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An Insider's View of the First Round of Arm Wrestling in a 'New' Parliament



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The conclusion that emerges is that public enthusiasm and opposition unity are not enough to combat such an incorrigibly authoritarian ruler, who controls the levers of power once again.



Congress members protest outside parliament on July 1. Photo: X/@INCIndia

When some 500 freshly elected members of the Lok Sabha arrived in New Delhi on Sunday, June 23, the mood in the opposition camp was certainly very upbeat.

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The INDIA front, that Narendra Modi and his acolytes had scornfully dismissed as divided and doomed, had managed to give the Bharatiya Janata Party a real fright, with its 237 seats so perilously close to the BJP's 240. There was euphoria among those millions who are opposed to a Hindu Rashtra-based authoritarianism. They are now waiting, in all simplicity and sincerity, for the final shove for Modi to go.

But wishes are not horses. The first indication that Modi was completely impervious to democratic signals was clear when he yanked the two most popular statues of Mahatma **Gandhi and Babasaheb Ambedkar and relocated them**, with other statues as well, to some obscure corner, claiming that it was some new inspirational '*prerna sthal*'. The real reason is that these two statues are the traditional sites of protest for every political party or group, including the BJP and its allies. This wiping out of protest sites was Modi's brazen reply to the quite unambiguous message of the voters of India. And, he carried out his plan in that small gap between the 17th and 18th Lok Sabhas – when there was no elected Speaker or MPs to consult.

Even in choosing the next interim Speaker, he followed his usual provocative style, of **overlooking the claim of the longest-serving MP** – who was from the opposition and a Dalit. He played around with the post and so tense was Om Birla, that he **bowed as low as possible to thank Modi's venerable hand**, when he was finally selected as the Speaker of the 18th Lok Sabha.



Om Birla bows to Modi after election as Speaker.

The President's Address – written by the Modi government – was, as expected, self-laudatory as always, with no sign of moderation, even after the drubbing at the polls.

One witnessed how the prime minister of the world's largest democracy chose to parade around an unequivocal symbol of imperial rule, a sceptre-like staff called the 'sengol', that he had rummaged out of nowhere to display his royal might. He reiterated that votes and numbers mean nothing to a leader who has already toppled nine democratically elected state governments in nine years —obviously with muscle and inducement.

He showed how little he cared for his two alliance partners who helped him cross the half-way line, by throwing crumbs at them during his cabinet formation. By apportioning all critical portfolios to his old trusted cronies, regardless of their efficiency or delivery, he self-certified that he was no magnanimous Atal Bihari Vajpayee or Manmohan Singh in coalition-management skills.



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This reveals a chink, indicating a major deficiency that may prove dangerous in days to come, but one never knows where and how India's plutocrats will chip in to plug it and bolster his regime. They have gained unimaginable wealth and have too much to lose if he goes. It is time to accept this stark reality – and with Modi's unprecedented splurging during elections, money is mattering much too much for any worthwhile challenge to his billionaire-backed raj.

The PM delivered the opening bouncer in parliament with an uncalled for reference to Indira Gandhi's Emergency. He was hoping to split the INDIA bloc into 'Congress versus the rest', as the latter had suffered under it. But it backfired and the bloc as a whole pounced on Modi's own undeclared Emergency, which it claimed is worse.

A rejuvenated opposition stuck together and made its presence felt – condemning Modi's vindictive rule. In a smart move, they transferred their site of protest from the empty 'Gandhi statue' space to the more prominent Makar Dwar, the main entrance of the new parliament building. Its seven wide steps provide enough space for some 70-80 MPs to stage agitations before an eager news-tracking camera-toting media – that is allowed only upto this point. So, Modi's attempt to eliminate protests also boomeranged on him.

Luck was just not favouring him and even the gods also appeared to be angry – especially in UP, that had recently shattered his invincibility. Varanasi's electorate had almost let him down; the voters of holy Ayodhya deserted him and **rainwater leaked from the faulty roof** of the over-publicised temple; Mathura presented him with a bad accident; Haridwar suffered the fury of floods and deaths and then, almost 120 hundred **pilgrims sadly lost their lives at a religious congregation in Hathras**.

