

India – the ascendance of Hindu nationalism

Secularism's future under threat

The construction of a Hindu temple devoted to Lord Ram at Ayodhya symbolises **India's** transformation under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from a secular democracy to something more resembling a Hindu-majoritarian state. Placing a foundation stone at the site, Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** proclaimed "[the wait of centuries is over.](#)" Ayodhya has been a point of contention between Hindus and Muslims for decades. In 1992, the Ayodhya's Babri Mosque was destroyed by Hindu rioters seeking to resurrect the Ram temple that had stood at the site until the 16th century. 2,000 people were killed in the ensuing violence. In 2002, 58 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya died in an arson attack on a train. Muslims were blamed for the incident. The resulting riots killed over 1,000 across the Gujarat region. Prime Minister Modi – then the Chief Minister of Gujarat – has been accused of being – at the very least – complicit in the riots.

Since coming to power, the BJP has revoked Kashmir's autonomy, initiated proceedings to deport up to four million mostly Muslim residents of Assam and introduced a [Citizenship Amendment Bill](#) that excludes Muslim migrants from an expedited path to citizenship. The BJP's recent proposal for a national citizen register could see more Muslim deportations. Ayodhya then, is just the latest in a string of policy moves and yet another sign of the erosion of India's secularism. While India is a lot more than just the BJP, secularism appears to be waning.

US sends high level delegation to Taiwan

Predictably, the visit has further inflamed Sino-US tensions

Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar's visit to **Taiwan** earlier this week was the highest-level **US** delegation to **Taiwan** since Washington formally switched recognition to **China** in 1979. The substance of the talks was relatively unremarkable. Azar argued – somewhat ironically given his country's handling of COVID19 – that Taiwan's successful response to the virus was because of its democratic and transparent society. Nonetheless, the visit continued a trend of deepening US-Taiwan ties under President **Trump**. Trump has been more willing than his predecessors to supply Taiwan with military hardware. The 2018 Taiwan Travel Act encourages US officials to visit Taiwan, while the 2019 TAPEI Act commits the US to advocate for Taiwan's participation in international organisations. Beijing's reaction to Azar's visit was one of fury. Chinese fighter jets briefly crossed the median line separating the mainland and Taiwan and Beijing warned of "grave damage" to US-China relations. There has been speculation that the Trump administration is seeking to use the visit to gain leverage before a review of the bilateral US-China phase one trade deal in coming days. Trump has [privately disparaged](#) the island nation. However, as bilateral ties deepen, it would be difficult for Trump to 'sell out' Taiwan for a better deal with the Chinese. With cross-strait reunification being a [pivotal](#) issue for **President Xi**, the once unthinkable prospect of a **US-China** conflict over the island should no longer be ruled out.

Turkey faces renewed economic stress

Turkey's economic foundations look increasingly shaky

Even before the pandemic, **Turkey's** economy was facing a number of headwinds. Growth was disproportionately driven by cheap credit and concentrated in a few industries like construction, real-estate and tourism. Foreign debt was already high and increasingly difficult for the private sector to service as the exchange rate moved against the lira. Interest rates were negative in real terms, yet major Turkish companies like iGA – the owner of Istanbul

Airport – had already been forced to seek debt relief from the banks. And the lure of cheap credit had caused family debt to balloon to unmanageable proportions. Political factors – such as President **Erdoğan**'s unorthodox views on monetary policy, undermining of the Central Bank's independence and an increasingly bellicose foreign policy – all combined to scare away investors. Turkey saw \$US16 billion in capital flight in 2019 alone.

Enter COVID19. The impact of the virus has been to precipitate a 10 percent decline in the Turkish economy over Q2 – causing a [considerable](#) flow-on effect for unemployment. Erdoğan's response has been to instruct the public banks to oversee a rapid increase in cheap and long-term loans. Revived demand has, however, proved to be a double-edged sword – inflation reached nearly 12 percent in July. The instability of the lira – which the Central Bank has spent tens of billions trying to prop up – is a worrying development. Net foreign exchange reserves are almost certainly negative. Virtually non-existent tourism, wary foreign investors and depressed exports have greatly reduced currency inflows. Paying for imports and the need to roll over US\$170 billion in foreign debt means that foreign currency outflows will remain high. Continued inflation and depreciation of the lira threatens to lower living standards further still. Politically, much of Erdoğan's popularity has been predicated on the success of the economy. Whether Turks will continue to stick by him is far from certain. If the past is any guide, Erdoğan will seek to distract the electorate's attention, potentially by doubling-down on foreign policy plays or disputes.

Rigged elections in Belarus

Electoral interference masked what looked to be an unusually competitive election

Belarusian President **Alexander Lukashenko** has for 26 years presided over a country that is often referred to as “Europe's last dictatorship”. Opposition leader Svetlana Tikhonovskaya entered election day looking competitive, holding some of the largest rallies in the country's post-Soviet history. Tikhonovskaya was an unlikely candidate. She had no significant political experience and only entered the race to draw attention to her husband's arrest – he is a popular blogger who has been critical of Belarusian authorities and was blocked from running himself. Tikhonovskaya was nonetheless able to channel discontent at Lukashenko's handling of the economy and COVID19 – Belarus has recorded approximately 7310 cases per million – more than **Russia** on a [per capita](#) basis.

Sunday's preliminary results showing that Lukashenko had won with 80.23 [percent of the vote, compared to Tikhonovskaya's 9.9 percent, were [almost certainly](#) doctored. Demonstrators have taken to the streets of Minsk and the smaller towns of Grodno and Brest. So far, at least 6,000 have been arrested. Tikhonovskaya attempted to register a complaint over the results and was detained for seven hours. She has since fled to **Lithuania**. More unrest seems likely, although it is not certain that this will be enough to overthrow Lukashenko, who appears to enjoy the support of the security forces. Since the invasion of **Ukraine**, Lukashenko's relationship with Russia has become increasingly complicated. However, he will likely be able to count on Russian President **Vladimir Putin**'s support. Putin after all, would be loath to see a democratic transition to a pro-Western leader on Russia's doorstep. Facing their own challenges, the **EU** and **US** are unlikely to do more than reimpose relatively tokenistic sanctions. Lukashenko may yet cling to power.