

## Can Modi turn the tide?

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)

Last year, towering like a colossus, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) could do no wrong, announcing programmes and winning admiration for speech after speech, from Varanasi to the Red Fort to Madison Square Garden. The tide has now turned. Why? Can it turn back in his favour again?

In all democracies, an election victory, if extraordinary, provides surplus legitimacy to a party or leader. But more often than not, the surplus vanishes before long, and normal politics returns. Indira Gandhi lost her surplus within two years of her massive 1971 victory and Rajiv Gandhi his in less than two years after December 1984. Modi's surplus has eroded in less than a year and a quarter. In Delhi, after 1947, only Jawaharlal Nehru enjoyed long periods of undiminished legitimacy. On the whole, the end of political honeymoons is a common problem in most democracies.

Legitimacy erosion also follows a similar pattern. The dreamy, or visionary, quality of the moment of victory morphs into the regular humdrum of politics, in which the ethical fibre weakens, deals are struck, tall leaders begin to look small, campaigns to save the indefensible are launched and newspaper commentary bemoans the decline of morality in political life. TV was not terribly important in earlier times and social media was absent. The discourse on both amplifies the cacophony.

India is also witnessing yet another feature typical of democracies: election victories alone, however spectacular, cannot sustain political legitimacy. While a polity is not exactly a moral order, an irreducible minimum of ethical conduct by the ruling party is necessary for the survival of legitimacy and ease of governance. Even when people view politicians as hopelessly compromised, many want to see decorous conduct in political life.

We know that a lot of politicians do not join politics to elevate the level of the discourse, or to further national interest. They do it for personal fame, recognition and, in many cases, if not all, for material enhancement. This leads to a paradox: the demand for ethical leaders normally exceeds the supply.

Moreover, even when some leaders maintain their ethical core, either the colleagues around them, driven by inappropriate conduct, trigger a downward journey for the whole government, or the adversarial nature of democratic politics erects roadblocks. [Barack Obama](#) won two massive election victories and has undoubtedly kept the ethical kernel of his politics alive, but each time he has found the political going tough not too long after his election.

Admittedly, the Obama comparison can only go so far. Modi's victory last year was quite Obama-like, but he is not functioning in a presidential system. In a US-style presidential polity, the leader of the executive and the Houses of the legislature are both directly elected, creating a serious possibility of logjams if the president's party does not control the legislature, which is often true. In a

presidential system, the legislature can close down the government by not passing the budget. Over the last 20 years, the US government has been shut down at least twice.

In the parliamentary system that India has, a government shutdown does not take place because the party that controls the government also dominates the legislature. But parliamentary disruptions, as opposed to government shutdowns, are more likely, especially if the opposition feels that the party in power will use dominance in the legislature to block its demands. The [BJP](#) shut Parliament down a few times during [Congress](#) rule. The [Congress](#) is exacting revenge now.

While the argument above is institutional, I should emphasise that India's parliamentary democracy is not the cause of the current imbroglio. Rather, the problem is rooted in the decline of Modi's surplus legitimacy, which the institutional framework has simply aggravated.

The key issue is Modi's long silence on the view of state power that his colleagues display in their behaviour. Like [Congress](#) politicians, [BJP](#) political leaders also believe that state power can and should be used to help friends and/ or family. On the whole, the concept of conflict of interest does not exist in Indian politics. As a private citizen, [Sushma Swaraj](#) could have helped a highly controversial family friend, who is also a client of her lawyer husband and daughter. But if she does so as India's external affairs minister, using her public office to persuade a foreign government, it can only raise serious arguments about a conflict of interest. The issue may not be legal, but it is certainly about political ethics. Public lives inevitably require strict standards of conduct. The tragedy is that Swaraj, along with Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, the three [BJP](#) leaders most heavily targeted by the opposition, are among the ablest in a party that has a deficit of talent in modern governance.

Modi's legitimacy, of course, has been declining for some time. His silence on "ghar wapsi" upset those who voted for him on the promise of economic development and governance, not on the "reconversion" of Muslims and Christians back to Hinduism. Then came the stunning defeat in the Delhi assembly elections. Soon thereafter, the land acquisition bill revived a previously doomed [Rahul Gandhi](#) for he could label Modi as anti-farmer and anti-poor. No prime minister of India can afford an anti-farmer image for long, for two-thirds of the vote is still in the countryside. Modi's remarkable external successes could not adequately counter the declining legitimacy, for foreign policy still does not shape political discourse the way religion and rural issues do.

The loss of surplus legitimacy, of course, does not mean an absence of legitimacy. Nor is the decline irreversible. The forthcoming Bihar elections offer Modi an opportunity. If he wins big, the recent fires can be doused. If he loses, his problems will be substantially greater, which can still be surmounted if a great economic turnaround takes place, or a national security crisis lifts him above the routine humdrum of politics.

But, meanwhile, normal politics has returned. The adversarial shrill will become louder in politics. Pragmatic bargains might have to be struck, at least in policy domains that require legislative approval.

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