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What the Sunday verdicts in Maharashtra and Haryana will mean for Narendra Modi



📷 Can the BJP take Haryana and Maharashtra from the Congress? (Reuters/Babu)

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WRITTEN BY

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"Our nation's biggest problem is that we who sit in government think nobody knows more than us, nobody is more honest than us, and nobody cares more about the nation than us. This is wrong. We have to trust 1.25 billion Indians. The government cannot run on suspicions," Narendra Modi told an audience on Thursday, a day after exit polls signalled that the Bharatiya Janata Party would win power in both Haryana and Maharashtra.

Modi has stayed on message in twenty weeks in power. He wants to

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thousand studs at the stubborn soil. You have to scoop it all out in order to lay a new foundation. So far Modi has been erecting dozens of posts. Will they be made pillars? Often it seems he is in a hurry to put his stamp on everything and everybody.

He and his team come up with a scheme here, a plan there, an image elsewhere. And he is not unaware of this irony himself. "Each of these schemes is such that even if we launch one a month it would be a big achievement. But there is a lot of work to do in five years. That is why I take on five tasks every day," he said at the Thursday launch of the Shrameva Jayate Karyakram (Hard Work Alone Triumphs Programme).

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It is a dizzying whirligig. One tweet dubbed the prime minister "Slogan Murugan". It was a trifle unkind, but not as much as the name he coined during the general elections for his predecessor, "Maunmohan" Singh. You do get to hear a lot of your new leader.

So why are the victories in Haryana and Maharashtra important? For several reasons. Ending ten years of Congress rule in Haryana means bringing down the curtain on a decade of crony capitalism. Although Modi shamelessly courted the Jat vote, it will do the state good to be rid for a good spell of politicians like Om Prakash Chautala, the jack-in-the-box Indian National Lok Dal chief and his son, who are in prison for corruption. In Maharashtra, where the nation's richest state was run by a merry-go-round of diffident, dissolute or desperate Congress chief ministers, with Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party playing the harpy in the wings, voters seem ready for a dose of right-wing Hindu capitalism. They will also have signaled their distaste for the kind of chauvinistic rowdiness of Raj Thackeray's followers or the muscle-bound Shiv Sena.

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Pawars and the Chavans in Maharashtra. And not forgetting the Gandhis and the Vadras, whose fates and fortunes are enmeshed closely with people like Bhupinder Singh Hooda, and of course master-builder Kushal Pal Singh of DLF, whose autobiography was aptly titled *Whatever The Odds* and who **got slapped down very hard last weekend** by the Securities and Exchange Board of India.

Conquering the states

Victory in Haryana and Maharashtra will also validate Modi's win in May, and Amit Shah's upstart hand on the BJP's rudder. Shah concentrated entirely on Uttar Pradesh in the Lok Sabha elections, and his claim to fame was the 71 seats he won there alone. The by-elections in UP, Bihar and Rajasthan did not make him look too good, and his credibility was on the line. Adding two states to the BJP's ranks will cement his image as an organiser and poll strategist. The BJP won the Lok Sabha with only 31 per cent of the vote, which you could argue was not an avalanche of support.

Dislodging Congress from the ten states it ruled until last month is critical if Modi wants to push through permanent change on the statute books. Even if it bags these two states when the count is done on Sunday, the BJP will control only seven states, a quarter of the total. Congress will still rule eight.

And Modi will still have to worry about Jammu and Kashmir. The Election Commission will decide this weekend if elections to the state assembly will be held on schedule before deep winter sets in despite the terrible floods that ravaged the Valley in September.

Best of all for Modi, good electoral news will give him much-needed elbow room on three fronts: his own government, the economy and the nation's defence. There are strong signals that Modi will finally end a six-month freeze and expand his cabinet. Whether he can find high-quality talent for key ministries like defence, water and sanitation, rural development, law, and the environment remains to be seen, but he needs to ease up on the pressure on his overworked lieutenants.

Both defence and the economy were treading water for several weeks while an unwell Arun Jaitley went in and out of hospital. Soon after Jaitley took up office again, **two key appointments were made in the Finance Ministry**: Arvind Subramanian, a no-nonsense developmental economist who has had no qualms in ticking off the Modi government when it put its feet wrong, was named the Chief Economic Adviser.

Even more interesting was the humiliating shuffling of Finance Secretary Arvind Mayaram exactly a year before his retirement to the sinecure of the Tourism Ministry. Mayaram, who

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distribution reforms in BJP-ruled Rajasthan. It was clear that Modi does not mind grabbing the best talent for his central command even if it means undercutting his juniors.

The Subramanian-Mehrishi appointments will work well with Reserve Bank of India governor Raghuram Rajan in fashioning two key Modi/Jaitley goals—revamping the central bank's autonomy, and drafting a powerful budget for fiscal 2015-16. The signs are propitious: falling food prices and lower consumer inflation; a narrowing current-account deficit; and slowly quickening manufacturing activity.

A full-time defence minister will let Jaitley focus on the economy. While Modi has led a frenetic foreign-policy drive, there have been serious skirmishes with Pakistan along the western frontier, and an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation with China in Ladakh. Pounding the Pakistanis with heavy firepower, and standing firm against the Chinese, have begun to trace the muscular defence policy that Modi was expected to bring in.

It is not just nuclear-armed neighbours that need telling off: Modi also needs to prepare for the looming threat from ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or simply, the Islamic State), and the imminent spread of the Ebola virus. So far Modi has not had to tackle a huge national emergency; the Kashmir floods were localised and not well managed. Now, as the weather turns cooler, it's time for the "more governance" part of Modi's mission.

Will he finally deliver?

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