

A MANDATE FOR ACTION

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THE INDIAN electorate has shown great wisdom in returning the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to power with even a bigger majority than before.



Narendra Modi's victory has been stunning, more so because until the exit polls appeared, this scale of success was ruled out, the likelihood of the BJP falling short of numbers was seriously discussed and Opposition leaders entertained the possibility, until the last minute, of forming a government by stitching together an alternative coalition to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Fortunately, the disastrous prospect of a brittle government at the Centre has been avoided.

Internal cohesion

To address pressing domestic and external challenges, India needs a strong and stable government. To be more effective internationally, we need to become internally stronger. For long, India has been seen as too mired in managing its internal difficulties to be considered a credible power at the international level.

The resilience of our democracy is admired, but its chaotic nature is also seen as a handicap in taking tough decisions to improve governance. Managing Centre- state relations; handling regional aspirations; the preference of regional parties for a weak Centre; the insurgencies in parts of the country; the majority-minority schisms; caste divisions, the festering Kashmir sore that draws negative international attention — all create the image of a country too preoccupied with putting its house in order. India is unable to affirm itself on the international stage with the vigour that befits a country of its geographic and demographic size, its long history and distinctive contribution to arts and culture and human civilisation.

Modi now has the mandate to address these issues. However, managing a country of 1.25 billion people with all its diversity within the limits of a checks and balance system that is inherent in any genuine democracy will not be easy.

NARA, or National Ambitions and Regional Aspirations, the new acronym coined by Modi provides the theoretical framework to create greater harmony between the Centre and the states, which is important in view of BJP's lack of success so far in penetrating southern India, barring Karnataka. The endless election cycle in the country that distracts from governance at the Centre and creates an atmosphere of constant political confrontation, directly involving the Prime Minister, has to give way to simultaneous elections at the national and state levels.

The judiciary has become all too powerful, is not accountable to anyone, and has begun intruding into the executive sphere. Judicial encroachment should not be confused with judicial independence. Judicial reforms are imperative, including in the appointment of judges.

If by November 2020 the NDA gets a majority in the Rajya Sabha, it will be able to introduce needed reforms in this and other areas.

Nation first

Modi has struck the right inclusive note by saying that he sees himself as the PM of all those who voted for the BJP and those who did not, and reassuring the minorities whom he views as victims of fear-mongering by the secular parties to preserve their vote banks.

Protecting the constitutional rights of minorities — which must be done — and strengthening nationalism in the country are not contradictory. Contrary to claims by secular circles in India, nationalism is not opposed to a commitment to democracy. Donald Trump or not, no other country is as 'nationalist' as America, given its claim to exceptionalism and drive to shape the world order in accordance with its national values. Europe, where nationalism is rising, traces its identity to its JudeoChristian roots. Japan is deeply wedded to its homogenous ethnic identity. Russia is today increasingly attached to its Slavic identity and the Orthodox Church. Authoritarian China believes in Han supremacy and actively promotes nationalist sentiments to counter external challenges.

The Opposition in India between secularism and cultivating a stronger sense of nationalism in our society, based on the civilisational roots of 80 per cent of our population, has not helped to make us internally strong.

In all the democratic and non-democratic countries cited here, minority focus is not the centre of nation-building. It is quite to the contrary, in fact.

Already seen as a global leader, the powerful mandate he has received strengthens Modi's hand in dealing with foreign interlocutors.

Cementing relations

He has to deal with many challenges. The US has to be handled with great dexterity because of the strategic gap between its political and economic posture towards India. The traditionally close ties with Russia have to be insulated from our deepening strategic ties with America and its own strategic closeness to China and overtures towards Pakistan. Relations with China have to be managed through tactical engagement and strategic hedging. A premature engagement of Pakistan should be resisted as it would contradict the position on national security and terrorism expressed powerfully during the elections with positive electoral returns.

Modi's ambition to make India a leading power has to be advanced in the next five years by maintaining the independence of our foreign policy through cooperation and resistance as necessary, building an indigenous defence manufacturing base, and making India even more investment-friendly for both foreign and Indian capital.

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Foreign Secretary. The views expressed are personal.