

Modi is here for another seven years

The PM is probably even more popular today than he was when he was first elected

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In October 2013, several months before the Lok Sabha elections were due, I wrote, on this page, that Indians had already decided that Narendra Modi would be the next prime minister. Now, with the next Lok Sabha poll still two years away, I'll make another prediction. Most Indians believe that Modi will win the next election and, therefore, a second term as prime minister.

This is not an overly extravagant claim. Opinion polls by various research agencies published over the last week suggest that there is no anti-incumbency factor. Modi is probably even more popular today than he was when he was first elected. The latest survey suggests that if a general election were to be held now, the NDA would win 48 % of the vote (far more than in 2014) and over 300 seats. In the two years that remain before polls are due, can the Opposition reverse this state of affairs? In theory, yes. But in practice, it is difficult to defeat Modi.

There are several reasons for this, many of

which the Opposition either does not see or fails to recognise.

The first and most important is leadership. It is no accident that Modi rose to national prominence in 2011/12 at a time when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh seemed especially ineffectual and uninspiring. Sonia Gandhi was ill and had gone abroad for treatment. And it was not clear what Rahul Gandhi's role was.

In the five years since then nobody has seemed like a credible challenger to Modi's charisma and aura of strength. The public mood is anti-dynasty (at election after election, dynasts from all parties have been trounced), no new leaders have emerged and the one politician who offered a fresh alternative—Arvind Kejriwal—has seen his aura fade. The second reason for Modi's continuing popularity is that he has not betrayed the central theme of his appeal: Anti-corruption. Few people believe that the prime minister is personally greedy and there hasn't been one significant, corruption scandal during the life of his government.

But the Opposition's main problem is that Modi is a far shrewder politician than his rivals. We forget now how different a prime minister he is now from the man who first took office. Then, he wanted to be an international statesman, sought to make peace with Pakistan and moved legislation that benefited Indian industry. That kind of prime minister



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PTI

was easier to attack. Rahul Gandhi's best moments came when he portrayed the government as a "suit-boot ki sarkar." Others made fun of Modi's global ambitions. Nothing much came of his foreign travels, of his meetings with the Chinese and American presidents, and of his overtures to Nawaz Sharif.

But swiftly and deftly, almost without the Opposition realising it, Modi has recast his prime ministership. He no longer bothers to cultivate the CII, the businessmen who once seemed close have discreetly moved away, the foreign policy ambitions have been scaled

down and his focus has moved from his original middle class core constituency to India's poor.

Economists may argue about the merits of demonetisation — as indeed they did about Indira Gandhi's nationalisation of the banks — but there is no doubt that with that one move, Modi has successfully re-invented himself as the scourge of the corrupt rich and as a prime minister who will reboot the economy while wiping out the accumulated hoards of black money.

The Opposition can argue — as it did in the 1971 election when it fought Indira Gandhi on bank nationalisation — that economic gimmicks will actually damage the economy in the long run. But nobody is listening. The battle for the public imagination has already been won.

So what is the Opposition's best hope? Well, if history is anything to go by, Modi can only be felled by unforeseen events that we have no control over. Mrs Gandhi's goodwill disappeared after the global oil price hike of 1973 which ravaged the Indian economy. Rajiv Gandhi's massive mandate was punctured by Swedish Radio's claims about kickbacks in the Bofors scandal.

So yes, it is entirely possible that something startling will come out of nowhere to damage Modi. In such situations, it does not matter who leads the Opposition: In 1977 and 1989, the victory was shared by squabbling little men. But unless that happens, we are looking at seven more years of Narendra Modi. And there is very little that the Opposition can do about it.

The views expressed are personal

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