

Lifting the pall of fear

Centre faces classic dilemma civil disobedience unfailingly poses: Whether or not it cracks down, protests will grow

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At Park Circus Maidan in Kolkata. (Express photo by Partha Paul)

“As it were, that pall of fear was lifted from the people’s shoulders, not wholly, of course, but to an amazing degree.” This is how [Jawaharlal Nehru](#) described what Gandhi, after 1918-19, did to India’s psyche against the British rulers.

After three recent weeks in Delhi (including Shaheen Bagh), Mumbai,

Bangalore, Hyderabad, Bhopal and Lucknow, it is clear to me that the pall of fear which accompanied [BJP](#)'s victory in May has been lifted. The analogy is not perfect. Instead of Gandhi, it is women and students who have taken charge of protests. And the current rulers, like the British, are not alien, though to India's 200 million Muslims, they feel like one.

Continuing citizen protests illustrate a well-known feature of parliamentary democracy. If a parliamentary system is first-past-the-post (FPTP), and it does not have proportional representation (PR), election victories and defeats acquire an exaggerated form. The BJP had 37.4 per cent of the national vote in May 2019, which yielded 55.8 per cent of the Lok Sabha seats. In contrast, the Congress received 19.5 per cent of the vote, but only 9.6 per cent of seats. In a PR system that marks much of Western Europe, votes and seats are in proportion.

The vote-seat paradox of FPTP systems, prevalent in British-style democracies, generates an illusion. The winners often begin to believe that they have not only won a majority of seats, but also a majority of vote. They think that their parliamentary majority entitles them to making laws, which radically restructure a polity. But what often happens is that a brute assertion of executive or parliamentary power touches off citizen anxiety and protest, at least among those who did not vote for the party in power, which was nearly 63 per cent in the recent Indian elections.

The unrelenting march of protesters undoubtedly contains a substantial proportion of non-BJP voters. But I also met many Modi voters, certainly those not wedded to the ideology of Hindu nationalism, who have found the behaviour of the Modi government excessive. The ideologically-committed, on the whole, think that cracked skulls and maimed bodies are simply the price to pay for establishing their preferred political order. They are after a "higher truth", as it were, the "truth" of Hindu primacy and Muslim

subsidiarity, which they think the “New India” must seek, even though the Constitution is decidedly against that. In contrast, the symbolic repertoire of the protesters shows an unmistakable embrace of constitutional values: The [preamble](#) of the Constitution, pictures of Gandhi and Ambedkar, songs, poems and artwork of defiance as well as pluralism, and a commitment to civil disobedience aptly depicted in a Shaheen Bagh poster, “Don’t be Silent, Don’t be Violent”.

It is hard to escape the well-known political hypothesis that India is witnessing a conflict between two different majorities: The majority of voters, who did not vote for the BJP, and the parliamentary majority, which was based only on a plurality, not a majority, of vote. The BJP might still win a parliamentary majority four and a half years from now, but meanwhile it has to deal, at least as a governance matter, with what could well be the wishes of a majority of citizens. The BJP used to be proud of its control of the streets. It has lost that dominance, and the narrative control that comes with it.

Another important analytic point is worth emphasising. Scholars have long drawn a distinction between hegemony and dominance. Hegemony implies a takeover of minds and an obliteration of virtually all opposition spaces. Dominance means the victor is far ahead of the competing alternatives, but pockets of resistance are substantial, not meagre.

The intensity and breadth of protests illustrate that the BJP is dominant, but not hegemonic. More significantly, after its enhanced majority in May 2019, the BJP government assumed that it was hegemonic. Only such an assumption can possibly explain why it went for what, in retrospect, was a legislative overkill: The [triple talaq](#), the unlawful activities prevention, Kashmir, Ayodhya (a victory the court handed), and the citizenship amendment. It is as though the BJP rulers thought it was time to turn the

Constitution upside down and realise their long-held ideological dream, the dream of Hindu supremacy and Muslim marginality.

Delhi's rulers have tried to wrest the narrative by arguing that the protests are an artefact of opposition political parties and the protesters are Muslim, who can be identified, as the PM put it, by their clothes. But it is abundantly clear that civil society organisations, not political parties, have led the protests, with the partial exception of West Bengal and Hyderabad. Individual party leaders might have spoken at the rallies, but political parties are not the vanguard. Moreover, though statistically valid surveys are still to be conducted, it is fair to hypothesise that every fourth protestor is a Hindu, or at least a non-Muslim. The protests are undoubtedly multi-religious.

Indeed, if a political party had led nationwide protests, if only Muslims had protested, if the protests had been predominantly violent, it would have been easy for Delhi to crush them. There was a violent streak in the beginning. But the dominant form since then is non-violent. It is Gandhian-style civil disobedience without a Gandhi at the helm.

The Modi government is caught in a classic dilemma that civil disobedience unfailingly poses: If it cracks down, as it did at Jamia, JNU or AMU, the protests will only grow, and if it does not, then too protests will continue. Two more factors contribute to the government's difficulties. There are so many civil society organisations involved, with none as a clear leader, that the Modi government really does not know who to target. Besides, women are holding the centrestage at Shaheen Bagh and if more Shaheen Baghs emerge in different cities, the government would find it extremely hard to use coercion. Use of state violence against women almost always boomerangs.

Normally, civil society has the feet to stand on, but rarely the legs to run with. So it is unclear how far the protests will go. But one thing is clear. If the

Modi government violently cracks down, the protests will engulf more of India. The energy demonstrated in protests and the opposition of multiple state governments have placed the Centre in a quandary that civil disobedience always generates.

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