



Three major hurdles in Modi's march to 7, RCR, Delhi

SWAMINOMICS

SWAMINATHAN S ANKLESARIA AIYAR



Let me stick out my neck and say Narendra Modi will not lead the next BJP election campaign. Almost all other analysts, whether pro- or anti-Modi, think he is inexorably headed for New Delhi as

the new battering ram of the BJP. Modi's own post-election speech showed clearly that he aimed to become the next PM.

His third successive victory in Gujarat was stellar. He has an enviable development record. Yet Indian history shows that successful chief ministers do not translate into Prime Ministers. Morarji Desai, Charan Singh and Deve Gowda, each lasted just a few months or years as Prime Minister. Narasimha Rao lasted five years, but was

made PM because he was a lightweight.

Modi has three hurdles to overcome. First, he must be acceptable to NDA allies of the BJP. But Nitish Kumar (JDU), Chandrababu Naidu (TDP), Mamata Banerjee (TMC) and Jayalalithaa (AIADMK), all woo Muslim vote banks.

Now, these are cynical politicians, perfectly willing to share a platform with Hindu communalists if there is an electoral advantage. If by accepting Modi's leadership they think they can gain more Hindu votes than the Muslim votes they lose, they will do so. But the very opposite is true.

Naidu concluded that associating with Modi caused his 2004 defeat in Andhra Pradesh. Nitish Kumar was with the NDA for years, and indeed defended the BJP when he was railway minister during the Godhra riots. But once he became Bihar CM, he saw Modi as a serious liabil-

ity, and refused to accept even a flood relief donation from Modi after the Kosi floods. Mamata joined hands with the Jamaat-e-Islami in her famous Singur agitation. These NDA allies refuse to accept Modi as NDA leader. For that reason alone, his bid for prime ministership looks doomed.

Second, he faces many rivals and enemies within the BJP. They will argue that opposition from NDA allies makes him totally unsuitable. Besides, Shivraj Chauhan in Madhya Pradesh and Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh, both aim to win third successive terms as CMs in the 2013 state elections. If they succeed, Modi's triple victory will cease to look exceptional. MP has 290 Lok Sabha seats against Gujarat's 26, and Chauhan is more acceptable to NDA allies than Modi.

Modi's third hurdle comes from voters. Political analysts usually discuss elections

in national terms, but elections are decided mainly on local issues. National politics is not irrelevant, but is secondary.

Possibly 90-95% of Indians have never seen a Central government official. The only face of government they see is the patwari, thanedar, electricity linesman, and a few officials at the tehsil level. National issues like inflation or the Kargil war can indeed swing national elections, but not development policy issues.

The best proof of this came from Yogendra Yadav's assessment of whether voters backed or opposed the economic reforms of 1991-96. The question he asked in a survey was: "Are you aware of any change whatsoever in economic policies?" Almost 80% said no!

Despite the hue and cry in Parliament, despite raging debates in the media, voters mostly didn't know or care. They surely liked new TV channels and

cellphones, but did not associate these with economic reform in any policy sense. At the grassroots, the 1996 general election was decided on more local issues.

Modi is a great administrator with a great record in economic development in Gujarat. But if he goes to other states and boasts he has built thousands of check dams and attracted major industries to Gujarat, will voters there care?

Almost certainly not. This strength of local issues explains why no strong chief minister has ever swung voters in other states, despite trying.

Modi refused to campaign for his party in Punjab and Uttarakhand in state elections last February. He campaigned outside Gujarat for the first time in Himachal Pradesh this time.

The outcome was dismal. In his absence, the BJP won in Punjab and only

just lost in Uttarakhand, a fair performance. But in Himachal, despite Modi's campaigning, the BJP was thrashed.

Now Himachal is a small state, and Modi addressed only two major rallies. It can be argued this was not enough to have an impact. Yet in a small state two major rallies should matter. His thrashing in HP is surely not conclusive. But he has made a weak, unconvincing start as a vote-getter outside Gujarat. His Midas touch seems to desert him.

Modi may be the darling of TV analysts, stock markets and Twitterers. But he is opposed by NDA allies, questioned by rival BJP factions, and ignored (so far) by voters outside Gujarat. Can such a man become Prime Minister?

✉ My Times, My Voice: Like this article? SMS MTMUSA <space> Yes or No to 58888. Charges applicable. Rs 3 per sms