The energised opposition hauled Modi's new government over hot coals – focusing on the series of man-made problems and scams. Indians had become used to water leaking through the roofs of public buildings when heavy rains crashed on them, but now they saw how **critical exam papers kept leaking left and right**, while **roofs and bridges kept crashing** all around.

The first day after the President's Address was a test of nerves and muscles, in true arm wrestling style – as the opposition demanded an immediate discussion on the repeated exam scandals. When the Speaker refused, the opposition walked out and **Lok Sabha was adjourned**. But the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha decided to carry on the proceedings, even as the entire opposition was on its feet, shouting slogans, demanding a discussion on the scam. They even went down to the 'well', which has lately started inviting suspensions. But as the treasury benches went on lauding the government, all INDIA parties walked out together in disgust.

The actual debate took place on July 1 and in the Lok Sabha, as the new Leader of the opposition, Rahul Gandhi, **embarrassed the prime minister and his brand of Hindutva** quite effectively. Team Modi started distorting his words, but INDIA had scored its goal. Other speakers from INDIA-parties like the Trinamool Congress, the Samajwadi Party and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, continued to attack, with razor-sharp logic, mauling Modi in the Lok Sabha.

In the Rajya Sabha, the opposition trampled all over the government in a no-holds-barred political assault. It was refreshing to see so many citizens glued to the TV to watch opposition leaders socking the government with new gusto, even as the latter fielded their most eloquent defenders. The opposition's strikes were certainly more spirited in this session, but the viciousness with which the regime responded shows what lies ahead of us.

PM Modi's long-winded and vitriolic reply singled out Rahul Gandhi as child-like and a failure – diatribes that were in poor taste. He pounced

only on the Congress in both the Houses, revealing a dangerous psychological obsession and disconnect with the reality of a multi-party opposition.

It was clear that Modi was rattled, quite badly so.

The opposition's slogans in the were loud and clearly heard — but not seen, as camera control is with the regime and is patently one sided. In both Houses, Modi's rage was uncontrollable, to cover which he was back to his blatant chest-thumping and theatrics. He boasted repeatedly that the people had voted him back with a record majority for the third time because of his outstanding performance.

So full of misrepresentations and provocations was his speech that the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha rose, to interject but was disallowed by the Chair. The entire opposition was on its feet, and **finally decided to walk out of the PM's speech**, as it was impossible to impossible to suffer in silence as the PM went on with his unending rants, exaggerations and insults. Such a walkout during PM's reply was an extreme form of protest, that is rarely undertaken. The Chair has reportedly used castigating terms like “undignified”, “disgraceful”, “insulting” and “condemnable”.

It is clear that despite Modi's electoral battering and the spirited combat by the reinvigorated opposition, his genetic intolerance prevailed. He ignored universal protests and operationalised the three new draconian criminal laws during this session. These empower the police to arrest us without a warrant and keep us in police custody for intolerable periods, upto 90 days. The government now has the power to book one and all under anti-terrorist provisions.

Modi has also given effect to several sections of another menacing law, the Telecommunications Act — that had been hustled through in December last, along with the three new criminal laws. To ensure their smooth passage, 146 MPs were suspended from both Houses, marking a new nadir in democracy. This Telecom Act introduces a surveillance regime that no other democratic country in the world suffers.

The conclusion that emerges is that public enthusiasm and opposition unity are not enough to combat such an incorrigibly authoritarian ruler, who controls the levers of power once again.

In politics, all that matters is who holds the steering wheel – even if he is a lying churl or an obnoxious rake. As long as the opposition is united in parliament and has impressive numbers (neither of which can, incidentally, be guaranteed always), Modi will not be able to change much of the constitution. This is, indeed, a relief, but the inveterate intimidator is sure to ram through whatever legislation he wants, as numbers favour him. The recent electoral verdict has clearly shown him the limitations of *Hindutvavad*, even in his hitherto-assured 'Hindi-Hindu' belt. While we arm-wrestle him in parliament, it is time to strengthen continuous communication with the people.

Many have seen through Modi's model of jobless growth, as they struggle with uncontrollable inflation and abysmally low incomes. It is time to unravel and expose Modi's cosy and profitable nexus with big capital, so as to de-hypnotise those who still do not believe how the billionaire raj he has created keeps him in power. It's going to be a long haul and the encouraging poll result of 2024 only signals that the real battle to reclaim

India has just begun.

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