Three Phases of the Modi Government

Hope, Fear, and Anger

Anmol Jain

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Delhi is, once again, host to a large student protest. It emerged in response to a pathetic comment by the sitting Chief Justice of India, and has now centred around entrance exam irregularities and education reforms. It has grown beyond the hunger strike by Sonam Wangchuk, now more than three weeks long, and the brutal police crackdown when a rally to Parliament was organised a few days back has only ensured its expansion across the country. As these events are still developing and taking new turns as I write, it is impossible to judge their trajectory. Nevertheless, in this piece, I assess what these protests convey about the arc of a government that has now been in office for over a decade.

That arc, I think, can be best described in three phases: hope, fear, and now, perhaps, anger. While it is impossible to put exact time stamps on the conclusion and initiation of each phase, and they significantly overlap, the argument I present here works on the understanding of the dominant theme that underpinned the narrative around the government. Read together, they trace how public legitimacy was earned, how it was substituted for, and how its increasing decline is now becoming the biggest threat for the government. It is, however, important to also flag that this three-phase account is an interpretation, and it should be held as one.

Hope

The Modi government's first phase ran from 2014 through roughly the early years of the following decade, and it was built on consent rather than compulsion. The government arrived with an unusually decisive electoral mandate after years of coalition governments in India and on the back of promises that seemed genuinely aspirational. The government had promised to deliver a more efficient and clean state, an end to policy drift, a country that finally worked the way its middle classes believed it should. This was hope in a fairly literal sense, as a large section of the electorate believed things would get better. "*Acche din aane wale hain*" or that good days are ahead was the dominant slogan. Their successive victories at the ballot box only renewed this hope. When policies failed to perform, this legitimacy helped the government secure the benefit of the doubt. At the same time, its constant efforts to delegitimise the opposition ensured that voters stayed with them even through their failures.

Fear

Eventually, the strategy of hope was replaced with that of fear, which operated on two fronts. Externally, the government leaned hard on the idiom of national security — Pakistan, China, border infiltration, etc — as the organising register of public life. In fact, the 2019 election was largely fought in the name of promising a strong response to these external threats.

This is not, on its own, unusual for a government that has repetitively faced genuine security challenges. What made it distinctive was how quickly the same idiom was also turned inward to cover for its policy failures. When students, farmers, journalists, academics, and religious minorities asked questions, they were clubbed together and referred to as internal threats, indistinguishable in the state's rhetoric from the external enemies it invoked. People were casually tagged as "anti-nationals", and while the state institutions turned servile, non-state actors were given impunity for their excesses. A protest against agricultural laws, a Facebook post about a communal riot, an academic paper on electoral irregularities, a strike over

statehood — each of these was, at different points, treated as a security problem, a conspiracy to destabilise India, and not as ordinary democratic contestation.

To further this project of fear, investigative agencies were turned toward opposition politicians but switched off the moment those politicians crossed the floor. Preventive detention laws designed for security threats were used against activists protesting the government. Foreign funding rules were used to starve civil society organisations. Television and large parts of the press came to be owned, directly or through advertising dependence, by conglomerates with close proximity to the ruling party. None of this required the government to silence everyone; it needed only to demonstrate, often enough, that it could and would come after anyone. The effect was a kind of pricing of dissent. People simply began to self-censor, and calculate, consciously or not, what disagreeing out loud might cost them.

This was complemented by the use of traditional and new-age media to indoctrinate the people along these lines, which ensured that the government had its soldiers even in personal spaces like family and friends groups. Once successful, this strategy extended public legitimacy with less effort, and now legitimacy did not demand consistent performance but some evidence of a consistent threat that only this government could handle. It produced a society that looks, from the outside, calmer than it actually is. At the same time, it generated a form of arrogance in the government, a literal self-belief in "the king can do no wrong", something that it also read as a sign of invincibility.

Anger

That is the wager fear-based governance makes. However, the calm it produces is never a reflection of actual consent; it only reflects the perceived cost of expressing dissent. Because that perception is collective, it can hold right up to the point where it doesn't, and then unwind very quickly, because nothing about the underlying sentiment needed to change; only people had to turn willing to say so out loud. Moreover, with continuous governance for over a decade, it is but natural for the rift between promises and performance to be visible, feeding into a sentiment of anti-incumbency across policy domains. In this situation, arrogance with a holier-than-thou attitude fails to satisfy the louder ask of accountability.

