

For B'day Bash, Modi Must Seize the Economic Day

The Needle's Eye



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It says something for the Congress that Sonia Gandhi has been its president for nearly 18 years, a longer unbroken stretch than anybody in the family she married into. Night after night on our TV screens, the usual suspects, ageing Congress leaders, pick apart the chicken-entrails of this middleman's diary entry or that arms dealer's Italian tryst, and I wonder: where are the younger Congress politicians? Watching the Congress's feeble convulsions over the Agusta-Westland deal, after coal scam, 2G and Commonwealth Games – it looks more and more like a terminally-ill patient administered electric shocks. Is there ever going to be a non-Nehru-Gandhi shepherd for this dysfunctional flock?

I asked Sachin Pilot, who heads the Rajasthan Congress, why no younger leader was standing up to be counted in the party. He said good young leaders had been named to head the party in states units. "There will be a paradigm shift when Rahul becomes Congress president," Pilot said. Rahul? Now there's a 5G solution for a party in dynastic sclerosis.

Two years ago this week, India had completed 16th general elections, and the writing was clearly on the wall for the Congress. I wrote then that after Jawaharlal Nehru, every leader from the family had had great power thrust upon her or him without earning it at the grass-roots: Indira in 1966, Rajiv in 1984, Sonia in 1997. Despite Pilot's optimism, and the mixed report card for the Modi government two-fifths into its term, it does not look like we are going to see a revitalised Congress rising.

There is much to worry about as we head deeper into a scorching summer, but the attention of the government as well as the public is riveted by the latest sensation. Too much time and resource are consumed by elections. After May 19 when the results of the state elections come in we will barely have time to draw breath before

the five elections next year – including the big one in UP and a potential upset in Punjab – and then the seven in 2018.

There is talk that Modi will reshuffle his cabinet around his



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second anniversary. The trouble is that, like India itself, Modi is fishing in a shallow pool of talent. A study by CMS in 15 states released last week on the government's performance noted that Modi is seen as a long-haul leader and gets a

62% approval rating. He towers over all his colleagues. But "Modi needs to avoid being viewed as 'poll bound PM' as people see his speeches on news media more often in that context," CMS said. Despite his dozens of overseas trips, Modi's foreign minister Sushma Swaraj won the highest rating, followed by Home Minister Rajnath Singh and Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu.

The first two years of the new government ought to have been replete with banner-headline achievements. There have been many incremental reforms: the government has not done a very good job of presenting them on a convincing dashboard. On two fronts though – reigning in the corruption that overshadowed the second term of the Congress-led UPA government, and controlling the black-money economy, Modi deserves much credit. He does worse on his legislative scorecard, with both the GST and land bill in deep freeze. The government is not creating jobs, fast enough or numerous enough. And India's skilling crisis grows by the day.

A senior economist I spoke with quoted a foreign entrepreneur who complained about the high cost of finding app-writers in her country. How about Indian soft-

ware engineers, he asked. They over-promise, under-deliver; they promise what they can't deliver, and what they deliver is poor quality, she told him.

S Ramadorai, the former head of TCS who is chairman of both the National Skill Development Corporation and the National Skill Development Agency, does not agree. He points to the scaling up of skills within India's software industry over the past three decades. Still, although the Modi government aims to skill 400 million young Indians 2022, which is 75 years after independence, Ramadorai says not to expect miracles.

He has been in this key skilling advisory role for about five years. Creating a strong ecosystem for both demand and supply and linking it through technology is crucial, he says. "But the institutional mechanisms are not there, the agencies are not there, the policy framework is not there, the apprenticeship legislation is not there, labour reforms are not there, state-level changes are not there," he says.

Modi will do well to shake up his economic ministries. In the end, they matter the most, and they matter more than the next election.