Farm laws: The political rationale of the repeal

The reduction of fuel prices, extension of free ration, and repeal of the laws will neutralise the Opposition’s line of attack

Since Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi announced his decision to pilot the repeal of the farm laws, analysts have ascribed it to two factors.

First, with the farmers’ protest deeply entangled with the issue of Sikh identity politics, there was growing concern in the establishment that radical elements may take advantage of the situation.

Second, the upcoming assembly elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Punjab, forced the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to change track. It has been suggested that feedback from western UP, in particular, must have played a significant role, as the party is a marginal player in Punjab and the repeal is unlikely to alter its position there.

Both these theories have some truth to them, and the PM’s choice to use the auspicious occasion of Guru Nanak’s 552nd birth anniversary to make this announcement is evidence of what might have transpired to arrive at this political judgment. After all, there must have been deliberations at the highest level, including how the PM’s image may get dented after spending so much political capital on these laws.

In hindsight, this announcement appears to have been in the making for weeks, if not months. After the Supreme Court’s intervention in January, and the subsequent suspension of these laws, a situation of stalemate had left only two viable options with the government — continue with the status quo, or repeal. Status quo, with protesting farmers at the borders, and incidents such as the one in Karnal (where a young Indian Administrative Services officer was giving orders to deal with protesters using force) or in Lakhimpur Kheri (where the son of a Union minister has been accused of mowing down protesters) were becoming costly for the government. The PM was being portrayed as insensitive and anti-farmer. And all of this could have hurt the party’s chances in western UP severely. Winning UP by a considerable margin is of utmost importance for the party to control the political narrative till 2024.

Electoral considerations are the raison d’être for political entrepreneurs. But why wait? The decision to repeal not taken after the court’s intervention, or in the run-up to the assembly elections in March-April 2021, or even after the Karnal and Lakhimpur Kheri incidents in September-October 2021? Why did the government wait for many weeks despite losing political capital?

Political judgement is based on an assessment of what is really going on at a specific historical moment, what actions are possible (not the mere contemplation of it), and what are the chances of success, in probabilistic terms, of each action to achieve certain ends. A political actor must also assess the opportunities and constraints of a given situation, while also considering the possible actions of others in conditions marked by uncertainty.

The key to any political judgment is timing. The political actor must make a move at the right time to deny any advantage to opponents from the emerging situation. It must also be calibrated in a way that not only protects the actor from the crisis, but also turns the crisis into an opportunity. And the success of this depends on political skill and communication abilities.

The parting of Captain Amarinder Singh from the Congress and his signal to openly embrace the BJP in Punjab opened up space for the party to fish in troubled political waters in the case of a hung verdict. Not that the repeal will dramatically improve the BJP’s chances in the state, but ground reports indicate that the party’s candidates would have found it difficult to even campaign in the upcoming polls under the prevailing circumstances.

The decision to first lower fuel prices, then extend free ration schemes to the poor till March, and, finally, the promise to repeal these laws in the winter session of Parliament has effectively neutralised three key issues on which the Opposition was mobilising voters, especially in UP and Punjab.

The PM, by making this announcement at a time of his choosing, has put the Opposition on the backfoot. In his address, he chose his words carefully and attributed the repeal to the fact that a section of farmers could not understand the benefits of these laws and took the blame for this upon himself. While analysts tend to overinterpret every event and use maximalist phrases, actors know that political capital is neither created nor destroyed by one event. It is built gradually, and political entrepreneurs can always find ways to regain trust.

How the PM and his party communicate the decision to repeal laws from here on in will determine their political and electoral success. However, two ramifications of this moment are clear.

First, unless the government and farm leaders find creative ways to engage, the momentous opposition faced on the land acquisition and farm laws means that the reforms in the agriculture sector will now be limited to discussions in seminar rooms for the foreseeable future. And the lesson learnt may put much-needed policy reforms in other contentious sectors on the back-burner.

Second, the power of street mobilisation and its ability to force the government will surely be misinterpreted in the coming days by vested interests on both sides. While democracy gets deepened by engaging with popular sentiments on the ground, the evident populist fiat of the repeal may further erode the faith in parliamentary procedures and democratic norms.

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