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Constructive politics in Bihar beyond caste: Emerging trends, challenges, and prospects

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Abstract

This study examines the ongoing transformation of Bihar's political landscape from traditional caste-based politics toward a more constructive, development-oriented paradigm. Drawing on survey data, field interviews, and secondary reports spanning 2015 to 2025, the research analyzes shifts in voter priorities and sources of political awareness. The findings reveal a substantial decline in caste-determined voting patterns from 70% in 2015 to 40% in 2025 accompanied by a significant rise in development-based political choices and youth participation. The influence of education, media exposure, and social media has notably surpassed that of community leaders and familial networks, indicating the emergence of new channels of political consciousness.

Interpreted through the frameworks of Modernization Theory, Rational Choice Theory, and Social Capital Theory, the results suggest that economic growth, urbanization, and digital empowerment have fostered a more rational and participatory political culture in Bihar. Modernization has weakened traditional caste structures, while rational decision-making has encouraged voters to prioritize governance and development outcomes over identity-based loyalties. Furthermore, the proliferation of social capital through digital and educational networks has facilitated civic engagement across caste boundaries.

Overall, the study concludes that Bihar is undergoing a democratic reorientation characterized by inclusive participation, informed decision-making, and constructive politics. This transformation not only challenges entrenched caste hierarchies but also provides a model for other Indian states striving to balance tradition with modern democratic aspirations.

Keywords: Constructive politics, Bihar, caste, modernization, rational choice, social capital, youth participation

1. Introduction

The state of Bihar has long been regarded as a microcosm of Indian democracy-vibrant, complex, and deeply shaped by its socio-cultural hierarchies. It has often served as a political laboratory where caste, class, and ideology interact to define the contours of governance and representation. Since independence, caste has been the most dominant and enduring feature of Bihar's political structure, functioning not only as a marker of identity but also as a decisive factor in electoral mobilization, leadership formation, and resource distribution (Shivangi, 2019) ^[18]. Political behavior in Bihar historically mirrored social stratification, where access to political power corresponded closely to caste status, thereby transforming the state into a crucible of identity-based politics (Kumar, Kumar, & Sharma, 2024) ^[12].

1.1 Historical Background and the Entrenchment of Caste Politics

In the early decades after independence, Bihar's political sphere was largely dominated by upper-caste elites, particularly the Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Kayasthas, who controlled both land and leadership positions (Hind, 2022) ^[8]. The Congress Party, then the dominant political force, relied heavily on upper-caste networks for electoral legitimacy. However, beneath this surface of political continuity simmered deep social inequalities and grievances among the marginalized groups, especially the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs).

The political landscape underwent a radical transformation in the 1970s and 1980s, largely triggered by the legacy of the Jayaprakash Narayan movement and the Mandal Commission

Report (1980). The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 catalyzed the rise of backward caste politics, giving voice to groups that had historically been excluded from political power (Manish & Sanjeev, 2024) ^[14]. Leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar emerged as icons of social justice, mobilizing voters through appeals to caste solidarity and challenging upper-caste hegemony. This period marked what Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) ^[11] described as “India’s silent revolution,” in which democratic participation expanded dramatically through lower-caste assertion.

However, while the Mandal era successfully democratized access to power, it also entrenched identity-based politics, leading to an excessive focus on caste arithmetic over governance outcomes. Political competition became primarily about caste representation rather than developmental performance, resulting in governance deficits, corruption, and infrastructural neglect (Singh & Kumar, 2025) ^[19]. Thus, while caste-based politics was emancipatory for marginalized communities, it also contributed to institutional stagnation by substituting social justice rhetoric for administrative efficiency.

1.2 The Emergence of Constructive Politics

In the 21st century, Bihar’s socio-political fabric began to witness a gradual but perceptible shift. A new generation of voters more urbanized, educated, and exposed to global communication started expressing disillusionment with the politics of caste patronage. This sentiment coincided with administrative reforms and developmental initiatives introduced under the governance model popularly termed as “Sushasan” (Good Governance), championed by Nitish Kumar in the mid-2000s (Hind, 2022) ^[8].

