



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

# The Massacre of Norms

Indian politics has always had colourful characters, even criminals standing for elections, but rarely has the political campaigning been so coarse, and rarer still has its vulgarity been defended so vigorously by party officials and supporters.

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As India's marathon elections enter their penultimate phase, the nation may be getting weary of the apparently never-ending campaign. But as in a test match, there is never a dull moment. The politicians are still at it, barnstorming the countryside to convince the many voters who still may not have made up their minds, why they're better than their rivals. But just as tired batsmen hit wayward shots, some politicians have let go off their inhibitions, hitting inelegant strokes which are caught at the boundary, but the umpire is too intimidated to object, and part of the stadium is so

vociferous in demanding a six, that those who want to uphold higher standards and see replays end up shaking their heads in despair as the umpire grants the batsman six more runs.

Whether or not anything illegal may have occurred, politicians, in particular leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party, have disregarded norms with a callousness that has taken Indian politics to a new low. India does have a model code of conduct to regulate the behaviour of candidates during electioneering, and it imposes penalties for violations. The code governs what candidates can say about each other

and the promises they make. But the way the commission has been ruling lately on contentious matters has baffled many people.

In an attempt to appear even, the election commissioners have been issuing warnings to candidates from most major parties, but like that timid umpire in the village cricket match who has to decide if the emperor is run out or not, the commission has given rulings that have allowed the emperor to keep batting. So Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been able to invoke the memory of paramilitary forces killed during the February terrorist attack in Kashmir, and ask voters to vote in the name of 'the martyrs'—essentially arguing that a vote for his party alone would honour the fallen, and the commission finds nothing objectionable. But it does reprimand the Uttar Pradesh chief minister Ajay Singh Bisht, who calls himself Yogi Adityanath, after he called the Indian Army 'Modi Sena'. There's one rule for the satrap, another for the sultan.

Unrestrained and emboldened, Modi took the electoral discourse to lower depths in early May, when he called his rival Rahul Gandhi's father and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, a man whose "life ended as corrupt #1." Calling Rajiv Gandhi corrupt may be seen as part of a bitter election campaign, but Rajiv was assassinated by a terrorist in 1991, so the reference to the end of his life was crass. In any case, Gandhi was neither tried nor convicted of corruption, although he was accused of it during his lifetime, and his party, the Congress, even lost the 1989 parliamentary elections.

There was irony too. Only eight months ago, on his 74th birth anniversary, Modi had praised Rajiv's contribution to Indian politics. In a remarkably candid statement to a fawning interviewer (and you get to interview Modi only if you are willing to be fawning), Modi had said that his only rival is Narendra Modi. Juxtapose the two statements: in one, Modi praised Rajiv in August, and a bit more than eight months later, he brought up his death in a crude way—remember, Rajiv was blown up by a suicide bomber. It showed those two rival Modis battling in his mind.

Such invective is usually associated with the presidents of the US and the Philippines—Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte. Modi is now firmly a member of that club. Unsurprisingly, Modi's supporters, who affix the term *chowkidar* (or security guard) in front of their names on social media, chipped in gleefully, arguing that Rajiv Gandhi was corrupt—probably forgetting that neither he, nor Jawaharlal Nehru, (whom Modi blames

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