

Will the Golden Age For Corporate Shareholders Ever End?



*John P. Ruehl - Source:
Independent Media
Institute*

05-05-2024 ~ *Shareholders have assumed enormous influence over U.S. corporations over the last few decades. Despite their firm hold, shifts are underway that could alter the domestic corporate landscape.*

On April 3, 2024, Disney CEO Bob Iger officially [fended off the attempt](#) by institutional investor Nelson Peltz and his hedge fund Trian Partners to secure two board seats. During the affair, [Disney faced pressure](#) from proxy advisory firm Institutional Shareholder Services to support Peltz's initiative. While Iger prevailed, the [costliest board fight in history](#) underscores the significant influence of shareholders in shaping the fates of corporations.

Historically, U.S. corporate power was [concentrated among executives](#), though with varying degrees of influence held by workers and other stakeholders. However, over the last century, U.S. corporations increasingly oriented themselves around their stock price and the imperative to maximize shareholder value. This mindset has now firmly entrenched itself within U.S. corporate culture and continues to shape their decisions and priorities.

Until the [early 20th century](#), shareholders wielded minimal influence over U.S. corporations, with notable changes instigated by industries such as railroad conglomerates. To sidestep antitrust accusations and manipulate competition, for example, railroad companies created “[communities of interest](#)” by buying shares in one another, frequently installing their financiers and bankers on targeted companies’ boards. However, increased antitrust enforcement from the Supreme Court discouraged these practices by 1912.

Investors remained undeterred. Throughout the 1920s [Merger Wave](#), shareholders amassed large stakes in various companies, eroding the traditional influence of company founders, executives, families, as well as other stakeholders like employees, trade unions, suppliers, customers, and local communities. The momentum of the shareholder rights movement surged [following the stock market crash](#) in 1929, which prompted legislation aimed at increasing transparency granting shareholders increased authority and information access.

During World War II, U.S. industrial power was [centralized under government control](#). This trend, however, waned after the conflict concluded, leading to a resurgence of privatization that benefited shareholders as control shifted away from government oversight. Despite [initially dominating](#) the post-WWII economic landscape, U.S. companies began encountering [tougher competition](#) from global rivals by the 1960s, hindering their growth.

[During the 1970s](#), prioritizing stock price growth for shareholders gained traction. However, it was the 1980s when this mindset became institutionalized, with legal rulings such as *Smith v. Van Gorkom*, (1985) and *Revlon, Inc. v. MacAndrews and Forbes Holding, Inc.* (1986) affirming corporations’ duties to shareholders.

Amendments to corporate laws aimed to enhance shareholder rights, enabling actions like director nominations, and voting on executive pay. Executive stock rewards [thus began to](#) increase, incentivizing risk-taking for short-term gains. Additionally, the [1986 Tax Reform Law](#) cut the individual top tax rate and fueled heightened interest in short-term stock trading.

The evolution of institutional investors also played a pivotal part in reshaping the financial landscape. The growing role of [hedge funds](#), 401(k) pension plans managed through [mutual funds](#), and the introduction of other major asset

management firms like [Vanguard](#) and [BlackRock](#) began to herald a new era in the stock market and corporate governance.

In the decades up to the 1980s, corporate raiding had [become increasingly common](#). However, regulatory changes during the 1980s lifted restrictions on mergers and acquisitions, leading to the [peak of the U.S. corporate raiding era](#). During this time, riskier, higher-return bonds called “junk bonds” and leveraged buyouts involving a large amount of borrowed money to purchase a company evolved into crucial financial tools for funding corporate takeovers. Companies often targeted struggling companies or undervalued firms, acquiring them with the intention of privatizing operations, slashing costs, divesting assets, and eventually reintroducing them to the public market.

In response to these attempts, entrenched corporate management networks implemented defensive strategies. They issued new shares to existing shareholders as [poison pills](#), diluting the ownership stake of prospective buyers. [Dual-class share structures](#) allowed company insiders to maintain their control even with a minority of shares. [Staggered boards](#) meanwhile divided boards into different classes to make it difficult for outside entities to gain control. However, many still found themselves compelled to yield to the demands of institutional investors.

While corporate raiding declined [in the early 1990s](#), the concept of stock prices as the primary measure of a company’s performance, thereby ensuring shareholder loyalty, was established. With more individuals and pension funds investing in the stock market, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average becoming an even more important economic indicator, increasing shareholder value had become the prevailing corporate imperative by the close of the 20th century.

Criticism of the shareholder value system and its repercussions, such as [job outsourcing](#) and [soaring CEO pay](#), continued into the 2000s and remains widespread. Boeing’s diversion of pandemic relief funds [for stock buybacks](#) highlights the issue of prioritizing immediate shareholder gains over long-term stability and growth.

Boeing’s actions, though legal due to a [1982 SEC ruling](#) that legitimized buybacks, received public criticism without significant consequences. Nevertheless, [Boeing’s ongoing troubles](#) with the safety of its planes have been

exacerbated by the lack of investment. Several incidents have led to a notable decline in its share price over the last few months, erasing the benefits achieved through short-termism policies.

The evolution of corporate culture toward shareholders has occurred globally but to a lesser extent in other capitalist countries. In [South Korea and Japan](#), stakeholder consensus among customers, suppliers, and the community remains more prominent. Long-term relationships are common with employees and suppliers, facilitating trust and collaboration throughout the supply chain, though efforts to increase the influence of shareholders [are ongoing](#).

Many European firms have [traditionally been characterized by high levels of ownership by founding](#) families and governments. While this has slowly changed, there remains a culture of “codetermination” in Germany and other European Union (EU) countries. [This model](#) grants greater rights to employees in the decision-making process, with a focus on stability and job preservation, and returned after Germany pursued more shareholder-friendly policies [during the 1990s](#).

In contrast, the UK shares a corporate structure more akin to that of the U.S., and it [remains Europe’s financial powerhouse](#) even after Brexit. However, the UK only has 15 companies in the top 100 companies, compared to 27 for Germany, 31 for France, and 40 for Japan [in 2023](#). China’s state-owned enterprises have meanwhile claimed the top spot from the U.S.

Nonetheless, advocates of U.S. corporate structure highlight the flexibility and adaptiveness of U.S. companies compared to [European](#) and [Asian firms](#), which are often viewed as less innovative. Additionally, they contend that this system has contributed to higher GDP growth than other developed countries, while several EU states maintain high unemployment rates. It is also argued that U.S. companies have navigated recent challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine better.

