

Modi's Vision for the Present Tenure

S Narayan

Summary

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi outlined the priorities for his government in his speech on the country's Independence Day on 15 August 2019. They differ significantly from earlier patterns of development.

There is an indication of the direction of policy and initiatives in the Independence Day speech of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 15 August 2019, and, in many ways, the priorities that he has laid down are somewhat different from his predecessors, or indeed, even different from what he had set out for himself in his first five years in office.

The speech started by recounting the government's actions so far, which included the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir, the passage of the legislation for abrogation of triple talaq, and the legislation for identifying individuals, not organizations, as terrorists. He also announced that there would be a Chief of Defense Staff, signifying the concept of theatre-based military commands rather than the existing separation of air, sea and land armies. This part of the speech was entirely about national security, about national interests, and most importantly, about sentiments of nationalism. It may be recalled that this was a major plank of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the election process in April 2019, and that Modi kept repeating the slogans of security and nationalism all through the campaign.

The second set of priorities that he put forth in his speech are equally interesting. Water and availability of clean water for all was a promise that the government had earlier made, and he emphasized that this would now be on mission mode. Parliament recently passed an act doing away with the existing Medical Council of India and replacing it with a different structure and institution that would be more hands on and supervisory. Modi articulated that public health, particularly his earlier announced health support for all (Ayushman Bharat) programme, would be pushed through, and in the speech, he pointed out that there is a shortage of doctors—hence the need to revamp the medical education system. Interestingly, he focused on population control as a necessity to prevent resource pressures from building up. It is the first time in over four decades that any Prime Minister has spoken about population growth as an issue. On environment, he spoke of a plastics-free environment, and promised legislation and action to implement this.

There was yet another box of priorities, that dealt with economic development. Interestingly, there were new priorities. Of course, infrastructure development was there at the top, but in addition, he added tourism and travel as an important area. The focus was not just on international travelers, but on internal travel as well, and in improving over a 100 destinations in India for domestic travel. The Make in India initiative would be focused on

exports—India is a high energy importing country, and needs to manage the current account deficit carefully. So there would be a focus on exports.

Interestingly, there was no mention of Pakistan in his speech, rather, he said that terrorism was every nation's problem, and every nation in the neighborhood needed to deal with—a veiled pointer to Pakistan.

It sounded like a plan of action speech and Modi is known to prefer a project approach to problems rather than a policy or programme approach. The priorities themselves fit in with the kind of personnel placements that he has made in the government. Cabinet appointments with Dr S Jaishankar for external affairs, Piyush Goyal for commerce and industry and Nitin Gadkari for road infrastructure, are hand-picked for the sectors that he has highlighted. It is interesting that he has not talked about finance or economic affairs, nor has he placed his best team there. In water and health, he has good ministers, and more importantly, handpicked secretaries, who have had long stints in multilateral agencies, with a proven track record of project delivery. Amit Shah, helming the Home Affairs Ministry, has assembled an efficient support team of officers as has been evidenced recently in the efficient way in which his team and he carried through the legislative changes with respect Article 370.

It is also clear that the traditional development models of support to business and taxation improvement concepts have a lesser priority. True, the current slowdown is a matter of concern, and that in due time there would be announcements to rev up the economy, but apart from that, perhaps there would be no focus on economic reforms in the traditional sense for Modi for his current tenure in office. Even without that, the task that he has set out for himself is quite formidable.

Finally, he has broken free from the dependence on the performance of individual states in the delivery of these initiatives and by carefully preparing projects, he could well have them supervised by a core team in headquarters.

.

Dr S Narayan is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a former Chief Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister of India. He can be contacted at snarayan43@gmail.com. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.