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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

7 INDIANS WHO FACED DEATH ROW IN QATAR RETURN HOME

CONTEXT: Eight Indian Navy veterans who had been in Qatari custody since August 30, 2022 were released on Sunday in Doha.



Eight Indian Navy veterans were arrested in 2022 on charge of espionage. On October 26, 2023, the men were given the death penalty by a lower court in Qatar. The men appealed against the death sentence of a lower court in Doha that was subsequently commuted to a sentence of varying periods for the eight individuals by a court of appeals on December 28. The case of the eight Indian Navy veterans kept India-Qatar relation on tenterhooks as the matter became an issue of diplomatic tug of war and their cause of the arrest was never publicised.

Earlier, there were expectations that the eight men would be freed ahead of Ramzan or Id. However, the announcement has come a day prior to Mr. Modi's UAE visit. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Qatar on Wednesday afternoon on his way back home from the United Arab Emirates where he will pay a two-day visit during February 13-14.

Qatar is a major supplier of energy to India and at least eight lakh Indian workers are employed in the Gulf country which continues to be a major source of foreign remittances to the Indian economy. Despite the case involving the eight Indian Navy veterans, economic ties have remained on track and recently the two sides signed a \$ 78 billion LNG deal that extended an existing agreement on supply of liquified natural gas till 2048. The bilateral relationship between India and Qatar that has been steadily growing includes a comprehensive span, including political ties, trade and investment linkages.

Both the United Arab Emirates and Qatar hold around 3,000 Indian prisoners in their prisons and the prisons in the Gulf region hold more than half of the total Indian prisoners in foreign jails.

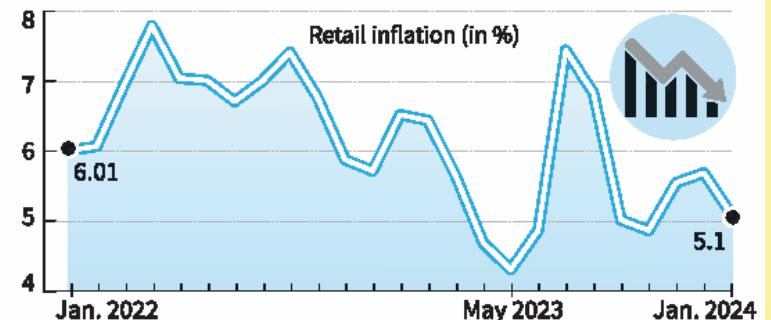
ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

RETAIL INFLATION EASED TO 3-MONTH LOW OF 5.1%; FOOD PRICES STICKY

CONTEXT: India's retail inflation eased to a three-month low of 5.1% in January from 5.7% a month earlier, with food price rise cooling a bit to 8.3% compared with 9.5% in December 2023.

Cooling down

India's retail inflation slowed to a three-month low of 5.1% in January on the back of lower food prices



January's headline inflation pace is slightly higher than the 5% average projected by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last week for the current final quarter of 2023-24. Any interest rate cut hopes will have to wait till at least August if not longer, as the Central bank expects inflation to average 5% in the April to June quarter as well, before it hits its stated inflation target of 4% in the next quarter.

Food inflation sharp

While overall inflation faced by urban consumers dropped to 4.92% from 5.5% a month ago, food inflation remained sharp at 9%, sliding a tad from 10.4% in December. By contrast, rural consumers faced food inflation of 7.91% in January, down from 9% in December, but their overall price rise pace was higher than their urban counterparts at 5.34%.

On a month-on-month basis, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) dropped 0.11% while the Consumer Food Price Index fell 0.73%. A year ago, in January 2023, CPI inflation stood at 6.52%, while food price inflation stood at 6%.

Among food items, vegetables inflation remained above 27%, just slightly below the 27.6% recorded in December.

The price rise in pulses also cooled marginally from 20.7% in December to 19.5% in January.

Cereals and spices inflation saw slightly better moderation, dropping from 9.9% and 19.7% in December to 7.8% and 16.4%, respectively. Fruits inflation also fell from 11.1% to 8.65% in January, while milk prices rose 4.6% compared with 5.1% in December.