U.S. companies have of course benefited from various factors such as the size of the domestic market, geopolitical influence, and status of the U.S. dollar as the world’s reserve currency, attracting global investment. However, they have become enamored by short-termism driven by investors. [By 2020](#), the average holding period of shares on the New York Stock Exchange had shrunk to roughly

five months, compared to an average of eight years in the late 1950s. Shareholders can easily sell their shares without sacrificing any assets in the company, hindering long-term strategic planning.

Frustration with the persistent dominance of shareholders in the U.S. corporate world has prompted efforts to diminish their influence in recent years. [In 2018](#), Democratic senators proposed the Reward Work Act and the Accountable Capitalism Act, which would require large companies to allocate 33 to 40 percent of board seats to worker-elected representatives. These proposals mirror the German concept of board-level codetermination, adopted in the post-WWII era and now popular in many European countries.

Some contend that the German-style codetermination model is a poor fit [for U.S. corporations](#). Moreover, codetermination initiatives [have primarily focused](#) on facilitating discussions between workers and employers on immediate conditions, serving as a supplement to existing union representation and collective bargaining structures rather than radically strengthening worker influence.

One advantage is the flexibility granted by U.S. state law, enabling states to experiment with their own rules. [On April 19, 2024](#), the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, voted to unionize after two failed attempts in 2014 and 2019. The decision not only brings representation to Volkswagen workers in the U.S. but also represents the first successful unionization effort at a non-Big Three (General Motors, Stellantis, and Ford Motor Company) auto plant in the South. And since the first unionization push in New York [in 2021](#), 41 states now have at least one unionized Starbucks, reminiscent of a century ago when labor movements gained significant momentum.

Policy recommendations have also emerged. Corporate Social Responsibility emerged originally in the mid-20th century [but then reemerged](#) by the turn of the millennium. Environmental, Social, and Governance considerations then emerged [by the 2010s](#), alongside Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. At a 2019 American Business Roundtable resolution, 196 CEOs [advocated for a change in business culture](#) and to commit CEOs to “[meeting the needs of all stakeholders](#).”

Despite increasing calls for corporate accountability, these endeavors often lacked enforceability. DEI initiatives in particular have become embroiled in

political controversies, leading to [companies backtracking](#) on their commitments. Shell meanwhile faced pressure from activist shareholders in 2021 regarding its contributions to climate change, including from its largest institutional investors, Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street. But as economic considerations took precedence, minimal pressure was put on Shell, [resulting in negligible advancements in](#) climate change initiatives.

Nonetheless, just as the rise of communication networks in the 20th century allowed investors to gain influence over corporations, the rise of the internet and social media has equipped stakeholders and grassroots activists with their own tools. Public pressure to raise the minimum wage has resulted in dozens of cities and counties increasing their minimum wage in recent years and compelled companies [like McDonald's](#) to stop lobbying against it. The GameStop stock saga [of early 2021](#) meanwhile demonstrated how retail investors, fueled by social media hype, drove the company's stock price upward, threatening institutional investors by disrupting established market dynamics.

Institutional investors like Vanguard, BlackRock, and State Street, which all own major shares in one another, [have helped lead](#) to an immense concentration of corporate ownership. Failing to reduce their dominance, and shareholders in general, could inspire further reforms. Limited Liability Companies emerged partly in response to this dominance, with the first one established in Wyoming [in 1977](#). Meanwhile, large companies like OpenAI and Stripe [are opting to remain private](#), further reducing the power of shareholders.

Additionally, worker cooperatives, businesses owned and operated by employees who share in decision-making and profits, have experienced [renewed interest](#) in the U.S. Despite waning popularity after their initial rise [in the 19th century](#), they [began to rebound](#) in the 1970s and 1980s. The founding of the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives [in 2004](#) has since [helped expand](#) the number of worker cooperatives in the country.

Benefit corporations, for-profit companies that prioritize both their societal and environmental impacts, have also seen significant growth in recent years. Maryland became the first U.S. state to enact laws providing for public benefit corporations [in 2010](#), and has since been joined by 36 other states and Washington, D.C.

The corporate era preceding the current one characterized by shareholder dominance was far from ideal. However, to foster a more equitable corporate landscape, public support for political initiatives that challenge the status quo and multi-stakeholder-focused business initiatives will be crucial to reducing the influence of shareholders. This may lead to major upheavals in pension systems and 401(k) plans invested in the stock market, yet it holds the potential to greatly improve worker rights, inspire long-term strategic planning, and promote a more equal distribution of corporate profits.

By John P. Ruehl

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Seeing Red: Our Ancient Relationship With Ocher And The Color of Cognition

05-03-2024 ~ *Extensive other use reflects the culture and cognitive abilities of early humans, who inherited an affinity for red from primate ancestors.*



Twenty-three million years ago, our distant ancestors gained trichromatic color vision through means of a random genetic mutation. Trichromatic color vision and trichromacy refer to the ability to perceive color through three receptors in the eye, known as cones, which are sensitive to different wavelengths of visible light. It has been [assumed](#) that primates ancestral to humans had two cones at the start of their lineage; the duplication and modification of genes coding for one of the two created another distinct, separate cone. Gaining a third cone allowed for the perception of red and other colors with long wavelengths in addition to the two preexisting receptors for blues and greens with shorter wavelengths—red was entirely unknown to primate species before this mutation, and the ability to see red remains rare among other mammals. Exceptions to mammalian dichromacy, the state of having two cones, are uncommon. Some primates lost one of their cone receptors, becoming monochromats. Having a single cone, monochromats like the nocturnal owl monkeys (genus *Aotus*) perceive light intensity in shades of gray without the ability to differentiate color values. Others, including the ancestors of modern apes, monkeys, and humans, happened to gain a third cone.

Michael H. Rowe, professor emeritus of neuroscience at Ohio University, confirms that random processes were involved in the evolution of primate trichromacy in his [study](#) of the underlying neurophysiological mechanisms, and outlines the two dominant theories for the maintenance of a third cone among primates. One longstanding theory is that of enhanced fruit detection among diurnal primates, who are most active during the daytime. According to this theory, improved discernment of red fruits against green foliage led to a direct increase in efficiency when foraging for nutritious food. The second theory, however, suggests it was the consumption of leaves rather than fruit that more strongly influenced routine trichromacy. This alternate [“young leaf” hypothesis](#) emphasizes the importance of enhanced color vision when selecting nutritious

leaves over their less beneficial counterparts, especially at times when fruit is scarce and surviving off of leaf consumption becomes critical. Rowe's findings and the newer "young leaf" theory also align with the later evolution of [trichromatic vision in the howler monkey](#), a New World primate.

New World primates like the howler monkey and Old World primates, which include humans and apes, are two major groups within the order Primates that differ in anatomical features and geographic distribution. Since their last common ancestor did not have trichromatic vision, the trait evolved in both Old and certain New World species through convergent evolution. This occurs when similar traits evolve among distantly related species, usually due to similar environmental pressures and advantages to the trait.

