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Introduction

Prologue

A phone rang around 9 p.m. in New York City's Upper East Side neighborhood.

"Namaste, is guru-ji there?" enquired a quiet, measured voice.

"Father, I believe India's next Prime Minister is on the line for you," came the instinctive reply. There had been rumors, after all.

"I have been expecting your call, Manmohan." The elderly voice of a teacher or guru, a fellow technocrat who had dependably served Mrs. Indira Gandhi 30 years earlier, came calmingly through the phone in Delhi.

"What is your counsel, guru-ji? This game is not for me. We are not supposed to be politicians. I'm an economist."

There was a pause. And then a response. "The first thing you must do, Manmohan, is sit down and write your resignation letter. Place it in your pocket and take it into work every single day. You have no idea the compromises you will have to make and the battles you will have to fight."

May 13, 2004, was a momentous day for the Indian National Congress. Against the predictions of pollsters, the party rose to power at the federal level, or center, in a coalition government. It was the return of India's "Grand Old Party" after eight years of political exile on the opposition benches. Just a week later, a different coalition was born, this time unprecedented in the history of Indian politics. On May 22, 2004, India's technocrat prime minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, walked into Parliament's Ashoka Hall for his swearing-in ceremony. After taking his oath, he approached Mrs. Sonia Gandhi and gave a slight bow of respect. Although Mrs. Gandhi's ability to build a left-leaning coalition, premised on constructing a government for the "common man" (*aam aadmi*), had won Congress the highest office in India, it would be the former finance minister and chief architect of the 1991 neoliberal reforms, Dr. Singh, who had been anointed by the Gandhi family to sit in that most coveted seat.

Bringing Ideas Back In

How do ideas shape government decision-making? Comparativist scholarship conventionally gives unbridled primacy to external, material interests—such as votes and rents—as proximately shaping political behavior.[1] These logics tend to explicate elite decision-making around elections and pork barrel politics but fall short in explaining political conduct during credibility crises, such as democratic governments facing anti-corruption movements. In these instances of high political uncertainty, I argue in this book, elite ideas, for example concepts of the nation or technical diagnoses of socioeconomic development, dominate policymaking. Scholars leverage these arguments in the fields of international relations, American politics, and the political economy of development. But an account of ideas activating or constraining executive action in developing democracies, where material pressures are high, is found wanting.[2] The purpose of this book is to trace where ideas come from, how they are chosen, and, above all, when they can be the most salient for political behavior in developing democracies. The study focuses on India, with similar settings, including Brazil, Turkey, and Indonesia, among others, explored in the concluding section.

In most developing democracies, state institutions are not neutral arenas, but rather reflect government decision-makers' preferences and power. Rather than consider Indian politics as a contest among competing figures with clear and stable interests who develop strategies to pursue those objective interests, this book develops a vision of Indian politics as a struggle for power and control among decision-making elites who are motivated by a myriad of ideas. Fundamentally, this requires us to understand decision-making elites, and the subset of political leaders specifically, and how they develop and deploy their preferences to structure institutions. Therefore, we will consider the questions explored in this book through a constructivist approach in which advances in historical institutionalist studies allow theorization of the interactions between ideas, human agents, and political and state structures. After all, when actors interpret their interests and preferences using an ideational framework, they are also deeply conscious of power. Elites in this book are denoted as decision-makers within the executive arena, chiefly the prime minister, and include the cabinet and other offices, party officials, and institutions that interact regularly with the executive and maintain key political economy powers. The specific set of ideas identified and reduced in this book revolve around concepts of the nation as well as technical ideas around social and economic development.

Research Puzzle

The puzzle animating this book began to take shape in the summer of 2012. That July, I witnessed thousands of citizens from across India take to the streets in her capital, New Delhi. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh faced its biggest civic challenge in an anti-corruption movement led by supporters of the activist Anna Hazare, a veteran social justice campaigner who had undertaken a hunger strike in New Delhi. The India Against Corruption (IAC) movement reached a crescendo due to deteriorating economic conditions and a sequence of high-profile corruption scandals that implicated senior officials all the way up to the prime minister. The government found itself in the midst of a credibility crisis. Fast forward to the smoldering summer months of 2013, when the cries of citizens across developing world democracies—from Chile, Brazil, and Mexico to Turkey and Indonesia—raised the global volume of movements calling for better central governance through the eradication of corruption, which would reverberate throughout that decade. Each government faced mounting pressure, and several closed in on re-election campaigns. Some, such as in Turkey, arbitrarily crushed the anti-corruption groundswell, while others, such as Brazil, were compelled into negotiated concessions. These fascinating trends piqued my interest in these movements, the credibility crisis environment in which they swelled, and, more intriguingly, *the determinants of government responses to anti-corruption movements*—the motivating empirical question explored in this book.