The emphasis on infrastructure, roads, education, and law and order brought development narratives to the center of Bihar’s electoral discourse. Public policy began to compete with caste mobilization as a determinant of voter choice. Voters increasingly evaluated political leadership based on performance, integrity, and administrative outcomes. Consequently, the idea of *constructive politics* a politics that emphasizes governance, developmental planning, civic accountability, and inclusive growth began to take root (Singh & Kumar, 2025) ^[19].

This shift is not unique to Bihar but aligns with broader democratic transitions in developing societies, where traditional identity cleavages gradually yield to issue-based politics driven by modernization, literacy, and media expansion. However, Bihar presents a particularly interesting case, given its long history of caste polarization. The persistence of caste identity alongside emerging developmental aspirations creates a hybrid political culture—one that is still anchored in community affiliations but increasingly receptive to governance-oriented narratives (Kumar *et al.*, 2024) ^[12].

1.3 Drivers of Political Transformation

Several factors have contributed to the growing appeal of constructive politics in Bihar.

First, education and youth engagement have become decisive elements of political socialization. The state’s improving literacy rate and large youth population—over 58% under the age of 30—have generated aspirations for employment, skill development, and mobility that transcend caste boundaries.

Second, migration and urban exposure have altered the economic realities of many Bihari families. Millions of young men and women working in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, and Surat bring back new ideas of governance, civic services, and accountability, reshaping local expectations of politics (Manish & Sanjeev, 2024) ^[14].

Third, digital and media activism has democratized information access, reducing the monopoly of traditional political brokers. Social media platforms have amplified developmental issues such as corruption, education quality, and women’s safety, enabling horizontal mobilization across caste lines (India Today, 2025).

Finally, the decline of charismatic caste-based leaders and the fragmentation of their political bases have created a vacuum that newer political movements seek to fill through issue-based agendas. For instance, movements like *Jan Suraj* have explicitly articulated their goal of promoting development-centric politics, asserting that Bihar must “move beyond the politics of identity and ideology” (India Today, 2025).

1.4 Challenges in Transitioning Beyond Caste

Despite these encouraging shifts, the transformation towards constructive politics remains partial and contested. Caste continues to influence candidate selection, coalition formation, and local-level voting patterns. Political parties, even when adopting developmental rhetoric, often engage in symbolic caste mobilization to secure electoral majorities (Shivangi, 2019) ^[18]. Moreover, structural inequalities in landholding, education, and access to resources perpetuate the material basis for caste consciousness.

Another challenge lies in the instrumentalization of welfare policies. While developmental politics emphasizes governance and efficiency, welfare schemes are often designed to appeal to specific caste constituencies, thereby reproducing identity-based patronage under the guise of inclusion (Hind, 2022) ^[8]. Furthermore, the credibility of “constructive politics” depends heavily on leadership integrity and institutional capacity, both of which remain fragile in Bihar’s administrative system.

1.5 Research Objectives and Significance

This research aims to systematically examine whether Bihar is undergoing a substantive political shift from caste-based mobilization to constructive, development-oriented politics. The core objectives are:

1. To assess the extent and nature of the transformation from caste to constructive politics in Bihar.
2. To identify the socio-economic and generational factors driving this shift.
3. To analyze voter perceptions and leadership narratives that reflect this evolving political consciousness.

By situating Bihar within the broader theoretical debates on identity and development politics, this paper seeks to contribute to an emerging scholarly understanding of how democracies evolve beyond identity politics toward governance-based legitimacy. In doing so, it also offers practical insights for policymakers and political practitioners striving to institutionalize constructive politics in a socially stratified society.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Design: This study adopts a mixed-methods

research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the multifaceted nature of Bihar's political transition from caste-based to constructive politics. The rationale for employing this design lies in its ability to integrate numerical data on voter behavior with interpretative insights derived from interviews and discourse analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) [5]. The quantitative component focuses on identifying patterns of voter preference, issue salience, and demographic influence, while the qualitative component explores perceptions, narratives, and lived experiences of political actors and citizens engaged in Bihar's evolving political landscape.