Further down the evolutionary timeline, rocks and minerals became the cornerstones of technological advancement among hominins. Within the range of widely accessible raw materials, one pigment stands out with its broad spectrum of color: ocher. Ocher varies in shade depending on its [chemical and structural composition](#), appearing from light yellows and rusty browns to deep red-purple hues. Red ocher, for example, gains its color from an abundance of an iron oxide called hematite.

Known evidence for processing and crushing ocher pieces by early humans in Africa dates as far back as the Early Stone Age. In a 2022 [article](#) published by the Journal of World Prehistory, researchers Rimtautas Dapschauskas and his co-authors compared the frequency of ocher use over time between over 100 African archaeological sites. They found that ocher, particularly of the hematite-rich variety, grew in geographical distribution and frequency of use from 500,000 y.a. (years ago) and became part of the cultural behaviors habitual to site inhabitants as early as 160,000 y.a. Over a third of sites included in this study that were used at or after this date contained various forms of the material. Notable ocher finds from Early to Late Stone Age African sites include two intentionally shaped pieces of red ocher from 307,000 y.a. at the [Olorgesailie basin](#) in Kenya, as well as a [workshop at Blombos Cave](#), South Africa, for processing ocher 75,000-100,000 y.a. Several of the Blombos Cave specimens display patterns of wear suggesting their use on hard surfaces in the same manner one would use a crayon today.

Ocher pervaded early human history, with many instances of use appearing throughout the archaeological record in accompaniment to

technological/utilitarian developments and ritualistic behavior. A few utilitarian applications of ocher include its use in [hide-processing](#), as a skin protectant to guard against [mosquitos](#) and [excessive sun exposure](#), and in compound [adhesives for tool making](#). The latter is considered to be one of the best pieces of evidence for advanced cognitive abilities in early humans.

Processing ocher is not unique to *Homo sapiens*, either, and was a practice shared by other members of the *Homo* genus. A [2024 study](#) conducted by scientists Patrick Schmidt, Radu Iovita, and their colleagues investigates the use of ocher-based compound adhesives for Middle Paleolithic cutting and scraping tools crafted by Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*) at Mousterian rock shelters in France. The researchers found that the adhesive's ratio of ocher to bitumen was optimal and exact—bitumen loses adhesive properties when mixed with ocher, but the ratio used by Neanderthals creates a mass malleable enough to be formed yet sticky enough to adhere stone tools to handles. The glue's formula is presumed to be a result of experimentation and costly investments of time and labor, akin to the behaviors and thought patterns of early *Homo sapiens* in Africa.

Past ritual applications are evident through the intentional selection of ocher based on color. Despite the prevalence of other pigments such as yellow ocher or black manganese in local landscapes, the [disproportionate abundance](#) of processed red ocher in large artifact assemblages points to a strong preference for saturated red hues over any other pigment color. Having no obvious instrumental value and inexplicable from a utilitarian perspective, the prolonged repetition of color-driven ocher collection exemplifies [ritual behavior](#). Burial decoration was another ritual application of ocher. The deliberate burial of human remains appears in many well-established cases from the Upper Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods throughout Europe and Asia. Burials often imply respect for the individual and adornment of the grave or deceased individual was sometimes used to honor the person's social status or to enhance their appearance. Lawrence G. Straus and his collaborators describe a burial of "the Red Lady of El Mirón" in their 2015 *Journal of Archaeological Science* [article](#). The "Red Lady," found in a cave in northern Spain, gained her name from an abundance of red ocher that coats her remains in a bright red hue. Those who buried her used a form of ocher not found in local sources, suggesting it may have been collected elsewhere for special burial rites or preservative use. Another example is a

[discovery made at Sungir](#), northeast of Moscow, Russia, where a man and two young children were buried 27,000 years ago. Their grave contained objects including mammoth ivory spears, a variety of ornamental jewelry, and thousands of ivory beads. The burial was covered entirely in red ocher.

Researchers have suggested that the initial catalyst for ocher use may have been its colorful and aesthetic appeal, only later followed by practical applications. With this in mind, it is no surprise that ocher is one of the earliest natural pigments used for artistic expression, including bodily adornment and cave paintings. Two of the oldest known cave paintings are hand stencils in the Cave of Maltravieso of west-central Spain and painted stalactites, mineral formations that hang from cave ceilings, in the Ardales cave of northern Spain. The red pigment decorating these caves has been [dated through uranium-thorium](#) testing methods to at least 66,700 and 65,500 years ago, respectively. Today, artists primarily use a synthetic version of red ocher invented in the 18th century. Still, they carry on a very ancient legacy of using this pigment—to create meaningful symbols in meaningful places.

Red ocher has been heavily featured by people across time and continents compared to its undersaturated counterparts, and the color red continues to hold special significance on a global scale. In many East Asian cultures, red represents good fortune and is featured heavily during celebrations. In some Native American communities, red denotes courage and spiritual strength, while other groups associate life, vigor, passion, revolution, and other powerful concepts with the color. The power ascribed to red is also heavily reflected in language—different cultures group the visible light spectrum into categories of different sizes and names. However, an overwhelming majority have a designated word for red no matter how they differentiate between the rest of the rainbow.

Modern people with normal color vision may take the ability for granted, but the capacity to identify shades of red in natural settings served as a significant advantage for our diurnal primate ancestors in terms of survivability and evolutionary fitness. Whether color vision was upheld by the consumption of fruit, foliage, or a combination of both, a new array of visual cues meant new survival strategies and perceptions of the world. In this regard, trichromacy, an accidental evolutionary milestone, paved the way for the widespread cultural gravitation of people toward red and red ocher long before anatomically modern humans existed themselves.

Although past interpretations of ochre have been complicated by its duality in symbolic and practical uses, special attention toward the mineral grows alongside the number of excavated finds. Current research initiatives increasingly recognize the value of the material as a reflection and potential driving force of cognitive and cultural evolution in early humans.

By Irina Matuzava

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PVV Blog 7 ~ Remembrance Day 2024



05-03-2024 ~The Netherlands commemorates the victims of the Second World War annually on May 4th. This remembrance takes place through a ceremony held at the central square 'de Dam' in Amsterdam.

During the yearly Remembrance Day event, wreaths are laid at the monument by the chairpersons of the Senate and House of Representatives. This year, Martin Bosma, a member of the Party for Freedom, will lay the wreath on behalf of the House of Representatives. In 2023, Bosma was democratically elected as the chairman of the House of Representatives, representing the ideological stance of the Party for Freedom. Throughout this series, I heavily draw upon his book *'De schijn-élite van de valse munters. Drees, extreem rechts, de sixties, nuttige idioten, Groep Wilders en ik'* published in 2010. Below, I provide an analysis of several quotes from Bosma's book, followed by commentary on these quotes.

