

# What All The Protests Are Telling BJP

## Reform is tough. Reach out to those affected before you announce the big change

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Traders protested GST, labour unions protested against changes in labour laws, there were protests in J&K after the revocation of Article 370, Muslims protested CAA and NRC, farmers protested farm laws, and most recently young job seekers have protested Agnipath.

Let's not get into the merits and demerits of each scheme, which have been debated in opinion pages. Let's ask another key question. What are the social and political implications for BJP when it frequently finds itself on a collision course with various interest groups?

### India's diversity makes consensus hard:

To be fair to BJP, it is very hard to build a consensus on any reform measure in a diverse country like India. It is well-established that most reform measures, especially given the way they get implemented, create winners and losers. And it is natural for those who perceive themselves to be on the losing side to lodge their protest.

- But why does a governing party with an excellent ground game, a famed organisational machinery as well as a proven social media strategy fail to anticipate the nature and level of such protests?
- Is it because on many occasions BJP's government did not do enough consultation with groups that its proposed policy measures were likely to affect?

Often, it first announces the policy and then opens channels of communication, rather than the other way round. Crisis managers appointed by the government also seem to shift

goalposts on the intended outcome of the policy measure. This raises the possibility that in efforts to calm protesters, there may be so many policy tweaks that the original message of the policy measure gets obscured.

**Super insulated babus don't help:** In high decibel and highly competitive electoral democracies like India, politicians are often better informed about public sentiments than bureaucrats.

- So, the question arises whether greater involvement of political actors will help. Because it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the bureaucracy at the top is largely insulated from societal pulls and pressures.
- Their feedback loop, in comparison to that of politicians, is very limited and thus bureaucrats often fail to fathom how ordinary citizens are going to react. And this creates its own set of challenges when it comes to foreseeing expected pushback on any policy measure.

A related point is that the role of politicians, who can act as a bridge between the government and aggrieved interest groups, becomes more crucial in an environment of acute trust deficit between the government and the opposition.

Beyond PM Modi, there are very few leaders in the current BJP who can play the role of conciliators. But even this political acumen can come into play only after unrest against a policy has reached a certain

quantum. It's much better to have a better anticipation of how interest groups may respond to certain policies.

**Nor does the weak opposition actually:** Some argue that policy announcements that draw big protests seem less politically costly to BJP because the opposition is weak. It can push a policy through and does not have to fear any electoral backlash even if there are huge protests for some time.

- But those who argue this forget one crucial fact. Electoral majorities in highly competitive democracies are not permanent.
- Relatedly, there is the cost of a continuously unilateral approach to policy change.

**But what's the first principle of reform in an electoral democracy?** Over time, given the nature of competitive electoral democracies, frequent large-scale protests can start affecting the accumulated political capital of the governing regime.

- If that starts happening, it can also eventually open up a space for the opposition to build a narrative against the party in office.
- That the opposition has so far failed to do this doesn't necessarily mean it can never do it.
- BJP's stakes here are particularly high because it would wish to govern with a comfortable single-party majority.

Therefore, if BJP wishes to sustain its electoral dominance and implement its governance agenda with minimal problems, it must abide by the first principle of implementing reforms in electoral democracies: Prepare public opinion before announcing a big policy measure and do further work on building public opinion post-announcement.

A good thumb rule to follow in democracies is that those who feel that a new policy may be disadvantageous to them should, at the minimum, feel that their voices were heard. It is to BJP's advantage to follow this rule.

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