

# Modi attempt to redraw India's electoral map shot down in parliament

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The Indian government yesterday failed to pass a bill to increase female representation in parliament after being accused of using the proposal as a guise to redraw the electoral map.

It is the first time in 12 years in power that a constitutional amendment bill proposed by Narendra Modi's government has not been passed by parliament.

It followed a fierce debate in parliament as Modi's Bharatiya Janata party was accused of an "attack on democracy" after it tethered a bill which would reserve one third of all parliamentary seats for women to a wider exercise of "delimitation", which would redraw parliamentary constituencies along population lines, as per the 2011 census. It also proposed increasing the number of Indian MPs in parliament's lower chamber from 543 to 850.

As the bill was a constitutional matter, it required a two-thirds majority, making it more challenging for the BJP and its national democratic alliance, which does not have an absolute majority, to pass. In the final tally, 298 MPs voted in favour and 230 against.

India's often fragmented opposition parties put on a rare display of unity in resisting the bill. The Congress leader, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, had called it an "open attack" on democracy while another senior party figure, Gaurav Gogoi, accused the Modi government of trying to "bulldoze" delimitation through the back door.

Delimitation is seen as one of the most divisive federal issues in India. It is particularly inflammatory in more prosperous southern states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, which have succeeded in bringing down populations in recent years through development and welfare programmes, and fear a reduction in political representation as a result.

Meanwhile, the poorer, more populous northern states - known as the BJP's political heartland - stand to gain the most seats if they are redrawn according to the last census.

India's electoral map was last redrawn in 1971, and southern states have pushed for it to be frozen on those lines for another 25 years.

MPs from Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the party that rules Tamil Nadu's state government, arrived in parliament yesterday dressed in black in protest. The previous day, Tamil Nadu's chief minister, MK Stalin, branded the bill a punishment to southern states and burned a copy of it outside parliament.

Opposition MPs from a cross-section of parties questioned why women's representation had now been linked to a much larger and more seismic political exercise.

"The first truth is that this is not a women's bill," said Rahul Gandhi, a senior Congress figure. "This has nothing to do with the empowerment of women. This is an attempt to change the electoral map of India."

A bill reserving a third of the seats for women was already passed unanimously by parliament in 2023 but its implementation was delayed until at least 2029 due to electoral processes that must take place first. The BJP said this new bill would speed up the implementation of female parliamentary quotas. "Let all of us not miss this important opportunity to give reservation to women. I have come to appeal to you - do not see this from a political lens, this is in national interest," said Modi.

In a speech to parliament, the home minister, Amit Shah, said India's population had dramatically increased over the past decades to more than 1.4 billion, and delimitation would ensure people were better democratically represented.

In an address in response, the opposition Congress MP Shashi Tharoor said that linking women's reservations to a delimitation process in effect "holds the aspirations of Indian women hostage to one of the most contentious political exercises in our history. We risk creating a tyranny of the demographic majority where a handful of large, poor states could theoretically determine the fate of the entire country."

## 1.4bn

Population of India. The legislation would have assigned parliamentary seats along population lines