Quotes about Christianity

'There are few things the Dutch can be happier with than the Christian background of their country. Almost all of our crucial achievements have a relationship with Christianity. Democracy, separation of church and state, tolerance, but also values such as diligence and efficiency' (p. 94).

'Monoculturalism, supplemented with Christian-Western values such as diligence, discipline, honesty and efficiency, created an unparalleled high point in human history' (p. 188).

Quotes about Islam

'Islam brings us mutual distrust, certainly not multicultural enrichment' (p. 321).

'Maybe individual Muslims adapt here and there, but Islam cannot do that' (p. 304).

'The dominant factor that determines whether Sharia is introduced in the Netherlands is not so much the ummah (the international Islamic community) but it is the powerful left-wing church with its crucial positions of power' (p. 148).

'The limits of what you say in the Netherlands are no longer determined by democratically established laws, but by the assessment of whether by saying it you run the risk of being ritually slaughtered on a public road' (p. 130).

'In the long term, there is a huge possibility of the introduction of Sharia in (parts of) the Netherlands. In the medium term, the subject of Islamization will have a paralyzing effect on the political system' (p. 119)

Quotes about left-wing parties and multiculturalism

'As a result of the Sixties revolution, multiculturalism has become our national state ideology' (p. 320).

'The multicultural society is the result of an erosion of democracy' (p. 119).

'Somewhere an immigration flow reaches a tipping point. Then it is not the immigrants who are adapted to the host country, but the host country is adapted to the immigrant (p. 141).

'The war is a war about who is in charge on the left' (p. 251), (i.e. Hitler's National Socialists or Stalin's Communists, JJdR).

'Almost all multicultural states have disintegrated after a lot of misery' (p. 188).

Bosma also quotes Adolf Hitler: 'How can you be a socialist without being an anti-Semite?' (p. 256).

'Genocide as a policy instrument already appears at the origins of socialism' (p. 258).

Quotes about Jews and Israel

'Israel has become the symbol of our freedom and the desire to continue that freedom.'

'The flag of Israel is therefore the flag of all free people.'

'The country is a barometer of our future' (p.275).

'If the armies of Hamas and Hezbollah march through the streets of Tel Aviv, Amsterdam and Paris will be hopelessly lost' (p. 275).

Other quotes

"Democracies rarely go to war, and certainly not with other democracies" (p. 188).

'A hundred years from now, people will remember Geert Wilders (leader Party for Freedom) as someone who had the moral clarity to tell the truth that needed to be told'

Remembrance Day 2024

As a representative of the Dutch state, Martin Bosma stands on May 4th at Dam Square in Amsterdam, espousing the views expressed above. He contends that Christianity has played a significant role in shaping our democratic accomplishments.

He advocates for a monocultural society as a path to salvation, asserting that Islam only leads to suffering and distrust. He attributes the blame for the Second World War to leftist ideologies, associating them with anti-Semitism and genocide, while regarding Israel as a bastion of freedom.

However, Bosma's perspective overlooks the contributions of the French Revolution to our democratic ideals, which emerged independently of Christianity. It also disregards the existence of successful multicultural societies

that remain resilient.

Additionally, he fails to recognize that diversity can foster empathy and mutual support. Furthermore, Bosma neglects to acknowledge the persecution endured by social democrats in Nazi Germany.

Looking at the present moment, it's evident that some of Bosma's quotes have become outdated. The surge of anti-Islam rhetoric in the Netherlands and Western Europe, largely fueled by populist parties like the Party for Freedom, has effectively discredited the notion of 'multiculturalism' as a state-endorsed ideology, assuming it ever held such a status. Additionally, the once formidable left-wing influence has significantly waned.

In the context of international affairs, accusations abound regarding the current Israeli government's alleged genocidal actions in Gaza. Prior to October 7th, attempts to stifle the Israeli Supreme Court added to the mounting concerns. The perception of the Israeli flag as a symbol of freedom has undergone a transformation, evident in the stark divide between perspectives within Israel itself and those in Gaza and the West Bank.

Furthermore, it's worth pondering the assertion that democracies seldom engage in warfare. The historical trajectory of post-World War II America, marked by military interventions in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, challenges this notion.

Reflecting on the relevance of Martin Bosma's statements from a book published thirteen years ago, one might question the validity of using them as a cudgel. However, the absence of any retractions from Bosma over the intervening years raises concerns. Coupled with the recent impassioned rhetoric of his party leader, Geert Wilders, at the [Hungarian CPAC event](#), it seems prudent to remind the public that the individual solemnly laying wreaths at Dam Square on May 4th represents an ideology with potential implications for inciting conflict.

Singapore: Lawrence Wong To Lead Amid Economic And Political Challenges



Geography of Singapore - en.wikipedia.org

05-03-2024 ~ Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong is set to become Singapore's next leader on May 15, succeeding Lee Hsien Loong. His leadership will be closely watched as he takes the helm.

Singapore has announced that Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong will take over as the country's next leader on May 15. Wong, 51, has garnered unanimous support from lawmakers within the People's Action Party (PAP). He will succeed Lee Hsien Loong, who has held the top job for 20 years.

Wong, who earned praise for his management of the island's pandemic response, has been regarded as Lee's successor since April 2022. During this time, the ruling party selected him to lead the "4G" or fourth generation of leaders in Singapore's political parlance—politicians the party aimed to have govern the country in the future.

Before that, Heng Swee Keat, a former central bank chief and education minister and choice for the post of Prime Minister, suddenly stepped aside in 2021,

throwing the party's succession plans into disarray.

The term "generation" suggests a significant transition rather than a complete overhaul of cabinets, as some ministers served under more than one prime minister. The first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, led the first generation of leadership from 1965 until 1990. He was succeeded by Goh Chok Tong, who held the premiership for the following 14 years until 2004 when Lee Hsien Loong assumed leadership.

Wong began his political career in 2011 and has since held various ministerial positions, including defense, education, finance, and national development. Following his successful leadership during Singapore's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Wong was selected by his fellow cabinet ministers in early 2022 as a leader of the next generation through a selection process that excluded Lee and other senior ministers. Shortly thereafter, Lee appointed him as Deputy Prime Minister.

Singapore adheres to a parliamentary system, where general elections are conducted once every five years. Since gaining independence, Singapore has been characterized by a one-party dominant state led by the ruling PAP. Despite this, the opposition led by the Workers' Party has made notable strides, securing seats and now overseeing two group representation constituencies, marking a substantial breakthrough in the electoral landscape.