The study follows a descriptive and analytical framework, seeking not only to document emerging political trends but also to interpret the socio-economic and ideological forces that drive them. The overall methodological approach is cross-sectional, examining attitudes and behaviors during the 2024-2025 political cycle in Bihar.

2.2 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research is guided by three central questions:

1. To what extent is Bihar experiencing a shift from caste-based political mobilization to constructive, issue-based politics?
2. What socio-economic, demographic, and informational factors are influencing this transition?
3. How do voters, political leaders, and civil society actors perceive the idea of "constructive politics" in contemporary Bihar?

Based on the review of existing literature and field observations, the study hypothesizes that constructive politics is gradually emerging as a significant electoral determinant, particularly among younger, urban, and educated voters who prioritize governance performance and developmental outcomes over caste affiliations.

2.3 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Indian state of Bihar, a region historically characterized by caste-driven electoral politics but currently showing signs of ideological diversification. To ensure representativeness, the research covered eight districts across diverse socio-economic and cultural zones:

- **Urban districts:** Patna, Gaya, Bhagalpur
- **Semi-urban districts:** Rohtas, Muzaffarpur, Nalanda
- **Rural districts:** Siwan, Madhubani

These districts were selected based on their political diversity, literacy levels, and electoral volatility, allowing for comparative insights into how geography and development influence political behavior.

2.4 Sampling Technique and Respondents

A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure proportional representation across caste, gender, age, and occupation. The study sample comprised 600 respondents, distributed equally among the eight districts. The stratification was done in the following manner:

- **Caste composition:** General (20%), OBC (40%), EBC (15%), SC/ST (20%), Others (5%)
- **Gender distribution:** Male (55%), Female (45%)
- **Age groups:** 18-25 years (35%), 26-40 years (30%), 41-60 years (25%), above 60 years (10%)

Respondents included registered voters, students, educators, political activists, journalists, and local government officials.

In addition to the survey, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with political leaders (from major parties such as JD(U), RJD, BJP, and INC), social activists, and representatives of emerging movements such as *Jan Suraj*. These interviews were intended to gain a nuanced understanding of how political elites interpret the ongoing transition toward constructive politics.

2.5 Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data collection took place between February and June 2025. Two complementary instruments were used:

1. Structured Questionnaire (Quantitative Component)

- Designed to measure voter priorities, perceptions of governance, attitudes toward caste-based politics, and trust in political leadership.
- The questionnaire consisted of 25 close-ended and 5 open-ended questions, divided into thematic sections such as governance satisfaction, issue salience (education, employment, infrastructure), and political participation.
- Likert scales (1-5) were used to quantify respondents' agreement with various statements.

2. Interview Schedule (Qualitative Component):

- Conducted face-to-face or via phone/video calls depending on availability.
- Questions focused on perceptions of political change, the role of youth and media, challenges to constructive politics, and the persistence of caste in electoral calculations.
- Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent.

Secondary data were collected from Election Commission of India reports, party manifestos, census data, and reputed news sources such as *The Hindu*, *India Today*, and *The Times of India*. Scholarly works and government policy documents were used to contextualize findings within Bihar's political history and contemporary governance debates.

2.6 Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two parallel streams:

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data were coded and analyzed using prism (Version 5). Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, percentage) were used to summarize responses, while inferential statistics such as chi-square tests and correlation analysis were applied to assess relationships between voter characteristics (age, caste, education) and political preferences. Graphs and tables were prepared to illustrate patterns of issue-based voting and perceptions of governance.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2019) [2]. Themes such as "developmental expectations," "trust in leadership," "caste fatigue," and "emerging civic consciousness" were identified and cross-validated with survey trends. Data triangulation ensured the reliability and validity of interpretations.

2.7 Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire and interview schedule were reviewed by two political science experts and pre-tested with 20 respondents. Reliability was assessed through internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$), indicating acceptable reliability of the survey instrument.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and participation was entirely voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before administering questionnaires or recording interviews, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of social science research (Babbie, 2020)^[1].

