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analysis



UPA is not able to take credit for what it has done

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We are a nation holding our breath. Some in eager anticipation, others in ambiguous apprehension or actual terror, but all of us transfixed by the drama of Mr [Narendra Modi's](#) arrival.

Even those who do not relish the thought of the outcome seem happy to get it over, to put behind us this sad drama of the UPA's strange implosion, the decline, Lear-like, from decisiveness (if wrong-headed at times) through confusion to utter impotence. We will remember UPA 2, if at all, it seems, as that period when things went mysteriously wrong — for the bribe-taking, buck-passing, foot-dragging, and general sense of paralysis.

I think this is unfair, perhaps not to the UPA leadership, but surely to an interesting historical moment. I don't believe that the most important fact about the last 10 years was the explosion in corruption. I don't doubt that corruption has been going up — but it has been since the 1960s; we have a data set where we tried to put some rough numbers on what fraction of Uttar Pradesh legislators active in 1969, 1980 and 1996 were corrupt, and the pattern of increasing corruption is very clear. This is perhaps not very surprising given that there is more money around everywhere, and less high-minded idealism.

What importantly changed over the last 10 years is the fact that it was no longer automatic that someone would be getting away with any amount of malfeasance if he happened to be powerful enough. A combination of a more aware and restive public, a much more aggressive media and a somewhat less complaisant (though still venal and very creaky) judiciary has meant that powerful members of the ruling coalition can no longer assume that they will be protected. Remember that no one at all important went to jail for Bofors. Now some people (though not yet anyone from the inner circle of central government ministers) do.

It was the end of complete impunity that caught the UPA government by surprise. They were used to uncomfortable truths going away on their own, helped by collusion within the political class and a pliant set of institutions. When the institutions started pushing back ever so little, they had no idea of which way to turn.

As our institutions grow out of their mostly colonial origins towards a more democratic stance (albeit very slowly — remember our police are still governed by the Police Act of 1861, which designed it to be the enforcement arm of the colonial State), more and more of our elected and other officials at all levels are facing similar challenges.

In Rajasthan a sarpanch told us, slightly ruefully, "you can still take money but it is a lot more work". He was referring to the early go-go years of MGNREGA, when a sarpanch could apparently pay ghost workers to work on projects that never existed. Our recent surveys in Rajasthan and Bihar confirm that there are essentially no entirely non-existent projects.

Another recent survey in Andhra Pradesh finds that 11% of the claimed MGNREGA beneficiaries are untraceable, and presumably invented. 11% is not good news, but it is not 90%. Clearly some machinery has been put in place that makes sarpanches worry about going too far.

It is not a revolution in governance that is doing this, but a set of small changes in standard operating procedures. A very nice example of this kind of innovation is in a recent study by Karthik Muralidharan and Paul Niehaus from the University of California and Sandip Sukhtankar from Dartmouth College, which examined the effect of making MGNREGA payments using biometric identity cards in Andhra Pradesh.

These cards, which were essentially a precursor of the Aadhaar, allowed villagers to collect their MGNREGA payments by verifying their identity on a simple biometric identification device that was placed with a bank employee in the village. The mandals (sub-districts) where this new system was implemented were chosen at random from an area that covered eight districts and almost two crore of people. The rest of the mandals stuck to the old system, where the money came through post offices and several visits, gifts to the postal employees and/or the help of elected village officials were often necessary to get the money.

The results they report are almost startlingly positive. The time spent collecting the money went down by 20% as did delays in getting it. Encouraged by this, people were more willing to seek MGNREGA

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work and overall MGNREGA earnings went up by stunning 23% without any measurable change in the government's MGNREGA spending, suggesting that it was mostly paid for by a reduction in leakages. The gains to the beneficiaries in just a year are many times the cost of implementing the new system.

I emphasise this as an example of how governance change actually happens on the ground — piecemeal, often in response to a scandal or an obvious problem, often quite specific to one issue. There have been many such changes in the last 10 years; just to name some of the more famous ones, the Right to Information, MGNREGA, direct benefit transfers, Aadhaar, the lokpal Bill. Some of them came out of the UPA, some were imposed on them.

Some were genuinely good ideas; others were poorly thought out or worse. But together they will change the kind of democracy we have, mostly for the better, towards one where there is less arbitrary power and more accountability. Between 1890 and 1920, in what is called the progressive era, the United States went through a similar process. Many scandals, many changes in rules and processes — often very local and apparently small — but together they redefined US democracy.

The tragedy of the UPA is not that it didn't do anything, but that it is not able to take credit for what it has done. By staying silent when it should have been shouting from the rooftop and by protecting the guilty, it surrendered the governance agenda to AAP. This could have been a good election for it.

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