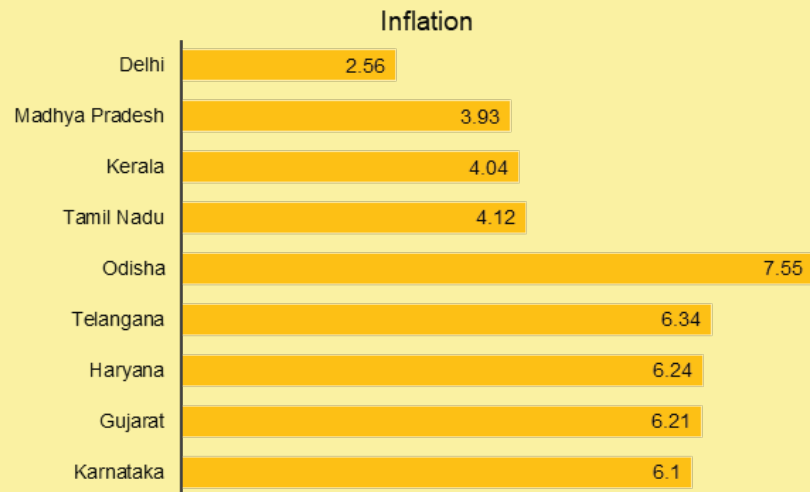
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Inflation in eggs, however, picked up pace to touch 5.6% in January, as did sugar and confectionary price rise which hit 7.5% from 7.1% a month earlier.

Weaker upticks

Most non-food items continued to see weaker upticks in prices compared to food items, with personal care and effects that had clocked a 7.3% rise in prices in December, dropping below 6%. Education inflation inched up a tad from 4.77% in December to 4.93% in January, but the pace of rise in healthcare costs dropped from 5.1% to 4.8%.

Half of the 22 major States for which the National Statistical Office calculates inflation rates registered a price rise below the national average of 5.1%. On the other hand, five States reported inflation of over 6 %, breaching the RBI’s tolerance threshold for price rise.



arrest. The military may have wanted to turn the page of Mr. Khan’s challenge and create a new political reality through the electoral process, but the results have underscored his popularity and public anger towards the establishment. For a long-term solution, the generals should make peace with Mr. Khan and allow the spirit of the results to prevail — an unlikely outcome. As political parties that finished second and third are moving ahead with their plans with blessings from the establishment, public discontent and distrust would remain the unresolved issues.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

‘WEIMAR TRIANGLE’ TO JOIN HANDS AGAINST DISINFORMATION

CONTEXT: Top diplomats of France, Germany and Poland launched a joint initiative to fight disinformation attacks. Paris, Berlin and Warsaw are hoping to ramp up cooperation and reinvigorate the so-called “Weimar Triangle” format initially created in 1991 to enable concerted European action.



French Foreign Minister Stephane Sejourne will host German counterpart Annalena Baerbock and Radoslaw Sikorski of Poland at the Chateau de La Celle-Saint-Cloud just outside Paris. France, Germany and Poland would unveil a new cooperation agreement to combat foreign disinformation operations, particularly those originating in Russia. The Ministers were expected to also report on Moscow’s new information attacks against the three countries.

INTERNATIONAL REALTIONS

PAKISTAN IN TURMOIL

CONTEXT: : In the run-up to the elections was a systematic effort by powerful quarters to dismantle Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) founded by former Prime Minister Imran Khan. He has been jailed since May 2023, facing multiple cases and serving convictions.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), founded by Imran Khan was barred from using its symbol on the ballot paper, forcing it to field independent candidates. Many of its leaders were also in jail or on the run, while others were forced to quit politics or defect to another party. Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif, once the nemesis of the army, who returned from exile in London, led his party’s campaign with the establishment’s blessings.

Independents won 101 of the 265 seats (93 went to PTI-linked candidates), the PML-N secured 75 seats while the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) won 54, and the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan took 17. To form a government, 134 seats are needed.

With Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir backing Mr. Sharif’s call, what followed was an in-principle agreement between the PML-N and the PPP “to work together for political stability”. All these developments point to political manoeuvring aimed at stitching together a unity government that will keep the PTI and Mr. Khan out of power. The independents could also come under pressure to switch to the coalition parties. The PTI, which has already alleged electoral irregularities, has called for street protests, triggering memories of the widespread clashes in May 2023 after Mr. Khan’s

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

YEMEN PEACE PROCESS ON HOLD AS CRISIS GROWS IN RED SEA AFTER HOUTHIS ATTACKS

CONTEXT: As Houthi attacks roil the Red Sea and Western air raids target the rebels, moves to end Yemen’s long-running war are at a standstill, threatening further woe for a country on its knees.



