

The Needle's Eye



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KALBAG

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The Lights Go On In BJP's Shop Window

Five years ago the Centennial Group and the Asian Development Bank issued an interesting report titled "India 2039: An Affluent Society". There is a lot to read there; the Congress party had just been re-elected, and it seemed to have been handed a decisive second chance that would enable it to get out of the divisive coalition politics of its first term. We all know how the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance frittered away this groundswell of support, and this past weekend, watching the results roll in from Haryana and Maharashtra and the further humiliation of the Congress party, I dusted off my copy of the 2009 report and saw these chapter headings:

- * Create a smarter, more focused, agile and more credible government
- * Retool the civil service to meet the needs of today and tomorrow
- * Focus on the long term and open the public-private dialogue
- * Support competitive markets and prevent capture of state organs
- * Inculcate a code of self-discipline and ethical behaviour within the business community
- * Implement priorities, monitor results, ensure transparency and en-

force accountability

- * Reverse the deterioration in political governance

How many of those points will be achieved, how many remain, and will change be permanent? Over the past several days, the Narendra Modi government has begun to move from a feint-and-parry posture to a thrust-and-engage stance. It deregulated diesel prices, said it would directly pay cooking-gas subsidies to beneficiaries' bank accounts, issued an ordinance to start to bring some clean procedure into the coal-block mess, and promised that the names of people who have illegally stashed black money in Swiss bank accounts will soon begin to be made known.

How does the mood change? One of India's top retailers told me the tide had reversed in a dramatic manner over the three or four days preceding Deepavali. Footfalls had been subdued in his stores and supermarkets, he said, but there was a sudden surge; people were flooding bazars and malls and shops, and if the tempo continued, he saw nothing but very good news in the months ahead. "Let's face it, the economy was in pretty poor shape, people were worried, and SMEs

(small and medium enterprises) were not doing well," he said. All it took was a few positive actions by the government.

Modi himself will be spending Deepavali in Srinagar on the day you read this column "with our sisters & brothers affected by the unfortunate floods". This is another bold gesture, but it is obviously not altruistic. The Election Commission is about to announce dates for polling – the current Assembly's term ends in mid-January. Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has already urged a postponement because of the devastation, but polling will be hard in deepest snow-bound winter. The Bharatiya Janata Party and the People's Democratic Party each won three of the state's six Lok Sabha seats in May. The BJP is gearing up to grab an unprecedented seat or two in the Kashmir valley; if the exiled Pandits vote in strength for the BJP it might well wrest the Amirakadal and Habbakadal seats from the ruling National Conference. If that happens, the BJP could, with help from an ally or two, be in sight of power.

This will be Modi's fourth visit to Kashmir after taking power in May



ANIRBAN

and it will closely follow weeks of extremely heavy exchanges of fire by India and Pakistan across the border and ceasefire line across the state. Defence and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley put India's aggressive response in stark terms in a television interview on Tuesday: "When Pakistan used to fire, we always had a shield in our hand. This time we also had a sword," he said.

Soon after the festival, new governments will be installed in Haryana and Maharashtra. As I wrote last week, Modi will pick new and un-

tried chief ministers in both states. Modi's old fellow foot soldier Manohar Lal Khattar, not a household name in Haryana, will take office as CM on the 26th. In Maharashtra there is a swayamvar in progress, as Jaitley put it: which suitor will the bashful BJP garland? The Shiv Sena's Uddhav "Makepeace" Thackeray is now rowing furiously back from his bellicosity. Sharad "Power" Pawar and his NCP are trying to buy insurance against future prosecution by offering unconditional support, but it is clear that Devendra Fadnis, another long-time RSS faithful, will be the next Maharashtra CM.

How is Congress going to pick itself up off the floor after being counted out in both these contests? The ignominy of being in third place should have triggered a savage cleansing of the party. Instead, its senior apparatchiks say "drastic" reforms are about to happen, but after the elections in J&K and Jharkhand. Will this mean the possible exit of the Gandhis? "No way," said former minister Veerappa Moily. "that will mean the party will disintegrate." I turned to a younger Congress leader, Sachin

Pilot, for clues to how the party can reinvent itself. He told me about the turnaround in Rajasthan, whose state unit he heads. Five months after winning a huge majority in the Rajasthan assembly elections in 2013, the BJP's Vasundhara Raje engineered another sweep, grabbing all of the state's 25 in the Lok Sabha. It became clear that four assembly seats would fall vacant when their holders moved to parliament. When by-elections were held for these four seats, Pilot swung into action and spoke at 145 rallies. Congress snatched three seats from the BJP.

"The pink press writes about (Raje's) labour and food-distribution reforms, but the common man wants water, electricity, roads." Crime was up 21 per cent in the state, Pilot said, most homes get only six hours of electricity a day, and 15,000 police posts are vacant. I checked and found that Raje, who boasts a small 11-person cabinet although she has 160 legislators, herself controls no fewer than 47 ministries. There is a lesson here about too much centralisation of power: Modi would do well to add it to the tool-kit in the India 2039 report.