

Varieties of Democracy Report - 2018

What is the issue?

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- University of Gothenburg (Sweden) has recently published the “Varieties of Democracy Report” (V-Dem) for 2018.

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- The report provides the most sweeping global examination of democracy, and India has seen a downgrade in its overall status.

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What is the study about?

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- The study covers 178 countries, crunches a large number of indicators, and adds a deep historical perspective.

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- It is carried out rigorously, with a global team of 3,000 researchers with deep knowledge of local political contexts.

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- It's also backed by the European Union (EU) and funded by a multitude of different institutions and think tanks, ensuring a robust access to data.

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- The methodology involves classifying nations on a combination of variables and then checking for changes in overall democratic status.

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- Notably, the survey does a comparison over 2007-2017 on multiple indicators.

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What are the various categories for classification?

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- **Liberal Democracy** - This category is the ideal benchmark, and every citizen in such societies is guaranteed equal rights and full freedom of expression.

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- Further, equitable access to the law, institutionalised justice system, freedom of association, participatory elections etc., are other important metrics here.

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- Only 39 of the 178 nations that were studied had met these standards in 2017.

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- **Electoral Democracy** - In this category, all citizens have the vote but certain categories of people suffer exclusion due to their socio-economic status.

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- Further, lower standards (as compared to liberal democracies) apply here, when it comes to human rights, freedom of expression and association, etc.

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- In 2017, the V-Dem reckons 56 countries qualified for this category.

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- **Electoral Autocracy** - In this category of nations, all citizens have the vote but repression, censorship and institutionalised intimidation are very visible.

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- According to the study, in this domain too, there were 56 nations in 2017.

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- **Closed Autocracy** - While electoral Autocracy do have severe problems, they are still better off than countries that are classified as closed autocracies.

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- In a closed autocracy, the political executive is totally free of being answerable to its people, and their rule is carried out with fear and intimidation.

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- Notably, for residents of “Closed Autocracies”, not being subjected to political persecution is a common big dream that many of them chase.

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- Worldwide, there were 27 such “closed autocracy nations” in 2017.

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What is India's situation?

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- India saw a slide in its ranking over the years as the quality of democracy has noticeably declined over the past decade (especially after 2014).
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- The study notes that infringements on media freedom and the civil society activities have spiked since the “Hindu-nationalist government” took office.
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- Nonetheless, India retains a system of free & fair multi-party elections and thus, qualifies as an electoral democracy.
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- But it has seen major erosion in indicators such as Freedom of Expression, Rule of Law and Freedom of Association.
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- The future remains uncertain, as India could get better from here, or slip further down to a situation akin to the emergency era (1975-77).
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What are the related concerns in India?

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- **Media** - Censorship of the media and harassment of journalists can occur gradually through “inducements, intimidations, and co-optation”.
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- These tactics would further lead naturally to increasing levels of self-censorship and fewer explicit criticisms of the government.
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- The predictable result is a narrower range of political perspectives in the public sphere, as well as a general decline in the freedom of expression.
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- **Other factors** - Only the “Voter's Registry” has improved over the past 10 years and other parameters have either stagnated, or deteriorated.
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- This includes harassment of media, curtailment of NGOs and repression of cultural and academic expression, etc.
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- Even in terms of electoral transparency, the study says that intimidation and violence have increased and that party agents harass and bribe voters.
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- The murder and jailing of environmental and human rights activists and attempts to shut down alternate means of free expression have also increased.
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- Further, rapidly worsening “Gini coefficient” (increasing economic

inequality) is another worrying indicator for sustaining democracy.

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Source: Business Standard

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