The Iran-backed Houthis have been fighting a Saudi-led coalition since March 2015, months after they seized the capital Sanaa and most of Yemen’s population centres, forcing the internationally recognised government south to Aden. Hundreds of thousands of people have died in the fighting and from indirect causes such as disease and malnutrition. More than 18 million Yemenis need “urgent support”.

Hostilities slowed considerably in April 2022, when a six-month, UN-brokered ceasefire came into effect, and they have remained at a low level since. But Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping and American and British retaliation have thrown the peace process “up in the air”.

In solidarity

The Houthis, who say they are acting in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, have launched dozens of attacks on ships in the vital maritime route since November. Seventeen of their fighters were killed in recent reprisal strikes, according to the insurgents. In December, the UN special envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg acknowledged progress towards a roadmap that would resolve key issues such as agreeing to pay civil servants working under the Houthis, and resuming oil exports. The Saudi-backed Yemeni government is now angling for an “opportunity to reverse the balance of power” in its favour.

Last month, the deputy leader of the government’s presidential council even called for foreign backing for a ground offensive to back up the U.S.-British air strikes against the Houthis.

Terror group

In mid-January, Washington redesignated the Houthis a terror group, having lifted the designation in 2021 to aid humanitarian efforts and promote diplomatic endeavours. U.S. ally Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has engaged in a delicate balancing act as the world’s biggest oil exporter tries to extricate itself from the intractable war on its doorstep.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

INDUSTRIAL OUTPUT WITNESSED MILD RECOVERY IN DECEMBER

CONTEXT: India’s industrial output growth recovered from an eight-month low of 2.4 % in November 2023 to 3.8 % in December 2023, with the manufacturing sector’s growth picking up pace from a seven-month low of 1.2 % to 3.9 %.

A dozen of the 23 manufacturing segments tracked to compute the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) recorded an up-tick in December, double the number of sectors that grew in November.

Noting that the average IIP growth in the Oct.-Dec. 2023 slowed to 5.9 % from 7.8 % in the previous quarter, consumption demand is expected to remain soft as transmission of interest rate hikes and RBI’s regulatory measures dampen credit growth.

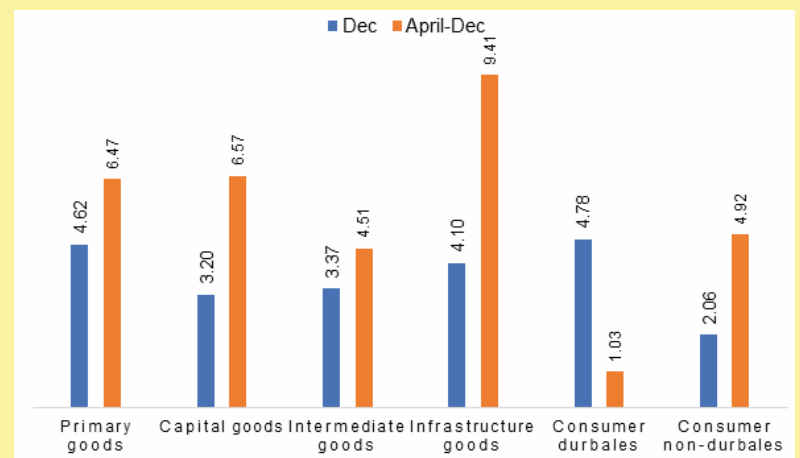


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the user-based Index of Industrial Production (IIP) growth rates on a monthly basis.