A nationwide anti-corruption movement creates a credibility crisis environment where political uncertainty obfuscates state elites' understanding of predictable interests, such as votes and rents. The full range of alternative strategies and their relative costs become narrowed. Such situations are hardly uncommon in matters of political interest, and are especially frequent in the messy political realities of India and plausibly other developing country contexts. Given the volatility of uncertain political situations, decision-makers are unsure about what their objective interests are, let alone how to maximize the utility of these interests. This book argues that in such distinctive moments, or critical junctures that disrupt the existing social, political, and economic balance, the waters of statistical prediction are muddied. *Instead, decision-makers seek to reconstitute interests, and establish narratives regarding the causation behind the crisis and functions of the respective anti-corruption movements.* In this scenario, ideas serve as "weapons" between decision-making

elites in the struggle to diagnose the overall crisis, and re-establish credibility to reduce uncertainty.[3]

Corrupt State Narrative and Credibility Crisis

The empirical research in this book examines the determinants of government behavior during a credibility crisis in India as denoted by the rise of a nationwide anti-corruption movement. In the cases I look at, corruption implicating ministers all the way up to and including the highest levels of government has been exposed in the context of deteriorating economic conditions. Government credibility has plummeted, and uncertainty engulfs the political arena as social movements narrating the crisis using the language of anti-corruption come to the fore to challenge the national government—the *corrupt state narrative*. It is more important today than ever before that social scientists, policymakers, and businesspersons study these movements, and responses to them, for theoretical and empirical reasons.

First, national-level collective action in developing as well as developed democracies has recently amplified and is bound to be a fixture of future citizen contestation, given the global penetration of technology as a mobilization tool and the enlargement of political society in distinct countries that demand increased legitimation of the state.[4] Second, such movements are an essential part of democratic politics, specifically the evolution of modern political institutions. In late-nineteenth-century United States, for example, anti-corruption movements allowed the passage of important legislation such as the Pendleton Act of 1883, which established the principle of merit-based recruitment into the federal bureaucracy.[5] Contemporary developing democracies such as India are at a similar critical juncture in their social and economic development, and issues such as government corruption and malfeasance are no longer an acceptable norm to an increasingly middle-class citizenry. [6]

Such movements coalesce around the language of anti-corruption but are not, in their organizational form, a monolith. Upon inspection, they can often appear as a set of contradictions due to the diverse motivations and groupings within them as well as the fluid tactics espoused by their activists and leaders. In both cases I consider, the movement simultaneously denotes a group of civic activists and reformers who represent the vanguard of the corrupt state

narrative and many mobilizers who use the collective action to further their own social and political ideals. For example, the inclusion of a semi-loyal opposition together with the mobilizational depth and zeal of the religious nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in both the Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) and the IAC movements delegitimized the entire collective action in the eyes of some decision-makers. This tension can be reconciled by envisioning anti-corruption agitation not as a singular, unified movement, but rather as a series of shifting, dynamic, loose coalitions where corruption becomes a powerful and overarching rallying call. By neglecting the real divisions among movement mobilizers, we fail to explore the mechanics of the associations they build, the reforms they seek, and the steep evolution of these movements. By focusing on these factors, we can investigate the many ways in which specific sets of government decision-makers can interface with the fluid configurations of anti-corruption movements and their causes. Of course, the bandwagoning of mutually referencing groups is a common occurrence in nationally mobilized social movements around the world.[7] This approach allows the broader applicability of my argument, given that there are several movements around the world that advance their goals through the corrupt state narrative, especially in contexts such as India, where there are plausibly very distinct ideas about what constitutes good governance and the corrupt elite. I look at some of these cases in the concluding chapter. However, as fascinating as these movements are on their own, this project focuses squarely on the government's response to the movement within the larger contours of a credibility crisis.

The empirical analysis in this book delves into government response to two movements from contemporary Indian history. Both movements' aims are defined through the language of anti-corruption and have been key to India's contemporary political development: the Jayaprakash Narayan movement (JPM) in 1975 and the IAC movement in 2012. The corrupt state narrative, publicly salient in recent years, is one that emerged in India leading to the 1975 Emergency and soared during it. It has been fueled by both the reality and the perception of an Indian state beholden to corrupt deals with businesses and corporates, which has, in turn, frequently shaped the behavior of state actors, the electorate, and civil society. However, the aforementioned movements and those coalitions similar to them around the world and across much of history cannot be examined in isolation. They represent the culmination of a series of domestic and international pressures that, together with the crescendo of

collective action on the street, represent a credibility crisis for the incumbent political elites. So, the entire crisis must be interrogated if we are to understand political actors' response.