Lawrence Wong confronts numerous challenges as he readies to assume office on May 15. Singapore is grappling with significant concerns regarding the escalating cost of living. The ruling party has also been shaken by a corruption scandal.

In February 2024, Singapore's core inflation, which excludes private transport and accommodation costs to better reflect household expenses, surged to 3.6 percent year-on-year. This marked a significant uptick from January's rate of 3.1 percent and surpassed market expectations of a 3.4 percent increase. It represented the highest reading for core inflation since July 2023.

The acceleration in inflation was primarily driven by elevated services and food inflation, partly attributed to seasonal effects linked to the Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year, also known as Lunar New Year or the Spring Festival, stands as one of the most significant and widely celebrated holidays in Singapore. During this period, there is typically an increase in consumer spending, leading to price

hikes.

This year, overall inflation also rose to [3.4 percent](#) in February from 2.9 percent in January.

The ruling party has also encountered an uncommon setback in recent years, which has tarnished its renowned clean image. This was an indictment on corruption charges of then-senior minister, S. Iswaran. He faces 35 charges (and more pending) linked to bribery and corruption. The prosecution alleges that he accepted various gifts from a Malaysian tycoon and developer, as well as from another contractor.

Singapore's record on freedom of speech has been a subject of considerable concern. The 2021 People Power under Attack report by CIVICUS Monitor highlighted a decline in the country's civic space rating from "obstructed" to "repressed." This shift underscores a recurring pattern of infringements on civic rights, especially concerning freedom of speech. Throughout 2021, Singapore utilized restrictive laws such as the Public Order Act, the 2017 Administration of Justice (Protection) Act, the Protection Against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), and defamation laws to target human rights advocates, journalists, and critics.

A significant event occurred when the government applied legal pressure on independent news platforms. In September, the police gave a "serious warning" to [New Naratif and its managing editor](#), Thum Ping Tjin, for publishing unauthorized electoral advertisements in 2020. Furthermore, in October, the national media regulator canceled the license of the Online Citizen after the platform allegedly refused to reveal its sources of funding.

The introduction of the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act further threatened freedom of expression, allegedly in the name of preserving national sovereignty. These actions, ostensibly taken to uphold order and protect national interests, have raised substantial concerns about the diminishing of civil liberties and the silencing of dissent in Singapore.

But most importantly Singapore, once adept at harmonizing its economic ties with China alongside its security partnerships with the United States, now faces mounting difficulty in upholding this equilibrium, especially compared to the initial years of Lee's premiership. The burgeoning economic sway of China in the

vicinity has become markedly pronounced.

China's assertiveness in regional waters has escalated. While the Philippines, led by Ferdinand Marcos, Jr., seems inclined towards siding with the United States on security matters despite China's economic prowess, the remaining Southeast Asian nations (excluding Laos, Cambodia, and strife-torn Myanmar) continue to navigate a delicate balance among the dominant powers in the region.

Yet, even for a nation as affluent and diplomatically adept as Singapore, managing the delicate equilibrium between these two forces is becoming increasingly challenging. China's efforts to extend its influence into the domestic affairs of every Southeast Asian nation are evident. Within Singapore, apprehensions regarding Chinese interference in domestic politics are mounting among senior officials, prompting the passage of stringent legislation to counter foreign intervention.

The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which strikes a chord with Singapore's substantial Muslim minority, has negatively affected the reputation of the United States in the city-state.

In the lead-up to Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's impending leadership, Singapore finds itself at a critical juncture. The transition represents a continuation of the People's Action Party's (PAP) governance, yet it also exposes the party to challenges and criticisms. Wong's ascent to power is not devoid of complexities; he steps into a role overshadowed by economic uncertainties and recent damage to the PAP's once-pristine image due to a corruption scandal. He faces the delicate task of navigating these turbulent waters.

By Pranjali Pandey

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Source: Globetrotter

May Day May Have Been Obliterated From US History, But It's Legacy Continues



05-01-2024 ~ *Progressive economic ideas have been on the whole an anathema to the U.S. political establishment and violence against labor militancy has always been the norm for almost all of the country's political history. Nonetheless, the U.S. labor movement has not yet been defeated.*

May 1st is International Workers' Day and was established as such in celebration of the struggle for the introduction of the eight-hour workday and in memory of Chicago's [Haymarket Affair](#), which took place in 1886. May 1st is celebrated in over 160 countries with large-scale marches and protests as workers across the globe continue to fight for better working conditions, fair wages, and other labor rights. International Workers' Day, however, is not celebrated in the U.S. and has in fact been practically erased from historical memory. But this shouldn't be surprising since U.S. capitalism operates on the basis of a brutal economy where maximization of profit takes priority over everything else, including the environment and even human lives.

Indeed, the U.S. has a notorious record when it comes to worker rights. The country has the [most violent and bloody history](#) of labor relations in the advanced industrialized world, according to labor historians. Subsequently, unionization has always faced an uphill battle as corporations are allowed to engage in widespread union-busting practices through manipulation or violation of federal labor law. The recent activities of [Amazon and Starbucks](#) speak volumes of the anti-union mentality that pervades most U.S. corporations. Accordingly, unionization in the

U.S. has been on decline for decades even though the [majority of Americans](#) see this development as a bad thing.

The backlash against unionization and worker rights in general in the U.S. also takes place against the backdrop of an insidious ideological framework in which it has been regarded as a self-evident truth that individuals are responsible for their own fate and that government should not interfere with the free market out of concern for social and economic inequalities.

Social Darwinism first appeared in U.S. political and social thought in the mid-1860s, as historian Richard Hofstadter showed in his brilliant work *Social Darwinism in American Thought, 1860-1915*, but it would be a gross mistake to think that it ever went away. The conservative counterrevolution launched by Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s and refined by Bill Clinton in the early 1990s aimed at bringing back the loathsome idea that the government should not interfere in the “survival of the fittest” by helping the weak and the poor. Progressive economic ideas have been on the whole an anathema to the U.S. political establishment and violence against labor militancy has always been the norm for almost all of the country’s political history.

Long before the movement for an eight-hour workday in the U.S., which can be largely attributed to the influx of European immigrants mainly from Italy and Germany, radicalism had set foot across a number of post-colonial states. Rhode Island, often referred to as the [Rogue Island](#), had one of the most radical economic policies on revolutionary debt, which was wildly popular with farmers and common folks in general, and experimented with the idea of radical democracy. At approximately the same time, [Shays’ rebellion](#) in Massachusetts was also about money, debts, poverty, and democracy. Naturally, the elite in both states pulled out all stops to put an end to radicalism, and the pattern of suppressing popular demands has somehow survived in U.S. politics across time.

