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Narendra Modi has to be most decisive at first

The BJP must nurture the institutions that put credible checks and balances in place. Otherwise, the street will fight back. Narendra Modi won and won resoundingly. There can be questions about how much the fragile arithmetic of four-party competition in Uttar Pradesh contributed to the margin of his victory, but in my mind there is no doubt that this should count as a mandate for him.

The question is more which Modi? The RSS pracharak, the man of the people — the chai-wallah's boy, or the icon of decisiveness? My sense is that it was very much the latter; this is an election where there is no point in asking whether the Congress lost the election or the BJP won it, since Modi was naturally positioned to be the one thing that Congress leaders were not: Manmohan Singh brings a natural hesitancy to his most decisive moments, and Rahul Gandhi seemed undecided even about whether he wanted to win. The voters made it clear what their preferences are.

I will confess that in general decisiveness worries me; it is often an excuse for being impatient with the details or insufficiently sensitive to other people's concerns. What Modi makes of this historic opportunity will depend a lot on where he chooses to be decisive.

There is no doubt that in the last years of the UPA's rule, a certain lethargy had set into the way the central government went about its business. Some of this was pure lack of leadership — for example, education, health and environment, to take three sectors that I follow closely, drifted, mostly because there was no one at the top who had the skills and the energy to take anything forward. The economic ministries, for their part, managed to get into a number of bruising fights over relatively esoteric issues like multi-brand retail and retrospective taxation and ended up retreating into their shells. The bureaucrats in all these ministries, liberated from any pressure from top, did what all bureaucrats are trained to do best — avoid taking any decisions. Projects piled up, pending approval that never came.

All of that, and more, Modi can fix. But he cannot do it by himself — these are huge complicated ministries and the bureaucrats who run them know all the rules backwards — they will run circles around him if he tries to single-handedly force the pace. There is only one trick that will work — to appoint excellent ministers and give them a long rope but clear long-run goals. Patience, humility and a willingness to learn are key, but also an ability to lead, to find solutions and hope, when, as often happens in Indian bureaucracies, you hit the Catch 22. This is what the previous government seems to have stopped doing, and what, as all successful chief ministers know, makes the difference between success and failure. India's liberalisation in 1991 needed more than a policy announcement to happen: P Chidambaram and his team in the commerce ministry had to change the rules one by one to get us there. Policy change is nothing if its not patient work.

But the UPA was not defeated simply by incompetence and lethargy: There is something deeper that is happening all around us that Modi will need to contend with. All over India, people, and especially young

people, are no longer willing to take the words of leaders as given: They are asking uncomfortable questions and demanding credible answers. The Right to Information, the Lokpal Bill, the National Green Tribunal (NGT), are all attempts of the system to respond to this very powerful impulse by limiting the executive's ability to take decisions that they do not have to justify. In the long run, I feel that this will build more accountability; right now it mostly encourages inaction. No one, neither the decision-makers in government nor the institutions that are meant to oversee those decisions, have a sense of what is reasonable and what is overreaching, and, therefore, everyone wants to play it safe. Some very well-respected bureaucrats in Delhi were telling me how they worry every time there is a Right to Information petition that it will then somehow end up at the NGT or the lokpal, and, therefore, their first reaction is to try to block it.

The good news is that this is part of the process of maturing of institutions. Formal rules are never enough: There needs to be a culture around them which tells us what is fair and reasonable and what is merely capricious or even deliberately obstructive. The bad news is that it takes time. And patience. I have heard BJP supporters from the business world arguing that the first thing Modi needs to do is to kill the NGT. That would be a horrible idea for variety of reasons, including that it is not at all in the long run interests of business. As the awareness of the environmental costs spreads — for example as people find out how many people in our cities will die today because of air quality — the street will fight back against it and when it does, it would crucial to convey a sense that there are credible checks and balances in place. This is the lesson from Singur and Nandigram — when those in power lack credibility — the street will choose its ways of ensuring that whatever they believe to be justice is served and those are much more likely to be destructive. Here is where Modi will need to check his decisiveness and let things take their course.

Finally, the one occasion when he will need to be at his most decisive is the first time some boys from the VHP or the Ram Sene or some fellow traveller, enthused by what they imagine is a collective endorsement of their views, decide to put their views of Hindu domination into practice. That would be the time to summon the heavy hand of the law and let it be really heavy. Any wavering and the next five years will be a battlefield.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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