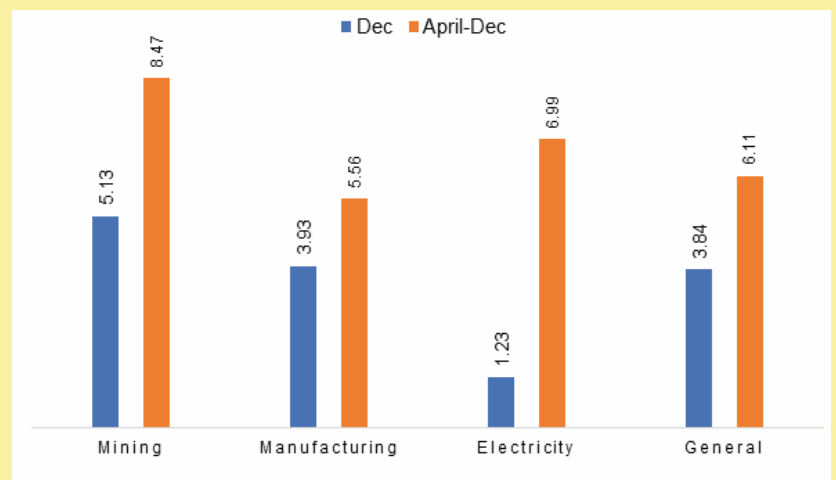
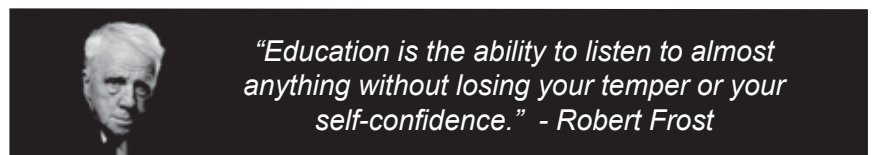


FIGURE: Column chart representation of the sectorial Index of Industrial Production (IIP) growth rates on a monthly basis.



ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT**RUPAY, UPI ROLLED OUT IN MAURITIUS, SRI LANKA**

CONTEXT: RuPay cards and Unified Payments Interface (UPI) connectivity between India and Mauritius, as well as UPI connectivity between India and Sri Lanka were established to deepen financial integration and to facilitate digital payments among citizens of the three countries.

An Indian traveller to Mauritius will now be able to pay a merchant in Mauritius using UPI. Similarly, a Mauritian traveller will be able to pay a merchant in India using the Instant Payment System (IPS) app of Mauritius.

Further, with the adoption of RuPay technology, the MauCAS card scheme of Mauritius will enable banks in Mauritius to issue RuPay cards domestically. Such cards can be used at ATMs and PoS terminals locally in Mauritius as well as in India. Indian RuPay cards would also be accepted at ATMs and PoS terminals in Mauritius.

The digital payments connectivity with Sri Lanka will enable Indian travellers to make QR code-based payments at merchant locations in Sri Lanka using their UPI apps. The projects had been developed and executed by NPCI International Payments Ltd. (NIPL) along with partner banks / non-banks from Mauritius and Sri Lanka, under the guidance of RBI.

- **Safety of ships:** Includes provisions for the construction, equipment, and operation of ships to ensure the safety of life at sea and the protection of the marine environment.
- **Prevention of pollution:** Prohibits the discharge of oil and other pollutants from ships into the sea.
- **Rights and welfare of seafarers:** Protects the rights and welfare of seafarers, including their wages, working conditions, and social security.
- **Investigation of maritime casualties:** Provides for the investigation of maritime casualties, such as collisions and groundings.

The Merchant Shipping Act has been amended several times since it was first enacted in 1958, in order to keep up with the latest developments in international maritime law. The most recent amendments were made in 2020.

The Union Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways is deliberating the proposed changes to the law. The new provisions will look to include up-to-date international maritime conventions to which the country is a party; allow for easier registration of ships under Indian flag by NRIs, overseas citizens of India, corporates, including limited liability partnerships; enable electronic registration of vessels and granting recognition to e-documents like log-books, record books.

Proposed under the new provisions is a three-tier dispute resolution mechanism. It will look to resolve disagreements arising between ship-owners and salvors (those engaged in salvaging ships lost at sea), and also between sea-farers and owners or masters or agents of ship. The resolution mechanism will look "to make the award of the shipping master enforceable instead of enforcement by a Magistrate".

Ambiguous terms like 'abandoned vessels' have been defined, while the new rules call for action against 'unsafe vessels' too. "The Central government has been empowered to direct port authorities and others to take steps in respect of abandoned vessels," the official said.

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE**INDIA EXAMINING REWORKING OF MERCHANT SHIPPING ACT**

CONTEXT: India is looking at reworking its Merchant Shipping laws as it replaces the existing eponymous Act of 1958.



The Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, a comprehensive statute that deals with a wide range of issues is the principal legislation governing merchant shipping in India.

- **Registration of ships:** Sets out the requirements for registering ships as Indian ships, as well as the procedure for transferring ownership of ships.
- **Manning of ships:** Prescribes the qualifications and certification requirements for officers and crew on Indian ships.