Cases and Unit of Analysis

This research project gives primacy to causal process tracing and the use of case studies. The focus here is on providing intensive analysis of two cases, compared across time, at the national level in India. While the project primarily remains a comparative study of two governments in one country, its central concepts resonate with government responses to anti-corruption movements in other parts of the world. Hence, the concluding chapter illustrates contingent generalizability of the core argument cross-nationally in several other developing democracies.[8]

Case selection employs a most-similar, different-outcome logic. The political episodes encompass the Congress Party government's institutionalization of an internal Emergency in the face of the JPM (1974–75) and the Congress-led UPA government's negotiated response in the face of the IAC (2011–12). Although this case selection allows control for partisanship, it is important to note that the cases follow sequentially. In this context, the use of the internal Emergency policy mechanism, as instituted under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, was less likely under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2012. The Emergency period (1975–77) left an indelible mark on the country's post-Independence history as an aberration on her democratic development. Some have even called it a dictatorship.[9] As we will see in Chapter 3, freedom of the press, political opposition, and assembly, among other civil liberties, were crushed during this period using Emergency laws. Congress governments since this time have, at least publicly, remained highly selective and often revisionist in their reflections of government suppression under Gandhi.[10] Nevertheless, and starkly given this historical backdrop, many other forms of, and justifications for, government suppression have continued to take shape in India at the center and state-levels since the early 1970s and, as the evidence in the empirical chapters show, were strongly considered and in a few instances carried out by some decision-makers in the UPA in 2011–12.[11] I analytically evaluate and reconcile these factors of continuity and change—which are core to any ideational argument—in the next chapter, as well as offering a detailed empirical study of the cases.

The first chapter of each case deploys case-specific knowledge of the formal and informal institutional structures within each government. Most notably the balancing of executive power and political competition, the broader economic and social conditions and challenges, and the substantive issues (government corruption, the emergence of national collective action against it, and the government's tactical response) at hand. Given the causal interaction between structure and agency in my argument, I supplement this approach with a fresh ideational process-tracing method.[12]

The second part of my analysis seeks to measure, illustrate, and trace decision-makers' ideas. The amorphous characteristics of ideational mechanisms make them especially difficult to study compared to materially driven causal processes that dominate rival explanations. In this study, decision-making elites analyze the anti-corruption movements and form responses through their cognitive frames around social and economic development as well as their concepts of the nation. Here, I follow three steps when examining data pertaining to these ideas in the second chapter of each case:

1. Identify the decision-makers' ideational commitments.
2. Establish that the relevant ideas were applied to the choice being explained.
3. Locate an ideational source external to the situation being explained.

This approach begins by expanding the empirical scope of the study in terms of its temporal range to trace the ancestry of ideas. The key here is to establish where cognitive frameworks come from. I therefore take seriously decision-making elites' statements and behaviors at critical moments as directly related to the outcomes I trace; that is, their response at the time of and around the anti-corruption movement. I also consider several sequences of indirectly related events and the movement of decision-makers, or idea carriers, across institutional settings over an extended period, including prior to entering authoritative positions in government. Beyond establishing the exogeneity of ideas and their subsequent diffusion, I look to reduce their multicollinearity against objective, material interests to illustrate causal weight and divergent preferences. This is where proxy measures, for example election results and specific policies that align with the interests of large capital domestically and/or international pressures, examined against decision-makers' ideas can temper material incentives alone. Over time, traced patterns of ideas help to undermine the sufficiency of purely instrumental causal narratives, and to

locate and scrutinize the availability of the relevant ideas that are necessary for the outcome to take shape. Of course, the aforementioned methodological and data-gathering tools come with both advantages and disadvantages.[13] Ultimately, however, I examine diverse, complex, and sometimes conflicting claims, and have judged the credibility, plausibility, and trustworthiness of these claims according to the best practices of empirical verification. The test lies in producing a tightly specified theory with thickly detailed causal observations that substantially enhances the discriminating power of my argument.

The contemporary case utilizes over 120 original elite interviews from the period of study, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, senior members of the party, cabinet ministers, senior bureaucrats, and other senior officials in apex institutions of policymaking power, such as the Planning Commission and the National Advisory Council (NAC), in addition to the Election Commission, the Comptroller Auditor General's (CAG) office, the judiciary, and opposition groups, as well as a close study of daily newspaper reportage.[14] In addition, I use assessments garnered from seven focus groups conducted with members from a cross-section of civil society, businesses, and the bureaucracy. The historical case rests on over 4,000 documents encompassing a broad set of decision-makers' private letters, correspondence, and speeches collected from three national archives (India, the United States [US], and the United Kingdom [UK]) that are yet to be examined collectively in the context of the subject of this book, as well as a forensic study of newspaper reports, party manifestos, memoirs, and autobiographies. Given that the evidence presented here relies heavily on the private and public statements, accounts, and decisions of state elites, and how they develop and deploy their preferences to structure institutions, the analysis focusses on individual leaders and their networks.