The pattern of suppressing social and political movements from below continued well into modern times. The Red Scare, climaxed in the late 1910s on account of the Russian revolution and the rise of labor strikes and then renewed with the anti-communist campaign of the 1940s, played a crucial role in the establishment’s fervent dedication to crushing radicalism in the U.S. and putting an end to challenges against capitalism.

In light of this, it is nothing short of a shame that May Day has been all but forgotten in U.S. political culture even though the day traces its origins to the fight of American laborers for a shorter workday.

Last year, after marching on May Day with thousands of other people in the streets of [Dublin](#), one of the questions that was posed to me was how could it be that International Workers' Day is not celebrated in the U.S. I am still struggling to come up with a convincing explanation, as may be evident from this essay, but Gore Vidal was not off the mark when he said, "we are the United States of Amnesia."

Nonetheless, the U.S. labor movement has not yet been defeated and is surely not dead. In spite of the bloody suppression and the constant intimidation over many decades, the U.S. labor movement has made its presence felt on numerous historic occasions, from the [Battle of Cripple Creek](#) in 1894 and the 1892 [Homestead Strike](#) in Pennsylvania to being behind the historic 1963 [march on Washington for Jobs and Freedom](#), and continues doing so down to this day. [Scores of victories](#) for the working class were achieved last year—and all against prevailing odds. Moreover, in 2023, [labor strikes](#) in the U.S. jumped to a 23-year high and some of the [largest labor disputes](#) in the history of the U.S. were also recorded last year.

So, while May Day may have been formally obliterated by the powers that be from U.S. public awareness, the labor movement is still alive and kicking. Even a small victory is still a victory, though time will tell of the historic significance of each step forward. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that the unionists, socialists, and anarchists that made Chicago in 1886 the center of the national movement for the eight-hour workday had foreseen what the impact of their actions would be in the struggle of the international labor movement for democracy, better wages, safer working conditions, and freedom of speech. All these social rights have been amplified over time, though much remains to be accomplished and the struggle continues.

But this is all the more reason why we must not forget—and indeed celebrate every year with marches and protests—May 1st.

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/>

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Under Modi, The Northeast Is More United With India, But More Divided Within



*Makepeace Sitlhou -
Photo: LinkedIn*

04-30-2024 ~ India's ruling BJP claims to have overcome the "tyranny of distance" that has plagued Northeast India, but its politics have created greater division, as the Manipur crisis shows.

In March, India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, said at an election rally in Arunachal Pradesh that previous governments had not cared for states that sent only two representatives to the country's Parliament, as Arunachal and several

others in the Indian Northeast do. Modi failed to see the irony of his claim given that he has not visited Manipur, which has only two representatives in parliament, since the outbreak of an armed ethnic conflict that has raged on for nearly a year. The toll from the violence stands at more than 200 lives lost, and many thousands displaced.

In India's 2024 national election, widely seen as being decisive for the country's democracy, the eight states in the Northeast—Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Meghalaya—will decide whether they want to be part of "*Modi ka parivar*," or Modi's "family"—a phrase that Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has rolled out on social media as an election gambit. The BJP-led central government in Delhi has repeatedly claimed to have bridged the "tyranny of distance" between the Northeast and the rest of India, something that the region has undoubtedly long suffered from. Unfortunately, the Modi government's handling of the Manipur crisis shows otherwise—and none of the BJP's numerous political partners in the Northeast region, who often profess themselves to be "sons of the soil," have challenged the government's claim.

The Northeastern states combined send only 25 representatives to the Lok Sabha, the 543-seat lower house of the Indian parliament. Assam, the most populous of the states, accounts for 14 of these alone. The perceived remoteness of these states, connected to the rest of India by only a narrow "chicken's neck" of a corridor in West Bengal, is another factor that has kept the region on the fringes of national politics. What's more, the Northeastern states are among the country's poorest—with the exception of Sikkim, which has the highest per-capita net domestic product of any Indian state—and among those most heavily dependent on central funds. In fact, the central government has a ministry dedicated to the development of the Northeast, going by the acronym DoNER, which channels 10 percent of the annual budgets of all 52 central ministries to infrastructure projects in the region. Regional experts often remark that the Northeast is compelled to follow Delhi's lead because of this historical dependence on the center.

The BJP secured its first electoral victory in the Northeast when it won an assembly election in Assam in 2016. Since then, it has gained a hold over much of the region and worked to better integrate it with the rest of India. But the specifics of that integration follow a very particular vision: for the BJP, the Northeast is not beyond the purview of its longed-for Hindu Rashtra, or Hindu

nation. In a region long perceived to be dominated by Christian groups, the party has played on the sentiments of the Northeast's Hindus, who constitute a 53-percent majority in the region cutting across multiple divisions of language, ethnicity, and caste. With this approach, the last decade of BJP politics in the Northeast has exacerbated internal divisions in a region that was already struggling with bloody schisms to begin with. The Manipur conflict is one symptom of this.

In the early 2000s, even while Atal Behari Vajpayee headed a BJP-led government at the center, the opposition Indian National Congress was in power in four of the Northeastern states, and in ruling coalitions with regional parties in two others. Once the Congress returned to national power, the grand old party's presence and power in the Northeast remained more or less a constant. That was until 2014, and Modi's ascent to prime minister. Like almost everywhere else, the BJP has used money and power to completely change this electoral picture in the Northeast, throwing large sums into campaigning in this region where many voters openly accept [bribes](#). The party also played *mitra*, or ally, to various regional parties, and partnered with them in numerous state governments.

Unlike the Congress, which typically chose to take on electoral contests in the Northeast alone, the BJP entered the region relatively quietly through alliances with the National People's Party in Meghalaya, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, the National Democratic People's Party in Nagaland and the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura. In a region with a dizzying mix of ethnicities and cultures, not only did this help deflect attention from the BJP's general reputation of being anti-minority, or being against anyone who was non-Hindi or not caste Hindu, but it also enabled the party to poach certain regional leaders. For example, Sarbananda Sonowal, the former chief minister of Assam and leader of the AGP, joined the BJP in 2011. The AGP eventually declined and is now reduced to being a token partner in Assam's BJP-led five-party coalition government. Such poaching by the BJP effectively ended the political runs of several regional parties. Helped by this, since 2014 the BJP has gone from a bit player to a dominant force in the politics of the Northeast, forming state governments in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, and Tripura.

