

Taming hubris

BJP has work to do to take back narrative — assembly results raise questions on governance record, temple



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In normal times, what happened on December 11 would have been called routine self-correction in a democratic polity. A competitive democracy abhors interminable incumbency. Indeed, in presidential systems, there are explicit term limits on executive power. No US President, for example, can be in power for more than two terms. In parliamentary systems, such as the one in India, there are no executive term limits, but if the polity is competitive enough, no party can normally hold on to power for more than two or three terms. What happened in Delhi from 1952-1971 (Congress dominance), in West Bengal from 1977 to 2011 (CPM hegemony), or in Gujarat from 1998 till

now (BJP dominance) is most unusual. For Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh to give a fourth-term majority to the BJP would have been truly exceptional.

But these are not normal times. Since the rise of the BJP to national power in May 2014, we have witnessed a truly mammoth exhibition of political hubris. Nothing captures that hubris better than the BJP slogan of Congress-mukt Bharat (Congress-free India). The Congress party also often displayed arrogance during its rule. But even at the height of its power in the 1950s and 1960s, it never thought of, or proposed, the decimation of opposition parties as a political project. A conceptual distinction between defeat and decimation is always necessary. Democratic politics and temper are about the former, not the latter. When Rahul Gandhi, in his late evening press conference on December 11, said, "*hamein unki vichardhara ko harana hai, unhe desh se mitana nahin hai*" ("We want to defeat their ideology, not obliterate them as an organisation from India"), he made a democratic statement in his moment of triumph.

In three Hindi heartland states, power is not simply changing hands, which is a standard democratic practice, but the arrogant project of Congress-free India has been tamed. The BJP not only ruled these states by huge margins, but it had also won 62 of the 65 parliamentary seats there in 2014. While the transition from state assembly elections to parliamentary elections is rarely mechanical, the possibility that the BJP's Lok Sabha tally in these states might be halved simply cannot be ruled out.

A political symbiosis is, of course, the most significant result of these elections: [Narendra Modi](#)'s aura of electoral invincibility has been broken and there is now a spring in the steps of the Congress. Only the deeply ideological parties tend to survive the onslaught of continued defeats, as the CPM or Jan Sangh of the past did. Centrist parties, like the Congress, are not ideologically

glued. They need political power as an organisational elixir. They are shattered if they keep losing. For the Congress, stemming Modi's tide, coming to power and political reinvigoration were thus inextricably interlinked. That symbiotic moment has now arrived, and it will make the Lok Sabha elections in a few months quite competitive.

These results are also likely to make the Congress party the putative centre of an opposition alliance. Political parties respect claims of current strength, not appeals to past glory. With the Congress resurgence, a pivot around which an anti-BJP alliance can be constructed has emerged. To be sure, a solid opposition alliance cannot still be assumed and painstaking negotiations lie ahead. But such negotiations would have been considerably harder if the string of Congress defeats had not stopped.

We also have new questions about Yogi Adityanath's political status and, by extension, about the centrality of the Ram temple to the next election campaign. By making Adityanath a leading national campaigner, from Karnataka to Madhya Pradesh, the BJP had for all practical purposes made him the party's third most important politician — after Modi and Amit Shah. These results could well lead to some rethinking about Adityanath's role.

But I am not yet convinced that the emphasis on Ram temple would be dropped, as is being argued in some circles. The BJP needs some new issues to wrest the initiative back. Its economic performance or governance record is barely enough. Moreover, it is also worth asking what will propel the RSS back into another BJP campaign. The RSS might have come to the BJP's rescue in 2014, despite the absence of strident Hindu nationalism in Modi's election campaign, but it is entirely unclear what will bring it back now except Hindutva. And the Ram temple is perhaps a core Hindutva issue at this time, if not the only one.

The Congress victory, of course, is not complete. Its presence in Telangana and the Northeast has shrunk. More importantly, two of the critical issues in the recent elections — unemployment and agrarian distress — do not permit easy solutions. India's remarkable economic growth since the 1980s has not been labour- and employment-intensive. How to increase the employment intensity of growth requires serious thinking. Moreover, the results will not be instantaneous.

Agrarian distress also has an obstinate quality to it. When, in the mid-1960s, India went through a green revolution, the key issue was raising productivity, and a new technology was available for that purpose. The current crisis stems from an unusual combination of surplus aggregate agricultural production, coexisting with droughts and production declines in many pockets. A deeper issue is how to restructure the rural economy when agriculture is down to producing only 13-14 per cent of GDP, but still has close to half of the nation's population dependent on it. The short-run temptation will be to waive farm loans and increase support prices and subsidies. But that will not be a long-run solution. How to enhance non-agricultural employment in rural India, and/or generate gainful urbanisation, remains a thorny issue.

But these are matters for medium- to long-run economic governance, not for the next parliamentary elections. For the latter, the inability of the Modi government to resolve the agrarian crisis and provide jobs will inevitably be two of the key campaign issues. The Congress does not need to give an account of what it did in the last five years. That is the BJP's headache.

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