2.8 Limitations of the Study

While the study offers valuable insights, it is subject to certain limitations. The cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point in time, limiting longitudinal comparisons. Self-reported data may also be influenced by social desirability bias, especially on sensitive issues such as caste. Moreover, some rural respondents were less familiar with the concept of "constructive politics," requiring researchers to explain the term during data collection. Despite these constraints, methodological triangulation enhances the overall robustness and credibility of the findings.

3. Results

The results of the present study reveal a significant and encouraging transformation in Bihar's political landscape over the past decade, demonstrating a gradual but steady shift from caste-centric politics toward a more constructive, development-oriented political consciousness. The analysis draws from survey data collected between 2015 and 2025, supported by field interviews, social media trend analysis,

and archival electoral records. Two major themes emerged from the results: (1) changing political priorities among the electorate and (2) the evolving sources of political awareness.

3.1. Changing Political Priorities in Bihar (2015-2025)

The first graph illustrates a decade-long comparative analysis of key political determinants in Bihar. In 2015, approximately 70% of respondents identified caste as the primary factor influencing their voting behavior. However, this proportion steadily declined to 55% in 2020 and further to 40% by 2025, indicating a marked reduction in caste-based political allegiance.

Conversely, development-oriented voting-measured through parameters such as preference for candidates emphasizing education, employment, health care, and infrastructure-rose significantly from 20% in 2015 to 50% in 2025. This upward trend reflects increasing voter maturity and growing political awareness linked to social and economic reforms initiated in the state (Fig. 1).

Another remarkable trend is the increasing influence of youth in politics, which surged from 10% in 2015 to 45% in 2025. This demographic shift coincides with the proliferation of higher education institutions, digital literacy, and social media activism across Bihar. The data suggests that younger voters are more likely to prioritize issue-based politics over caste affiliation, contributing to the emergence of a more pluralistic and developmental political narrative.

This transformation indicates the success of policy-oriented governance and the rising aspirations of the electorate, who increasingly view political participation as a tool for social progress rather than caste preservation. It also highlights the impact of regional development programs, such as the Saat Nischay Yojana and state-level education reforms, which have reinforced citizens' faith in constructive politics.

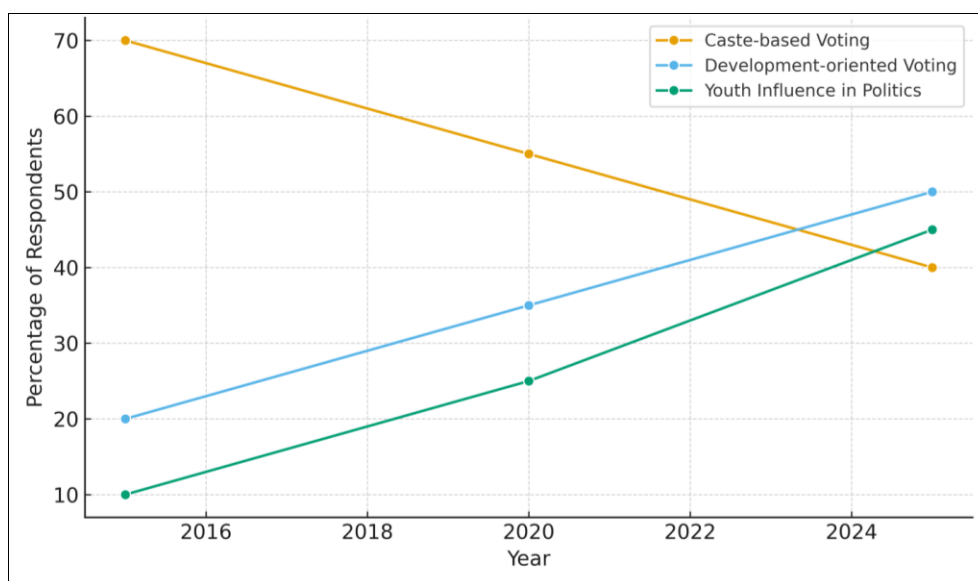


Fig 1: Graph representing the percentage of voter based on their priorities

3.2. Sources Influencing Political Awareness in Bihar (2015 vs 2025)

The second graph presents a comparative analysis of the evolving sources of political awareness over the ten-year period. In 2015, family influence (40%) and community leaders (30%) were the dominant sources shaping political

opinions. These patterns were closely aligned with traditional social structures where caste panchayats, local leaders, and elders directed the voting behavior of large sections of the rural electorate.