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INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

GAS BOOMING FOR UN COP29 HOST AZERBAIJAN

CONTEXT: The United Nations Framework Convention of Climate Change Conference of Parties (CoP) - 29 is set to be hosted by Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan, the former Soviet republic of 10 million people brimming with hydrocarbons is on track to increase its gas production by 35 % from 35 billion cubic metre (bcm) in 2024 to 47 bcm in 2034, contrary to efforts to contain global warming. The forecast covers actual production figures, estimates from approved developments, as well as confirmed reserves not yet being exploited. They exclude condensate, a liquid form of gas.

Long history

The country, a member of OPEC+, has a long history with hydrocarbons, which make up half of its economy. In the 2030s, gas is expected to represent more than half of fossil fuel production in the country. Its exports to Turkey, Europe, Georgia and Iran have already multiplied threefold since 2015. To replace Russian gas, Europe turned to Azerbaijan, whose share of imports grew from 2% in 2021 to 4% in 2023

Baku's expanding gas production is fuelled mainly by the Shah Deniz project, one of the biggest gas fields in the world, discovered in 1999 along the Caspian Sea and operated by BP, while other projects like Umid-Babek and Absheron will increase their output. The Absheron field, which began production in July, is operated by Jocas, which includes national oil and gas firm Socar, as well as France's TotalEnergies and Adnoc, the national Emirati firm.

Replacing Russia

Azerbaijan and European Union suspended negotiations on the gas agreement signed in 2022 to double the gas exports to 20 bcm by 2027. The main obstacle to meeting that potential "is their pipelines' capacity". Baku exports its gas through a southern European gas corridor, a network of pipelines that reaches Europe via Georgia and Turkey, including the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). Its capacity could be doubled but only with hefty investments that would require "long-term commitments" from European gas operators.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A GLOBAL ALLIANCE TO BRIDGE THE GENDER EQUITY GAP

CONTEXT: The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, adopted at the G-20 under India's presidency, is testament to this commitment to the equality and inclusion at the cornerstone of India's development journey.

The declaration underscores the need for advocating a growth agenda that is driven by women-led development. India focusses on socio-economic empowerment, bridging the digital divide, driving climate action, ensuring food security, nutrition, health, and well-being, among others, prioritising inclusion at the centre

At the World Economic Forum, India launched the multi-stakeholder initiative 'Alliance for Global Good – Gender Equity and Equality' placing India at the centre stage for accelerating the socio-economic cause as it will have a sustained global impact.

Bolstering governance

Mainstreaming gender equality and equity has been a key development area for the Centre. The Women's Reservation Bill ensured reservation of a third of seats for women in Parliament and the State Assemblies, is a revolutionary tool for women's empowerment and is expected to contribute extensively to improving the processes of India's governance. Allocations of nearly \$ 27 billion under the gender budget in 2023-24 are a manifestation of the commitment of the government to advancing women-led development.

There has been an increase in India's female labour force participation rate, from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23 (data from the annual Periodic Labour Force Surveys). Female enrolment in higher education has gone up by 28 % in the last 10 years. In terms of enrolment in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) courses, the share of women is a significant 43 %, which is one of the highest enrolment rates in the world. Even within rural India, there is a participation of over nine crore women in 83 lakh self-help groups, improving the socio-economic conditions in rural areas. All these provide a glimpse of women-led development that India is witnessing.

An Indian contribution at Davos

The Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Confederation of Indian Industry at Davos launched the We-Lead Lounge set up by, saw global interest and curiosity. It served as a platform to have many meaningful deliberations around how the world can contribute, join, and drive inclusive development. The Alliance for Global Good – Gender Equity and Equality now serves as a platform to channelise the resultant enthusiasm and intent into action at the global level.

The Alliance, anchored by the CII Centre for Women Leadership, guided by the Minister of Women and Child Development, Government of India and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will have a global network of experts, think-tanks, industry and country leadership that will

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drive collective actions to augment women empowerment. The partnership of the World Economic Forum as a network partner in this initiative, is testament to the global relevance and the global resolve to drive growth that is inclusive and equitable.

The goal of the alliance is to share and develop scalable and practical solutions for advancing women-led development in the areas of ed-tech, medical capacity building, and delivery of health interventions for women, learning and skill development, agro-tech, women enterprise development and unlocking capital to enable stronger gender outcomes, the Alliance brings together stakeholders on this critical global development agenda. India's leadership in these areas is proven, gaining the label of "pharmacy of the world". The alliance is yet another example of leadership, as

India accepts responsibility to provide shared direction to stakeholders globally.

