

SADF COMMENT



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“Modi’s India: Elections, expectations, endeavours”, a Perspective



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The success of Mr Modi’s government is much more than a domestic issue; it is a fundamental challenge for democracy. India is not only the biggest democracy in the World; India is the only significant example of a XXth century born nation that never knew any other form of government.

Nothing is settled regarding democracy in our age. One thing is however considerably safe to predict: the future of democracy is highly dependent on the success of the largest and most consistent emerging democracy.

Modi’s election broke three enduring democracy hexes: thirty years without clear parliamentary majority; politics polarised by factional issues and dynastic entrenchment.

It did so giving hope to hundreds of millions of people on consistent steps for development. And this is the crux of the matter for looking into this first year of Modi in government.

1. The diplomatic front

Modi promised to concentrate his first year’s attention on South Asia. He did and was mostly successful in doing so. He managed to overcome an intricate border dispute inherited from the pre-independence times with Bangladesh and improved relations with this country considerably; he developed relations with Nepal and Sri Lanka, reinforced relations with Afghanistan, managed to keep proper talking terms with the Maldives.

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Indo-Pakistani relations – the most important within the subcontinent – failed to improve as the issues at stake are considerably more complex.

Prime Minister Modi managed to improve relations with China creating a détente spirit. He did so simultaneously with a considerable reinforcement of relations with allied Pacific nations, namely the US, Australia and Japan.

He considerably enhanced India's diplomatic relations in the Middle East, namely with the UAE and Israel while keeping the country – for the time being – out of major Jihadi attacks.

India continued its BRICS engagement and managed considerably well the relative decline of Indo-Russian relations.

Although India's affairs with individual European countries improved, they did not with the European Union as a whole. Skipping Brussels in his European tour, India interrupted trade and investment negotiations in the middle of a serious row concerning the pharmaceuticals industry, whereas India and the European authorities have conflicting views on the issue of carbon emissions.

The diplomatic front absorbed most of the attention of Prime Minister Modi, to the point where “airline miles” jokes on his travel agenda became popular in India.

2. The internal political front

Modi's landslide victory – as Paul Wallace's book on India's 2014 elections reminds us – stood on the basis of a very charismatic leadership with a unifying agenda of economic and social development.

The Prime Minister was able to make gains in strained internal situations like Nagaland and even Kashmir. He failed however to reproduce his success out of the so-called Hindi belt.

As the South of the country is generally the most advanced and the least needing urgent reforms; as long as Mr Modi and the BJP will be able to develop a good and constructive relation with the regional powers of these states, I do not think the issue will block Modi's reform agenda.

Contrarily to some predictions, Mr Modi stood firmly against sectarian tendencies within his own political camp and prevented ethnic/religious tensions from playing a significant role in the internal political agenda after the elections.

3. The reform

However big the parliamentary sweep of Modi, the issue is he lacks the control of the upper-house – his alliance has 64 out of 245 seats – and this is a stumbling block in any sweeping reform legislation.

The Modi charisma remained intact even after the elections and certainly his way of galvanising popular opinion on discernible objectives has been fundamental in several crucial realms like sanitation.

But personal leadership has its limits, and the Prime Minister is facing a federally highly decentralised country with a solid majority in the Commons seriously limited in its legislative power by the upper house.

Over one year has gone by, and essential government reforms in domains such as land, labour, trade, tax system, foreign investment and finance remain blocked.

Otherwise, some Western actors have expressed their frustration with regards to financial interests that are being neglected by the Indian defiance mood on some international trade rules, namely the Indian challenge to WTO rules.

4. Potential ways ahead

Modi's success on the India-US agreement for WTO rules on food security sets the path to other indispensable Indian initiatives on global environmental and pharmaceutical issues that may break the present deadlock on relations with Europe.

As the Western international press recently recognised (The Economist, 8th of August 2015) the international intellectual property system needs to be fixed. As in the case of food security, it is unthinkable that India should put the life of its citizens at stake for the sake of keeping inappropriate rules that stifle innovation and disregard citizens welfare.

Concurrently, as we are approaching the 21st COP in Paris, India should lead the World out of the deadlock where World environmental issues are encapsulated and reviving the Rio spirit.

India is one of the countries in the World that has more to gain out of a new regime geared to put the respect for the planet on the frontline. It should lead the way into such a reform out of the Byzantine bureaucratic debate where it is now imprisoned.

The gridlock over far reaching reforms in the Indian upper house should be answered intelligently. While keeping the entire reform plan alive in the national arena, it is necessary to show at decentralised levels how the reforms can work.

Last but not least, there is a missing piece in Modi's plan, which I consider to be the most essential of them all: a comprehensive plan to supply basic education to every Indian child whatever its location, religion, social position, sex or mother tongue. The issue cannot be reduced to one of skills; and no one should expect it to fully show results in less than two decades. It is a *sine qua non* condition to insure the success of democracy.