I denote government response as the behavior of decision-makers within the executive arena, which encompasses the cabinet and other offices under the control of the governing parties. Where I rest on evidence from the parliamentary or extra-parliamentary (for example, civil society actors or consultants in government) arena, I do so in terms of their interaction with the executive. In the main, this is because the executive branch has important agenda-setting powers in parliamentary democracies, and India is no exception. These powers privilege the cabinet vis-à-vis parliament, and they render parliamentary control of cabinet members onerous. Executive power over parliament is plausibly strengthened during a credibility crisis when there is

less space for deliberation and decision-making requires urgency. Moreover, and as we see across democracies today, executive overreach is a hallmark of populist regimes. The political executive and parliament both consisted of a Congress majority under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. In the case of the UPA in 2012, more than two distinct parties comprised the political executive and parliament as part of the coalition government. I measure government response in terms of the number of imprisonments, the physical harm imposed on movement participants, leaders, and sympathizers such as the press or academics, and the death count. For example, in its suppressive response to the JPM, the Congress government instituted Emergency rule in June 1975, under which 110,806 citizens were arrested and a black-out of selected newspapers was introduced, among other mechanisms of suspending civil liberties.[15] JPM activists, leaders, and supporters were the first and most prominent dissenters to be targeted. In contrast, under the UPA's response in 2012, a small number of IAC demonstrators were temporarily detained, while the government was embroiled in negotiating with movement leaders. My argument reconciles this variation within cases and between controlled comparisons.

Argument

In this book, I outline two ways in which ideas play a role in Indian politics. The first is through activating government populism and the second is through an ideational checks and balances mechanism. Below, I detail specific dynamics in the causal interaction between power and ideas in each case.

The Congress Party won a landslide election in 1971 on a populist wave, which gave it a two-thirds majority in the national assembly and complete control of the cabinet and executive. State elites—chief among them Prime Minister Indira Gandhi—harnessed state power to reshape society, a process that began by centralizing executive power to monopolize decision-making within a majority government. This political and institutional setting serviced the structural conditions that allowed the executive to proclaim an Emergency and to act strongly against the JPM. On the other hand, the UPA government, led by the Congress since coming to power in 2004 and then again in 2009, was made up of a coalition of parties—a system firmly entrenched since the fragmentation of Indian politics from 1989. Furthermore, and more proximately to the structural drivers of the narrative in this book, UPA state elites orbited a

division of policymaking power at the executive level between Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the Congress Party president, Sonia Gandhi. Indeed, both dominant and subordinate decision-makers share a set of *rules of the game* that specify, often tacitly, the precise forms of struggle that are legitimate in each government.

In the Congress government led by Indira Gandhi, contestation among decision-makers was low and cooperation high, and this government often displayed autonomous and arbitrary policy action. In contrast, in the UPA, there was high contestation among decision-makers and often low cooperation on public policy action, thus resulting in constrained action within a polycentric executive arena. This intensified fissures between decision-makers, meaning that the government could not act arbitrarily in dealing with the IAC movement at the cost of inviting further pressure upon a precarious government. Additionally, unlike the Congress government in the lead-up to the 1975 suppression of the JPM, the UPA coalition in 2012 included decision-making elites, chiefly technocrats, with divergent ideas dispersed in authoritative positions of power.

In the majority Congress government, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi held de facto presidential powers and was the main custodian of the national interest, which she proclaimed was incumbent upon her and the Congress to define. The government's perspectives, led mainly by Gandhi, were enshrined within her Congress (R) faction's populism that had been concretizing in the lead-up to, and after, the unified Congress's split in 1969. This populism interlaced around the Congress's concepts of the nation—anchored in secularism, with a preference during this period for socialism and focus on minority rights. The prime minister, along with her close advisers, viewed the JPM as mobilized through right-wing religious nationalist groups such as the RSS and backed by opposition parties. The Gandhi-led Congress Party's unchecked, homogenous ideology cognitively locked the executive into building solidarity within the government—especially in a crisis environment where government credibility was low and had to therefore be re-established—and suppress ideological "others" within the JPM and its sympathizers. Hence, Prime Minister Gandhi could take unitary action to suppress the anti-corruption movement, wherein 110,806 citizens were detained and civil liberties crushed.

In contrast, no such unified cognitive lock emerged in the UPA government. Here, not only party politicians as in the historical case, but bureaucrats, activists, and technocrats also occupied authoritative positions of power and