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The Political Elevation of Narendra Modi

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A little over two months ago, on 22 January 2013, the President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Nitin Gadkari, who was under a cloud of corruption allegations, was hustled out to make way for a party veteran and former party chief, Rajnath Singh. It was during Singh's earlier tenure as president of India's main opposition party from 2005-2009 that Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi was dropped from the BJP's Parliamentary Board, the party's apex decision-making body. One of the reasons given then for the dropping of Modi was that there was a conflict of interest between being a state chief minister as well as being on the panel to select election candidates. The real reason, many felt, was that some senior BJP leaders had felt threatened by Modi.

But this time around, Singh really had no choice but to re-induct Modi into the party's parliamentary board. Ever since Modi won re-election as Chief Minister of Gujarat for a third term in end-2012, the BJP's rank and file have been clamouring for Modi to be projected as the party's prime ministerial candidate in the next general elections scheduled for 2014.

It seems, however, the decision to bring back Modi to the BJP's Parliamentary Board was not entirely unanimous. There is evidence to suggest that there were some within the BJP who were wary of the appointment of Modi in the fear of being upstaged. But the mood among the party cadre was such that Modi's induction was a certainty. This was not only because of his remarkable electoral success in Gujarat but more due to the recognition that Modi is the party's most popular and saleable face. Significantly Modi's ascendancy was reflected in

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other appointments. Modi's confidant and former Gujarat Home Minister, Amit Shah, who is facing criminal charges, was appointed party general secretary. There are at least two other general secretaries who are believed to have held on to their post due to Modi's backing.

The BJP President, who himself is no mass leader, has had to play a careful balancing act so as to not upset the different factions within the party. The veteran leader and former Deputy Prime Minister, L K Advani, and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), Sushma Swaraj, have got some of their candidates in. But what is noteworthy is the induction of new blood, with 32 of the 51 in the party's new line-up of office-bearers being fresh faces.

The big question of course is to what extent does Modi's elevation in the party hierarchy boost his chances of becoming the party's prime ministerial candidate for the next general election? While the BJP is not going to name a candidate for prime minister in a hurry, there is little doubt that the party has now given its seal of approval for Modi to move from the state to the national level. This can only fuel the ambition of Modi to aspire for the candidacy for PM.

Modi is well aware that he is by far the most popular national leader in the BJP, and he has been positioning himself as prime-minister material, though without ever publicly saying so, over the past few months. At the two-yearly 'Vibrant Gujarat' summit held in January 2013, he was the toast of India's corporate captains, including Ratan Tata, Mukesh Ambani and Anand Mahindra. This of course was not something new, as Modi has traditionally been a favourite of corporate India. A striking feature of the summit, however, was the attendance of a number of delegates from the United States, Britain, Canada and Japan. Many foreign governments, including the US, that were wary of associating with Modi after the 2002 riots in Gujarat have now softened their line. A month later, Modi was at the noted Shri Ram College of Commerce in Delhi talking to a packed audience of students about his vision for India and winning brownie points.

There is little doubt that none of the prime ministerial contenders within the BJP can match Modi in terms of popularity. Advani's moment has passed while Sushma Swaraj and the party's Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House), Arun Jaitley, are not mass leaders. Indeed recent national surveys have shown Modi to be the most popular candidate for India's next prime minister with a quarter of voters backing him. The Congress' Rahul Gandhi is a distant second.

That does not, however, mean that Modi is a shoo-in for the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. Besides his rivals within the BJP who are apprehensive of his ability to singlehandedly grab the limelight, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological brains trust of the BJP, is wary of the larger-than-life persona of Modi which could threaten to swamp the Sangh parivar (the saffron brotherhood comprising the BJP, RSS and like-minded Hindu nationalist organisations). The shadow of the Gujarat riots of course continues to hang over Modi. A large number of Muslims still do not trust him, making him a difficult candidate to manage a coalition government which is what general elections inevitably throw

up in India these days. A case in point is BJP's ally in Bihar, Nitish Kumar, for whom Muslims are a crucial part of his electoral math. Finally, there are doubts as to how far Modi's charisma will travel beyond the Hindi-speaking belt.

Modi's elevation is significant in that he has forced his way back to the BJP's top decision-making body. He will also play a much greater role in the party's national politics. The next few months, beginning with the tricky Karnataka polls in early May, will give an indication of Modi's popularity outside his comfort zone.

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