Moreover, the BJP has been able to exploit historical resentment against the Congress, which presided over the many brutalities of the peak years of insurgency in the Northeast, in the 1980s and 1990s. After a dark phase of

counterterrorist operations and extrajudicial killings that lasted into the early 2000s, Assam saw relative peace under a Congress government at the center from 2004 onwards. Yet the BJP has successfully blamed the Congress for allegedly encouraging illegal immigration into the Northeast, primarily from neighboring Bangladesh, by “appeasing Muslims.” The BJP has even interpreted a [radio speech](#) by the Congress icon and former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru as reflecting the rival party’s indifference to the Northeast. Speaking in 1962, when China invaded India, Nehru used the phrase, “My heart goes out to the people of Assam at this hour.” His political opponents have long claimed that this was a signal that Nehru had abandoned Assam to its fate—an accusation that the BJP has continued to drum up in its 2024 electoral campaign.

The BJP has temporarily neutralized civil society groups and armed groups in the region that would, in earlier times, have likely stood in opposition to the central government. The home minister, Amit Shah, boasted during the election campaign that the Modi government has signed nine peace accords in the Northeast in the last 10 years. Given that the Northeast has long had the greatest concentration of secessionist groups and movements anywhere in India, the first order of business for any government looking to impose itself on the region is to establish peace, preferably through political settlement. However, the Modi government’s peace agreements look better on paper than on the ground.

For example, the government’s first major move in the Northeast after coming to power in 2014 was to sign a framework agreement for a Naga peace accord with the Isak Muivah faction of the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN-IM). Given the Nagas’ history of demanding self-determination and standing against union with the rest of India, a firm agreement with the Naga leadership for a settlement within the Indian republic would have been a landmark achievement.

However, the framework agreement was ambiguous in ways that eventually left the Nagas feeling let down. Naga negotiators had agreed to share sovereignty with India while retaining Naga’s unique identity, as well as a separate flag and constitution. However, after the Modi government unilaterally abrogated Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which allowed for special constitutional status and autonomy for the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir, it became [clear](#) that the BJP government was pursuing a policy of “One nation, one constitution.” The Nagas were blindsided and talks went into a stalemate.

Then there is the example of the Bodos. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution offers special privileges regarding land and resources to groups recognized as Scheduled Tribes (a government-recognized disadvantaged socio-economic group in India.) After a bloody struggle, the Bodoland Territorial Council emerged in 2003 out of a settlement between the Bodoland Liberation Tiger Force and the governments of India and Assam. Such territorial councils, under the provisions of the Sixth Schedule, empower a designated tribal community in a designated region to self-govern within constitutional limits, with earmarked funds from the central government. Despite claims that the BJP has fulfilled promises of the accord such as providing [direct funding](#) to the Bodo Territorial Council, the Indian government has categorically said that it [has not](#). Meanwhile, even as Bodos have continued to engage with the government, their claims and ambitions have been pushed back. Under an agreement signed with the Modi government, the Bodo leadership's purview extends only over a "region," and not over a full-fledged state as the Bodos once hoped for.

More recently, the government has signed agreements with factions of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF) of Manipur—two insurgent groups known to be among the least amenable to negotiations. ULFA was founded in 1979 with the professed aim of liberating Assam from exploitation by India. The UNLF, established in 1964, has been advocating for Manipur's secession on the basis that its former ruler should never have agreed to merge with India in 1949.

The Modi government brandishes its agreements with these two old and formidable militant groups as impressive achievements, but they were, in fact, low-hanging fruit. Support for ULFA in Assam has decreased considerably in the last decade, with a steady fall in recruitment, partly due to fatigue with the group's Ahom revivalist mission and partly due to backlash after a series of blasts linked to it that killed civilians. The government signed an agreement with a pro-talks faction of ULFA in 2023, while an anti-talks faction refused to abandon the armed movement unless the government was willing to discuss sovereignty for Assam. The fact that the agreement led to the disbanding of the pro-talks faction while the more militant anti-talks faction continues to survive has left a major, and potentially dangerous, loose end.

In Manipur, the government was all set to sign an accord with the Kukis in May 2023—much to the displeasure of Biren Singh, the BJP leader and chief minister

of Manipur, according to a report in [the Wire](#). Singh belongs to the Meitei community concentrated in the Imphal Valley, which has long been at odds with the Kuki Zo tribes of the surrounding hill districts of Manipur. Kuki Zo communities, who complain of disadvantage and discrimination under the Meiteis' established dominance of Manipur politics, have been asking for separate statehood since the 1980s. The accord would allegedly have granted them autonomy under a territorial council. However, the violence in Manipur broke out the very month the accord was to be signed, pitting the Kuki Zo tribes against the Meiteis, and there has been no movement on it ever since.

Instead, there is increasing doubt that the ceasefire agreement between Kuki insurgent groups and the central and state governments, first signed in 2008, will be extended. Far from bringing real peace to the hills or the Imphal Valley in Manipur—the Modi administration has faced widespread criticism for not stemming the violence—the central government has signed a cosmetic peace agreement with the pro-talks Pambei faction of the UNLF, even though it has refused to [surrender](#) its arms. Instead, members of this armed group have openly carried AK-47, M-16, and INSAS rifles, which are among the more than 5,000 weapons stolen from government armories, and are carrying out military-style operations aided by drone surveillance to attack Kuki villages in the hills. The armed faction has often fought along with Manipur police commandos, with the central security forces functioning as nothing more than mute spectators.

The extortion of civilians by armed groups, something commonplace in earlier years, saw a brief lull in the initial years of BJP rule. Now, with armed groups resurgent across Manipur amid the conflict, the phenomenon has returned to both the hills and the valley. And the tensions in Manipur have naturally overflowed into neighboring states. The NSCN-IM has already warned the government against settling the Pambei faction in the Naga hills. As the Kuki Zo tribes and Meiteis fought each other in Manipur, many Meiteis in Mizoram were forced to leave the state after open threats against them by a local Mizo group.

Even the tripartite agreement signed in February between the Modi government, the Tripura state government, and the recently formed Tipra Motha party appears to cede political advantage only to the BJP. The Tipra Motha has seemingly compromised on its demand for a separate state for the indigenous Tiprasa people in exchange for a territorial council with more seats. Tripura's chief minister, Manik Saha, who is from the BJP, has said that only Modi can ensure the

development of the state's tribal communities.

This has become a widely held belief among tribal communities across the Northeast. This explains why, in Manipur, Kuki Zo MLAs from the BJP and the Kuki People's Alliance, one of the national party's local partners, continue to be faithful to Modi's party even after being driven out of the valley and shut out from assembly proceedings.

Much of the mainstream media across India has failed to look at the fine print of the peace agreements. Instead, it has followed the official line of hailing them as victories for the ruling government, alongside touting statistics like an [86-percent reduction](#) in civilian deaths across the Northeast since Modi's arrival in power. What such coverage has ignored is the wider atmosphere of conflict and heightened insecurities within the region, and the distrust that the one-sided "peace agreements" have engendered in the people of the Northeast, who have seen their long-standing demands being traded away cheaply.

