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A Tale of Two Leaders

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Veteran political leader L K Advani's resignation last week from even the primary membership of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the withdrawal of that resignation a couple of days later made national news. This came close on the heels of the appointment of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as Chairman of the BJP's Election Campaign Committee. The ruling Congress party has refrained from commenting about these developments, stating that these are internal party matters of the BJP. Internally, Congress should be quite pleased at the dissension in the ranks of the BJP and at the announcement by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar that his party would not like to align with the BJP in the forthcoming general election, if they projected Narendra Modi as the leader. Nitish Kumar has made a call for a third front, free of BJP and the Congress, which has had only lukewarm support so far.

It is not easy to untangle this web of developments, unless they are seen from the point of view of the actors. At the top of these is the media that has been interpreting these events. Tavleen Singh's comments on this are as follows:

"Modi is hated by most journalists working in the national media so they have taken great pleasure in pronouncing that if he can have such a polarising effect within his own party, he will certainly destroy the NDA (National Democratic Alliance). No sooner did Advani take back his resignation letter than the English news channels began to speculate about when Nitish Kumar would withdraw the Janata Dal (United) from the alliance. There is the additional problem that most political pundits from academia are even more leftist than us

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hacks so they hate Modi even more than we do. They say this is because of what happened in Gujarat in 2002 but you only need to scratch a little to discover that beneath that veneer lies the real reason. They hate Modi most of all because he has been articulating an economic vision for India that is the direct opposite of the one that the Congress Party has followed for most of its years in power. They hate the way in which he talks about aiming for a prosperous India instead of just one in which poverty removal is the goal. And, to demolish his ideas they spout so-called statistics that seek to prove that Gujarat has not done as well as Modi says it has. Any casual visitor to Gujarat cannot fail to notice the new roads and the new prosperity in the villages but academics rarely bother to travel out of Delhi so they base their opinions on information that they claim is from the Planning Commission”.

Advani as Administrator

Having interacted with Mr Advani over the years, I have always known him to be a humble, decent man whose integrity is beyond reproach. In 1977, he was a minister in the Morarji Desai Government at the centre, and visited the district where I was Collector and District Magistrate; and I was struck by his humility and down-to-earth approach. In later years, in the BJP-led Vajpayee Government at the centre, Advani distinguished himself as a balanced, sober administrator, ready to take on a reformist and not necessarily a populist agenda.

The post-Vajpayee years have not been kind to him. Advani resigned earlier, in the wake of his comment hailing Pakistan’s founder Jinnah as a secular leader, and there is common comment that he is embittered that the party (and the country) have not given him his rightful role. He wishes to lead; and the appointment of Mr Modi as the numero uno for the BJP for the forthcoming elections must rankle with him very much. He ascribes the Modi model to be divisive, and holds the primacy of Modi to be responsible for an important ally, Nitish Kumar, walking away from the NDA.

Modi’s Agenda and Electoral Mood

However, the ground realities appear to be a little different. Mr Modi has articulated a clear economic vision of prosperity that focuses on governance and delivery. He has succeeded in implementing ideas in Gujarat that has made it an investor-friendly state at a time when many Indian businessmen are looking to invest outside the country rather than within. The Modi rhetoric appeals to the younger generation, which is tired of the Congress homilies of subsidies and ‘aam aadmi’ (common man). In short, he comes across as a clear leader, strong, articulate and with a vision for prosperous India. The rank and file of the party appears to be strongly behind him and his vision.

And the media hates him even more for being so sure of himself.

At another level is a subtle analysis of the electoral mood. The BJP has little presence in the southern states, and cannot win any seats in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. Its

strongholds are Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Rajasthan, and, to some extent, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Maharashtra, Delhi and Himachal Pradesh. It needs to do well in this belt, and secure as many seats as or more than the Congress.

The mood in these states is anti-UPA (the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance); and the BJP needs to capitalise on this changing perception. Even in Bihar, Nitish Kumar would be hard put to hold his own without the BJP support – it is likely that others may take away even some of the existing seats.

Most importantly, it is UP which is crying out for change. Tired of Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party, tired of the empty Congress promises, it is looking for an alternative. In UP, Modi's man, Shah, will be the chief election organiser for the BJP; and it will be a Modi-led initiative. Bringing back Kalyan Singh, a respected leader in UP, is an important move. It is clear that there is a different articulation of election strategy – positive, development-driven and aggressive – and, perhaps, this makes Mr Advani feel redundant. Corporate India would also wish for a clear reformer to lead rather than indecisive leaders.

It is also clear that the Modi plank is likely to be an inclusive plank that will appeal to all minorities (in spite of the popular perception), and not an exclusive plank that Mr Advani is likely to be associated with. It is also clear that the other BJP leaders are willing to fall in behind this articulation, even though they may be nurturing ambitions of eventual leadership of the party.

In the circumstances, perhaps Mr Advani has only hurt his own image by this resignation and its subsequent withdrawal. There will always be place for him as a senior adviser, and the rank and file can never forget that they came to power in the nineties on the strength of the Advani strategy and Advani rhetoric. However, 2013 is not 1991, and the *Rath Yatra* rhetoric would no longer work; and the Modi alternative appears to be an interesting one.

Whether these initiatives would translate into significant number of seats still remains to be seen.

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