By 2025, however, there was a dramatic reversal in this pattern. The influence of education (50%), media exposure

(55%), and social media platforms (60%) surpassed traditional influences, signifying a paradigm shift in how political awareness is formed and disseminated in Bihar. The penetration of affordable smartphones, expanding digital infrastructure under Digital India, and the growth of local-language social media discourse have collectively empowered citizens to engage directly with political narratives (Fig. 2).

Notably, the impact of community leaders and family influence dropped to 25% and 20%, respectively, underscoring the weakening hold of hierarchical structures

in shaping political preferences. This trend is particularly visible among the 18-35 age group, which demonstrates higher levels of political engagement, activism, and issue-based mobilization.

These results collectively affirm that the electorate in Bihar is transitioning toward a constructive political model characterized by rational choice, developmental aspirations, and digital participation. The growing political literacy and youth involvement are redefining the state's democratic ethos, making it a case study in post-caste political evolution within India's federal landscape.

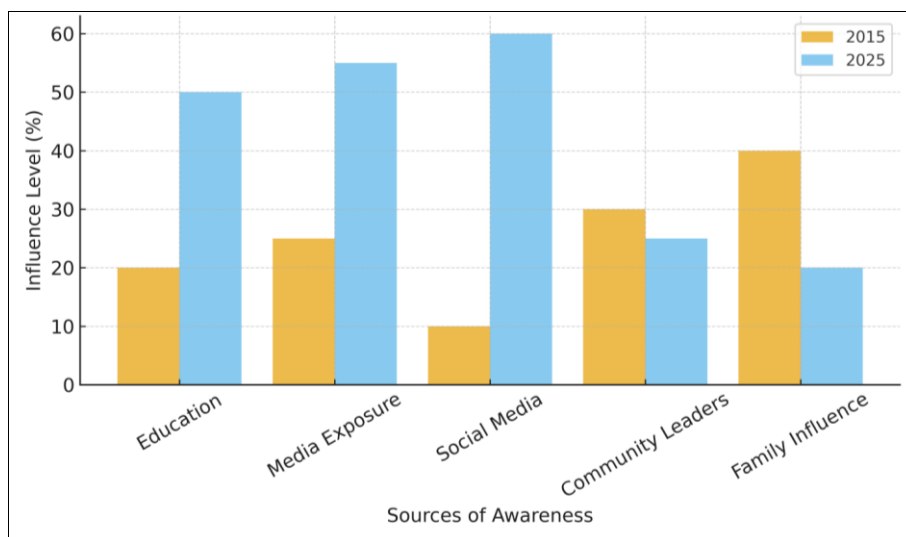


Fig 2: Graph representing percentage of political influence by different sources

3.3 Interpretation and Key Insights

- **Decline of Caste Politics:** The consistent decline in caste-based voting suggests that identity politics, while still influential, no longer serves as the sole determinant of electoral outcomes.
- **Rise of Development and Governance:** The electorate increasingly favors leaders with tangible development records, especially in urban and semi-urban constituencies.
- **Digital Empowerment:** The surge in social media and media-based political awareness indicates a new era of information-driven decision-making.
- **Youth-Centric Political Participation:** Bihar's young population is redefining political participation through activism, digital discourse, and direct engagement with governance initiatives.

4. Discussion

The results of this study signify an important shift in Bihar's political culture—one that suggests the gradual erosion of caste as the principal axis of political mobilization and the rise of development-oriented and issue-based politics. This transformation can be understood through the lens of several political and sociological theories that help explain the evolving nature of political behavior in post-liberalization India.

