



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets supporters Tuesday in New York. Modi was to speak before Congress on Wednesday. EDUARDO MUNOZ ALVAREZ/AP

Modi

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ner is seen as backsliding,” said Irfan Nooruddin, a professor of Indian politics at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service.

Modi pressed on human rights

Progressive Rep. Rashida Tlaib said she would boycott Modi’s address to Congress during the visit over his “long history of human rights abuses, anti-democratic actions, targeting Muslims & religious minorities, and censoring journalists.” She described the conduct in a tweet as “unacceptable.”

“It’s shameful that Modi has been given a platform at our nation’s capital,” said Tlaib, D-Mich.

Democratic Reps. Cori Bush, of Missouri, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, of New York, also are protesting the event.

The White House said Biden would raise human rights questions with Modi when they speak privately. A spokesman stressed it is a topic Biden routinely addresses.

“Certainly human rights is of concern to the United States, and it’s a foundational element to President Biden’s foreign policy,” White House national security strategic communications coordinator John Kirby said.

A group of more than 70 lawmakers asked Biden in a letter Tuesday to “discuss the full range of issues” facing the two nations during the visit. They noted that “independent, credible reports reflect troubling signs in India” and told him that “friends can and should discuss their differences in an honest and forthright way.”

“We think it’s important that we have a strong relationship between India and the United States, regardless of who India’s prime minister is, but we also think it’s important that the president raise these human rights issues and make it clear that the institutions of democracy – free press, freedom of religion, a free judiciary, an independent judiciary – these are all things that ensure a democracy,” Rep. Pramila Jayapal, a Democrat who was born in India, said in an interview. “And without a democracy, it’s going to be much harder for the United States and India to have a long-term,

strong relationship.”

Discrimination, harassment and erosion of trust

Trust in India’s judiciary system is also eroding. Earlier this year, a court convicted one of Modi’s chief political opponents, Rahul Gandhi, of defamation for disparaging the surname “Modi” in a case that is viewed as highly political.

If the conviction stands, Gandhi, who highlighted India’s struggles with democracy during a recent trip to the U.S., will be barred from competing in India’s national elections next year.

Modi and his political party have increasingly used government institutions to target political opponents. Discriminatory policies against the Muslim population and harassment of journalists and government critics grew significantly under Modi, Freedom House president Michael Abramowitz said.

“So it is still a democracy, as they say. It’s got a thriving election system. But it’s these other policies that cause concern for Freedom House,” Abramowitz said.

Modi has not fielded questions at a news conference since he became prime minister. But the White House said he and Biden would speak with the media on Thursday.

Rep. Ro Khanna, a Democratic congressman who co-chairs the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans, said that the U.S. should be “candid” about freedom of press and human rights questions.

But the congressman, who said he plans to attend the state dinner, argued, “The imperfections in democracy should not prevent the alliance of democracies.”

Ukraine on the agenda

India has refused to denounce Russia’s war on Ukraine and has continued to buy Russian oil amid the conflict.

The United States has not been able to put meaningful pressure on India to join the U.S. and its allies in working to cripple Russia’s economy. And Modi’s government views itself as having a lot of leverage in the relationship, Nooruddin said, because of how focused the Biden administration has been on maintaining positive relations with the na-

tion that it hopes can serve as a counterweight to China.

The war will be on the United States’ agenda during the meeting, the White House says, but the conversation is likely to focus on the importance of territorial sovereignty and the humanitarian assistance India has given Ukraine.

“We haven’t since the beginning of this war, nor are we going to start, browbeating or arm-twisting other nations about the way they’re looking at this war in Ukraine,” Kirby told reporters Tuesday.

One way that Biden could indirectly create a further separation between Russia and India is by accelerating U.S. approvals of defense equipment for India, said Richard Rossow, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

“It won’t be something dramatic. The tilt that has been happening over the years, where India is tilting away from Russia as a primary weapons supplier, I think that will accelerate,” he said. “But you’re not going to have a cold, hard stop, and I don’t think this trip is going to trigger that.”

Emerging superpower

Biden has sought to deepen the United States’ security partnership with India through a group known as the Quad. It is part of his administration’s efforts to counter China’s global influence.

With a population of nearly 1.4 billion people, India will soon be the world’s third-largest economy, behind only China and the United States.

Rossow said India’s growing economy and competition between the U.S. and China are at the heart of Biden’s decision to roll out the red carpet for Modi, who attended a large rally in Texas with former President Donald Trump in an earlier visit to the U.S.

Modi held a reciprocal rally for Trump in 2020 when the former president visited India. He is expected to host Biden in September during the Group of 20 Summit. The two leaders also met a month ago in Japan.

“You’re not going to see the big theatrics I think that you saw with the Trump administration,” Rossow said. “So maybe not the warmth and bombast that you saw in the previous administration but regular engagement.”