejriwal has denied the allegations, claiming they are politically motivated. He is just one of several prominent members of the opposition, including three other senior AAP leaders, that have also been arrested or investigated by state agencies in moves decried as political by their parties.

"I think there are very serious concerns about how free and fair the elections are going to be in India this time around," said Atishi, Delhi minister of education for the AAP, who goes by one name.

Reports have emerged of opposition party members being coerced into joining the BJP with the threat of arrest, while they were under investigation by state agencies. Other reports suggest politicians have had their probes dropped after switching sides.

Atishi said she was also approached to switch to the BJP. "Either you join the ruling party, and then the cases are closed or put into cold storage or if you don't, like the Aam Aadmi Party leaders, then the cases go ahead and you're arrested and put into jail," she said, without specifically naming who approached her.

CNN cannot independently confirm the incidents and has reached out to the BJP for comment.

In his interview with ANI, Modi denied any sliding of democracy under his rule and emphasized the independence of the Election Commission and state agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate, saying political leaders make up just 3% of cases.

"Shouldn't we let the ED work independently when it is supposed to do so?" he said. "I am convinced that corruption has destroyed the country. We should fight against corruption with our full strength."

Analyst Jerath said a BJP-led campaign to weaken the opposition was part of Modi's "scorched earth policy."

"Just wipe out whatever comes in your way so that this juggernaut can move on without any kind of challenge, without any obstruction," she said.

Gandhi 'not a contender'

Modi is enduringly popular, analysts say, appealing to both the poor and the affluent, especially among much of the roughly 80% of India's population who are Hindu.

During his 10 years in power, he has launched a raft of welfare policies including free food handouts, housing, cheap gas cylinders for women and infrastructure projects.

India is also the world's fastest-growing major economy and Modi's presence [*on the world stage*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/08/india/g20-summit-india-modi-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html) - including hosting the G20 - has cemented the country as a modern global power, along with a [*history-making moon landing.*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/24/india/chandrayaan-3-india-landing-thursday-intl-hnk-scn/index.html)

Author Christophe Jaffrelot told CNN Modi makes people feel "proud again of being Indian."

"There is a sense in India, a constant sense, of vulnerability, a lack of self-esteem. So to be recognized as a great power in spite of everything, (that) is attributed to him," he said.

That does not mean there aren't key issues the opposition could rally around, analysts say, including the BJP's failure to increase education opportunities or improve health infrastructure - especially following the coronavirus pandemic, which hit India especially hard.

Youth unemployment also remains a huge problem, close to 50% among 20-to-24-year-olds.

But the INDIA alliance has failed to capitalize on these weak spots, Jerath said.

"They haven't been able to weave together a cohesive kind of campaign, come up with a catchy slogan that will fire the imagination of the voting public," she said.

Congress leader Gandhi is one of the few opposition figures considered to have the kind of star power and name recognition to stand against Modi.

But though he may have the name, Gandhi lacks leadership skills, some analysts say.

Rasheed Kidwai, journalist and author of "24 Akbar Road," a history of the Congress party, said it's a winner-takes-all election and there is "no silver medal in ***politics***."

"The problem with INDIA alliance is there is nobody who has that kind of hunger, who has that kind of personal(ity), who has that kind of inner sense of belonging or ownership to go in this election. Rahul is doing it but is not a contender," he said.

Gandhi recently completed a 6,713-kilometer (4,200-mile) walk across the country, starting in the violence-hit northeastern state of Manipur, to raise issues of poverty, unemployment, diversity and democracy with voters.

Despite these efforts, the BJP has dominated the campaign narrative.

A key gauge of opposition strength will be in those parts of India where the BJP has historically failed to make inroads.

Regional opposition heavyweights, such as the West Bengal chief minister and All India Trinamool Congress head Mamata Banerjee and the south's Tamil Nadu chief minister Muthuvel Karunanidhi Stalin, will be vying to block a BJP takeover in their respective states.

But the only other major national party is the Congress, which has been the main opposition since 2014.

Congress governed the country for much of the 77 years since independence, and while it was once a powerful political force with its legacy rooted in the formation of modern India, it now finds itself in the doldrums, dogged by infighting and accusations of corruption within the party.

"In the Congress, the best and brightest are not fighting the election," Kidwai said.

Analysts say that during a decade in opposition, Congress has failed to rebuild its organization and political machinery to effectively take on the BJP.

The Congress organization has "decayed and almost died over the years, particularly in north India, and particularly in Uttar Pradesh, which is the largest, most populous state," Jerath said.

"There was a time after independence, and for many years after independence, that they used to say that you would find a Congress flag in every single village in India," she said. "That's no longer true."

Still, there is optimism from some.

The AAP's Atishi said that despite repeated attacks against her party, it has been able to defeat the BJP in Delhi again and again.

"Democracy becoming an autocracy ... That is what we are fighting against," she said. "I think that the people of India have always voted very sensibly, and we hope that they do so this time."

CNN's Kunal Sehgal, Aishwarya S. Iyer and Anna Coren contributed reporting.

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**Load-Date:** April 21, 2024

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