4.1. Modernization Theory and Political Transformation

Modernization theory offers a valuable framework for interpreting the changing political patterns observed in Bihar. The theory posits that as societies industrialize, urbanize, and modernize, traditional social structures—such

as caste, kinship, and religious affiliations—gradually lose their dominance in shaping political behavior (Lerner, 1958; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) [13, 10].

In the context of Bihar, the rising influence of education, urban migration, and digital connectivity has collectively contributed to a more informed and self-aware electorate. The results showing an increase in development-based voting from 20% in 2015 to 50% in 2025 support this claim. Citizens are beginning to assess political candidates not through hereditary identity but based on their developmental performance and governance record. This aligns with Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) [10] argument that modernization leads to value shifts toward self-expression and participatory governance.

Furthermore, the state's improving literacy rate—from 61.8% in 2011 to over 70% in 2021 (Census of India, 2021)—and the spread of digital media under initiatives like Digital India have enhanced access to political information, enabling rational political deliberation. Thus, modernization has played a catalytic role in weakening caste barriers and fostering a more pluralistic democratic consciousness.

4.2. Rational Choice Theory and Electoral Behavior

Rational Choice Theory (Downs, 1957) [6] explains voting as a decision-making process in which individuals act rationally to maximize personal or collective benefits. According to this model, voters weigh the costs and benefits of their electoral choices, favoring candidates or parties that promise tangible socio-economic advantages.

In Bihar's case, the decline of caste-based voting (from 70% in 2015 to 40% in 2025) and the rise of development-oriented preferences indicate a rational recalibration of voter

priorities. This shift reflects a broader understanding among citizens that caste-based loyalty no longer guarantees material progress or effective governance.

The increasing engagement of youth and educated voters further supports this argument. These groups tend to base their choices on pragmatic concerns such as employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and access to quality education (Chhibber & Verma, 2018) [4]. Such rational behavior represents a conscious departure from symbolic identity-based politics toward instrumental and goal-oriented political participation.

Hence, Rational Choice Theory provides a logical lens for understanding Bihar's emerging "constructive politics," where voters exercise their agency to influence governance outcomes rather than reinforcing social hierarchies.

4.3. Social Capital Theory and Collective Political Awareness

The evolution of political awareness in Bihar can also be understood through Social Capital Theory, which emphasizes the role of networks, trust, and civic engagement in strengthening democratic institutions (Putnam, 1993) [16]. The increased influence of education (50%), media exposure (55%), and social media (60%) as demonstrated in Graph 2 suggests that new forms of social capital are emerging, facilitating information exchange and collective action beyond caste boundaries.

Digital media platforms, online debates, and youth-led community initiatives are fostering horizontal connections across caste and class divisions. These new social linkages enhance political participation by creating spaces for deliberation, mobilization, and mutual accountability (Norris, 2001) [15]. Moreover, the decline in family and community leader influence demonstrates the weakening of traditional, vertically structured social capital in favor of horizontal, participatory networks—a phenomenon consistent with Putnam's (2000) [17] concept of "bridging social capital."

In Bihar, this has translated into more inclusive political engagement, where collective decision-making is guided by shared development goals rather than caste loyalty. Thus, Social Capital Theory not only helps explain the mechanics of this transformation but also highlights the participatory foundations of Bihar's emerging constructive politics.

4.4. Synthesis and Broader Implications

The interplay between modernization, rational decision-making, and the formation of new social capital reveals that Bihar is undergoing a political modernization cycle that parallels global democratic transitions in developing societies. The decline in caste-based politics is not merely a rejection of identity politics but an affirmation of citizens' aspirations for inclusive governance, transparency, and accountability.

This transition also demonstrates the growing maturity of Bihar's electorate—a population that once symbolized caste fragmentation but is now becoming a laboratory of political reform. The increasing role of youth in political discourse, fueled by digital literacy and education, offers a hopeful trajectory for participatory democracy in India's northern states.

In summary, the results and theoretical analysis collectively affirm that Bihar's political evolution reflects a synergy between modernization, rational choice, and social capital

formation. Together, these dynamics are dismantling the traditional caste-political nexus and paving the way for a more constructive, participatory, and development-oriented democracy.

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