This protest wave seems like an instance of this unwinding, particularly because of the character of the grievances driving it. Exam irregularities, unlike much of what the fear-based playbook has been built to manage, do not sort neatly along the fault lines the government has spent a decade cultivating. They are not a Kashmir story, or a minority-rights story, or an urban-anarchy story, some of the categories that can be folded back into the existing security idiom without much strain. They implicate an aspirational, cross-class, cross-community constituency that the BJP's own developmental promise was built to represent in the first place. That is a much harder grievance to recast as an internal threat, because doing so means accusing a very large and very ordinary slice of the electorate of subversion, something that does not travel well.

Beyond the visible anger, it is the gradual evaporation of fear that makes this protest important, and perhaps an inflexion point. Anger at exam failures and unaccountable ministers is a recurring feature of Indian public life. It is that the fear built up over the past decade does not seem to be doing its usual work of pre-empting confrontation. Rather, state action is only strengthening the protestors' resolve. None of this means that coercion has disappeared as prohibitory orders, surveillance, police violence, and mass detentions continue. It only suggests that the coercion is being challenged, openly and widely, in a way it had not been for some time.

This, however, seems to be giving rise to a larger problem, the resolution of which does not look easy. If Modi continues in power with declining legitimacy, the anger will not be directed only against him. It will be extended to his party members and to the individuals connected to the institutions who have worked tirelessly to build the brand Modi over the years. The kind of response being meted out to the police personnel and the media professionals, who do the public-facing

job without having any part in high-level decision-making, is evidence of that. They face the wrath from both sides: from the government, if they ultimately choose to do their job, and from the people, if they continue to do the government's bidding. And institutional self-reckoning seems unlikely as of now.

A Legitimacy Problem

All three phases produced a different nature of public legitimacy for the government. In the first phase, hope produced a legitimacy largely by consent. Fear produced a sense of it by making the question itself costly to ask. The current moment suggests that the government's public legitimacy is dwindling, though, of course, it is nowhere close to being lost.

Whether this moment amounts to anything more than a news cycle depends on two things. The first is whether the opposition can convert this anger into something more durable than itself. Diffused public anger is not, by itself, a workable political strategy. It can dissipate as quickly as it appeared; it can be talked down by a government eager to deny it was ever genuine in the first place; or it can fragment across the competing organisational interests of the parties trying to claim it. The distance between a crowd at a specific protest site and an electoral coalition capable of contesting power is considerable, and Indian opposition politics has a long history of failing to close it.

The second is how constitutional institutions and the BJP behave now that the government's public legitimacy is visibly under strain. Courts, state governments, media, and the fourth branch institutions have, for a decade, largely deferred to an executive whose authority looked secure. That deference was never purely a matter of coercion; it was also a reasonable bet on which way the wind was blowing. Whether we witness a shift in this pattern, or whether the deeper structural capture of the past decade proves durable enough to absorb a single season of anger, will do more to determine the shape of the next three years.

The most important actor in the shift could prove to be the party itself. During the last 12 years, the BJP has only been the aggregator: pulling in as many defectors as it can from the opposition parties to weaken the political opposition while suppressing the dissenters within, even at the cost of its own organisational unity and strength. With the government's legitimacy being tested, the internal party factions and its fountainhead—the RSS—may look towards charting their independent paths separate from Modi. They must logically aim for long-term survival beyond Modi, though whether this internal tussle takes place and what shape it takes would be revealed in the future.

Concluding Remarks

Given the ongoing tensions in West Asia and the economic crisis looming over the country, along with these student protests, some compare the current dynamics to the pre-1975 Emergency period. I'd be slow to make those comparisons. As India has moved along these three phases, much of the possibility of institutional resistance has been contained, something that bothered Indira Gandhi the most. Even Modi's capability to capture people's imagination will take time to shatter. Indira Gandhi's Emergency emerged from her perpetual weakness and a slew of existential threats. Modi has been able to consolidate both the people and the institutions in his favour, and whether this coalition breaks and what form it takes would be a story to look out for.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anmol Jain

Anmol Jain is an Honorary Senior Fellow at Melbourne Law School and an Associate Editor at Verfassungsblog. He holds law degrees from Yale Law School and National Law University, Jodhpur.Anmol Jain is an Honorary Senior Fellow at Melbourne Law School and an Associate Editor at Verfassungsblog. He holds law degrees from Yale Law School and National Law University, Jodhpur.

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