

The One-man Government in New Delhi

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Narendra Modi's proclivity to take all decisions by himself is responsible for the demonetisation disaster.

Immediately after Narendra Modi became Prime Minister of India in May 2014, there was considerable speculation in Delhi about who his media adviser would be. This was natural given the speed and fury of Modi's election campaign. There were expectations from journalists that the new media adviser would keep them regularly updated with the goings-on in his "fast-paced" government. A high-profile media adviser to the Prime Minister had been the norm in Lutyens' Delhi since Indira Gandhi's time, when the well-known journalist H Y Sharada Prasad occupied the position. Even during Lal Bahadur Shastri's short tenure as Prime Minister, his media portfolio was handled by another well-known journalist, Kuldip Nayar.

"Imported" from Gujarat

The media was surprised, therefore, that after great efforts Modi found a nondescript bureaucrat, Jagdish Thakkar, to serve as his public relations officer (PRO), who was given a status equal to that of a deputy secretary to the Government of India (GoI). Thakkar had been "imported" from Gujarat, where he was a PRO in the chief minister's office. His job had been to distribute press releases, not articulate Modi's policies. It soon became clear that in Delhi too, Thakkar's job would not be very different. He was chary of sharing even his mobile phone number with journalists, which many found rather unusual. His appointment was an indicator of the shape of things to come. Modi's government is not an open one. Its policies and programmes are not debated in the various forums before these are finalised.

What subsequently happened gave a clue to how else the government would be run. Thakkar turned out to be only one of the worthies who were parachuted in to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) straight from the chief minister's office in Gujarat. P K Mishra, Modi's principal secretary at the time of the 2002 riots, was brought in as additional principal secretary to the Prime Minister. Officers like Arvind Sharma, Rajiv Topno and Sanjay Bhavsar, who had worked at various times in the chief minister's office in Gujarat, found themselves in the rarefied environment of the PMO. Other confidantes of Modi—like

Hiren Joshi who was appointed as Officer on Special Duty (Information Technology)—were paradropped to South Block. Other important officers also came down, including Hasmukh Adhia, who had been principal secretary to the then chief minister of Gujarat, Modi; Adhia has been perched as the revenue secretary.

As per norms, important appointments in the government have to be cleared by the Appointment Committee of the Cabinet (ACC), of which the Prime Minister is the chairperson. This, in real terms, means that the appointments have to be ratified by the PMO. Reputedly, this job of vetting officers in the PMO has devolved on P K Mishra, even as a disproportionately high number of officers (from Gujarat, not necessarily Gujaratis) are being appointed, sometimes even raising eyebrows in the bureaucracy about the manner in which these appointments are being pushed through. The latest in the line is the lateral transfer of Rupak Dutta, an IPS officer of 1981 batch of Karnataka cadre from the position of special director, Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to special secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs. Dutta was in charge of crucial investigations and is certainly not one to be a caged parrot. Dutta was sent off just as the CBI chief retired and before a shortlist could be sent to the committee that will select the new CBI chief. The selection panel includes the leader of the opposition in Parliament. An interim CBI chief has been appointed and this is none other than Rakesh Asthana, an IPS officer of the 1984 batch of the Gujarat cadre, who worked closely with the Modi government in Gandhinagar. If the government delays the constitution of the selection panel, Asthana can continue for a long time. His appointment as interim chief is now a subject of litigation at the apex court.

According to a senior government official, “The government is being run by the PMO and in turn the PMO is being operated like the CMO of Gujarat,” suggesting that even the performance of Modi ministers is being actively monitored closely by the PMO. “Thank god, Gujarat is a relatively small state with a small IAS and IPS cadre. Otherwise there would be more Gujarat officers manning top positions in Delhi,” he adds.

Running Solo

With a tightly controlled government operating in the shadow of the PMO, the government itself has metamorphosed into a kind of a one-man show. In fact, even an analyst like Rajiv Kumar, disposed kindly to Modi, notes in his recent book *Modi and His Challenges* (2016) that the Prime Minister’s approach is marked by over-centralisation and unquestioned loyalty of civil servants to Modi himself: “It is a model that revolves around Modi’s persona and requirements and not a structurally-driven model for sustained development.” He adds that “the big brother is watching you” syndrome is beginning to appear on Raisina Hills and observes that there is “very limited degrees of freedom even for Modi’s senior cabinet colleagues.”

It was in these circumstances that Modi sprung a rude shock on 8 November by demonetising ₹500 and ₹1,000 notes, which in one swoop removed 86% of the currency in

use, paving the way for the contraction of the economy and fall in national output. It is unbelievable that a politically savvy Modi would deliberately do something like this, which would hit the rural poor and the unorganised sector and, thus, his own vote bank.

The only way that Modi would fall in this trap was by being misled by ill-informed advisers, or if he had not consulted anyone for this momentous decision. The latter is more likely, given Modi's nature. Interestingly, Power Minister Piyush Goyal asserted on 3 December that Finance Minister Arun Jaitley knew about demonetisation. This created a flutter because the finance minister has to be privy to such a decision, and, in fact, be part of such a move. Goyal's strong assertion made many wonder whether the finance minister was actually in the dark about the demonetisation or at least about its timing.

The RBI governor is one functionary without whose formal nod, currency notes cannot be sent out of circulation. But, that may have been true in spirit when Raghuram Rajan was the boss of Mint Street. However life was made miserable for Rajan, who decided to opt out. The incumbent governor, Urjit Patel's stature is no more than that of a joint secretary to the GoI, it would appear, given that he played second fiddle to economic affairs secretary Shaktikanta Das in the post-demonetisation press conference. On paper, the RBI governor has a stature far above that of GoI's economic affairs secretary, and it is unlikely that Patel could have stood up and proffered an alternate course of action to Modi. The same can be said for the other mandarins who might have had any inkling of this move (although this looks unlikely).

Modi was preceded by Manmohan Singh, who was the Prime Minister for 10 years. But, the economist-turned-bureaucrat-turned-politician was widely seen as Prime Minister to Queen Sonia, and not as Prime Minister of India. With scams breaking out with amazing regularity during the tenure of the United Progressive Alliance II (2009-14), voters sought a strong Prime Minister who was his own man and could clean the Augean stables. Thus, they put their faith in Narendra Modi. Earlier, there was a powerless Manmohan Singh and, now, we have Narendra Modi, who runs his government solo and listens to nobody's counsel. The latter can be equally, if not more, dangerous than the former.

What is worse is that Modi, now caught on the wrong foot, is trying to make no amends. Even as the life of ordinary Indians has been made miserable, the only concession Modi has made is to change his discourse. While demonetisation was earlier a strategy to clamp down on terror financing, counterfeit notes, and black money, it is now for the introduction of a cashless and digital economy.

Instead of this, Modi should introspect. Running a country as huge as India is not a one-man show and cannot be run from the PMO.