An opportunity

For industry across the globe, this is an opportunity: to share some of the practices that we have developed to advance the entry and growth of women in the workspace; to invest in proven programmes and initiatives and enable them reach scale, and to work collectively to make inclusion a business conversation. It is also an opportunity to learn and develop solutions with the global community consisting of industry, think tanks and investors to advance our commitment to increased engagement and leadership of women within the economy, through increased access to health care, education opportunities and economic opportunities.



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POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

A RECORD NUMBER OF GLOBAL VOTERS EXERCISE RIGHT IN 2024

Democracy on the decline in many nations

The data for charts were sourced from Our World in Data, International IDEA, World Bank and the Association of World Election Bodies



Map 1: The map shows the countries going to the polls or have already completed elections in 2024

■ National-level elections ■ Elections for the EU Parliament

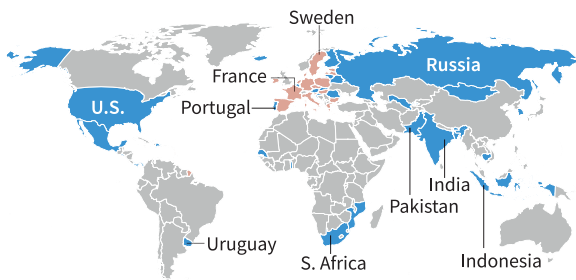


Chart 2: The chart shows the free and fair elections index, 2022. The bigger the size of the circle, the higher the voting population of the country

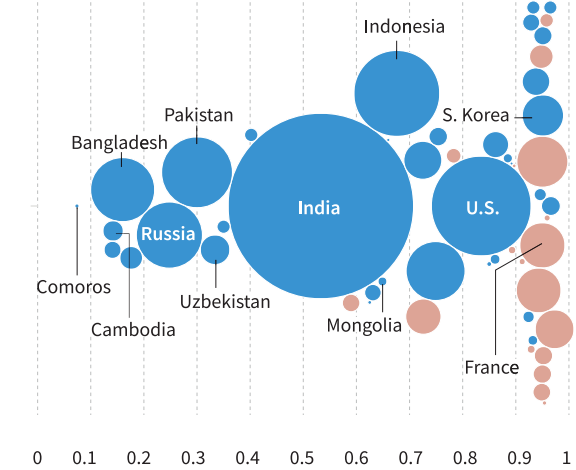
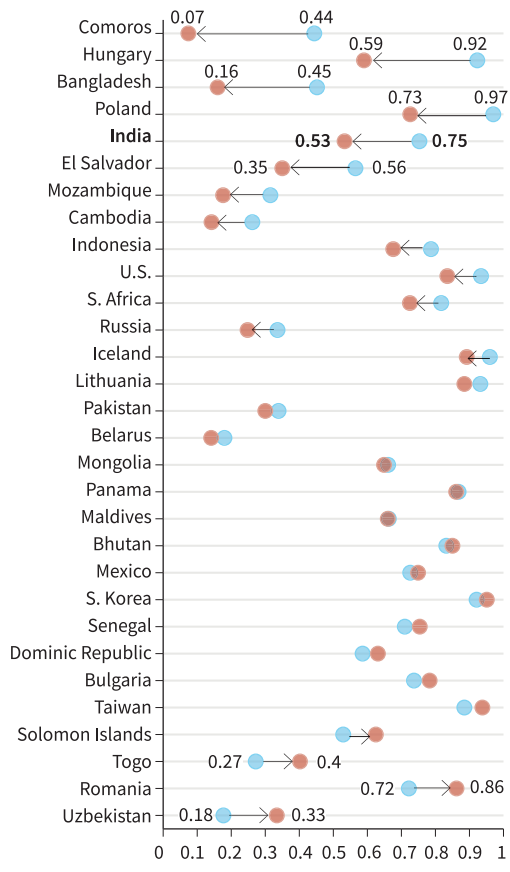


Chart 3: The chart shows the change in the free and fair elections index between 2012 and 2022



Over 50 countries in which close to 45% of the people in the world reside have gone to the polls or will go to the polls this year. This only includes those countries which conducted or will conduct national-level polls this year or are part of the nations which choose the European Parliament. Countries conducting local elections have been ignored. With the world's population on the rise and many countries having elections this year, estimates indicate that 2024 could see the highest number of votes polled in history.



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