The BJP model of governance to pacify tribal minorities caters to a political status quo that favors ethnic majorities in specific regions, and this has further cemented feelings of "us versus them" between ethnic communities. The government has exploited fault lines of identity politics in the Northeast as a ploy to distract from important issues that adversely affect all of the Northeast, like the amendments to the [Forest \(Conservation\) Amendment Act](#). There have been eruptions of violence along ethnic lines not only in Manipur but also along the disputed border between Assam and Meghalaya, and between Assam and Mizoram, where sub-regional identities have been pitted against each other. The atmosphere has never been as polarized as it is now.

This ethnic polarization in the Northeast is something the BJP does not know how to deal with, and that can get in the way of its own Hindu nationalist agenda. The party would rather curb the growth of Christian missionary movements in the region, which continue to make deep inroads, and project Muslims as a common adversary of the people like it has to its advantage across much of India. Still, to expand its reach in Christian-dominated states like Mizoram and Nagaland, the BJP has used the ploy of an ostensible Hindu-Christian solidarity that it has resorted to in Kerala. A BJP leader and former legislator of the Mizo National Front warned against Bangladeshi Muslims in Mizoram, [claiming](#) that "only Hindus would come to the aid of Christians." In Nagaland, similar sentiments led

to a Muslim man being lynched to death in a town square in March 2015 after he was accused of raping a minor. Local Hindutva groups are already acting as vigilantes against “love jihad,” a supposed conspiracy by Muslim men to seduce, marry, and convert Hindu women for their own demographic gains. It is very likely that a big-budget propaganda film with an anti-Muslim narrative set in the Northeast—doing here what the inflammatory movie *The Kerala Story* did in the context of South India—will soon be made.

In Assam, where anti-outsider sentiment has built up since the 1960s largely along linguistic lines, the BJP has placated majoritarian anxieties by further bullying the local Muslim minority. In the last five years, Muslims have been evicted from their homes on flimsy excuses, an act allowing the voluntary registration of Muslim marriages has been repealed, and the government has passed a law retroactively criminalizing child marriage and consigning offenders to new detention centers meant for “illegal” foreigners—measures understood to target the Muslim community.

But such targeting of Muslims brings its own complications. Through the winter of 2019 and 2020, India was swept by protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed by the Modi government, which allowed granting Indian citizenship to only non-Muslim immigrants from the Muslim-majority countries of Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In the rest of India, the protestors took issue with the non-secular nature of the law, setting a precedent for possible future disenfranchisement of Muslim citizens on the basis of their religion. Assam saw massive protests against the BJP government too, only here they were based on fears that the law would allow an influx of Bangladeshi immigrants and so threaten the identity and existing demographics of the state.

Bengali Hindus in Assam, many of whom came to India from Bangladesh, have already been declared non-citizens by foreigners’ tribunals, kangaroo courts set up by the Assam government, or marked “doubtful” voters by the Election Commission of India. Despite their being an important vote bank for the BJP, many Bengali Hindus have been excluded from the National Register of Citizens (NRC), another BJP-led effort originally intended to target and disenfranchise the Muslim population, and have been detained or stripped of access to government welfare as a result. On this, too, the BJP government faced significant pushback.

Yet, despite the unintended consequences and backlash from the CAA and NRC,

the BJP won the 2021 Assam elections with greater numbers than before. When the Modi government released framework rules for the CAA in March this year, taking the next step in implementing the controversial law, protests in Assam were far more subdued than the earlier ones.

Elsewhere in the region, where the CAA aroused similar anxieties over a possible influx of outsiders, the BJP managed to douse the fires by exempting from the purview of the law tribal areas with special protections under the Sixth Schedule, as well as areas under the inner-line permit system that regulates the entry of outsiders. Another potential flashpoint could be the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), which the BJP apparently intends to impose across all of India. The UCC, again intended primarily to target Muslims, would bring all Indian citizens under uniform personal laws regardless of their religion—yet it is also deeply divisive and complicated in the Northeast, where myriad communities hold dear to the traditional customs they are currently able to follow, and the customary laws and religious practices of Hindu, Christian, and indigenous communities overlap significantly. Assam's chief minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma has said that his state government will exempt tribals from following such a code, but the inflammatory potential of the UCC remains. The Modi government's abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir has led to fears of similar action in the Northeast, which is allowed several accommodations under Article 371 that recognize various tribal and customary laws.

In Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Tripura, there has been growing support within tribal communities for stripping those among them who have converted to Christianity from Scheduled Tribe status, which comes with special protections and reservations. Hindu tribal groups and ones following various indigenous faiths have been radicalized by BJP's ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), to act against Christian proselytization. This effort is primarily run through educational institutions, including the RSS-run [Ekal Vidyalayas](#), which impart Hindu nationalist philosophy to tribal children and train them to counter Christian-run schools. In the early months of the Manipur conflict, extremist groups that patronize the indigenous Sanamahi faith, practiced by a section of the Meiteis, attacked members of tribal communities and destroyed a large number of churches—estimates vary between 150 and 300—including ones that served [Meitei Christians](#). They have also forced Meitei Christians to return to the Sanamahi faith by making them sign conversion

affidavits and burning their bibles in what they described as acts of *ghar wapsi*, or homecoming—the preferred Hindu nationalist term for the reconversion to Hinduism of Indian Christians and Muslims.

The BJP's majoritarian playbook, bolstered by its push for the region's development, has proven largely successful in the Northeast. The BJP administrations in Delhi and the Northeastern states have invested heavily in promoting tourism and improving connectivity in the region, with long-term plans to make the region a trading thoroughfare connecting India to Southeast Asia. The BJP also has plans to promote mineral extraction, hydropower generation, and [palm oil plantations](#), which it touts as economic boons without heed of the ecological costs. Local communities have largely welcomed these announcements, and regional parties have not been able to challenge the BJP even on their home turf—Mizoram being the only exception to this.

Yet the BJP has not fully understood the region's complex ethnic and linguistic dynamics, or the dangers of heedlessly manipulating them, as the conflict in Manipur has shown. For the people of the Northeast, many of its intellectuals would argue, this national election is just business as usual, with pockets being stuffed and potholed roads (temporarily) fixed. However, every act of majoritarianism in the region is slowly changing its people and politics. The Northeast might have finally got more roads and bridges, but they have come at the cost of our relations with each other. With election predictions pointing heavily to a return to national power for Modi and the BJP, the people of the Northeast might expect greater connectivity with the rest of India, but with certainly more disunity among themselves.

By Makepeace Sitlhou

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