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Narendra Modi's Ambitious Agenda Will Face Difficult Obstacles

By ELLEN BARRY MAY 16, 2014

NEW DELHI — Addressing a euphoric crowd Friday afternoon, Narendra Modi rallied the public to join him in taking on challenges of a vast scale. He has floated the idea of building “a hundred new cities,” of extending a high-speed rail network across the subcontinent and undertaking the herculean task of cleaning the Ganges River.

He has been inspired by China’s model of high-growth, top-down development. But the country he will govern is India: messy, diffuse and democratic.

Mr. Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party won a historic mandate in the country’s general election on Friday, emerging with 282 of 543 parliamentary seats, more than enough to form a government without having to broker a post-election coalition.

For months, Mr. Modi’s advisers had focused on crossing such a threshold, which they regarded as a signal that the country was behind an agenda of radical change.

The nature of that change has never been clear, though. Voters are seeking immediate economic opportunities. The party has proposed pro-business legislation like the easing of labor and land-acquisition laws. Mr. Modi is drawn to large-scale building and infrastructure projects, which he pursues with a single-minded — critics say dictatorial — style.

“He has a fairly clear idea of what he wants to accomplish, and he

does not look for ratification from the market,” said Eswar S. Prasad, a Cornell University economist who has consulted informally with Mr. Modi’s economic team. “One could argue that in a country where there are far more words than actions thrown around, that this is far more preferable: a man who acts.”

Mr. Modi’s planned economic reforms are certain to encounter obstacles once he takes power, among them a federal system that puts essential functions like land acquisition in the hands of state leaders.

Entrenched national-level functionaries will resist efforts to strip their authority by eliminating red tape, a goal that was central to Mr. Modi’s plan to attract investors to the state of Gujarat. Changing tax policy or labor and land laws would require the support of the upper house of Parliament, which the Bharatiya Janata Party does not control. Meanwhile, voters’ expectations of immediate economic improvement are perilously high, setting the stage for rapid disappointment if Mr. Modi is seen as not delivering.

But Friday’s enormous victory will give Mr. Modi “a much freer hand than the typical leader of such a large democracy,” Mr. Prasad said. The reasons Mr. Modi’s party succeeded in defeating the Indian National Congress, which has controlled India’s government for nearly all of its postcolonial history, will be studied for years. But they clearly reflect a rapid change in Indian society as urbanization and economic growth break down old voting patterns.

For decades, the Congress party’s trademark initiatives have been redistributive, and the party introduced a package of major subsidies for the poor before the election. Voters, however, proved to be more captivated by Mr. Modi’s promise to create manufacturing jobs, which he has done quite successfully in Gujarat, the state he has governed since 2001.

Mr. Modi, 63, the son of a provincial tea-seller, prides himself on being an outsider amid New Delhi’s elite, and he recently promised in an interview with Open magazine that he would “break the status quo.” He was profoundly imprinted by his years as a full-time activist for the

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a right-wing Hindu organization, and his earliest and most frequent trips as an elected official were to other countries in Asia, which shaped his vision of India as a manufacturing power.

A cultural conservative, he is no admirer of the liberal intellectuals who traditionally support the Congress party. Swapan Dasgupta, a journalist who supports Mr. Modi, said Delhi elites were worried — justifiably — that the space for their work would shrink when the new government settles in.

“I cannot say what the contours of the future political elite or political class will look like,” he said. “He has brought in lots of people who have risen from local politics, less of those people who are traditional dynasts. A new sort of people, perhaps a little technocratic. People not from the Anglophone elite, maybe.”

The mood at Congress headquarters on Friday was funereal. Top officials had prepared for a loss, but not for the crushing defeat they faced; according to final results from the Election Commission, the party had secured only 44 seats, a surprisingly low number for the party that was integral to India’s founding narrative.

The president of the Congress party, Sonia Gandhi, and her son, Rahul, made a brief appearance at the headquarters late in the afternoon, when celebratory firecrackers could be heard from B.J.P. headquarters nearby. Mr. Gandhi, who has never appeared comfortable in his role as the party’s standard-bearer, kept an odd, fixed smile on his face, acknowledging that the party had “done pretty badly.” His mother, who reinvigorated the party after her husband, Rajiv, was killed by a suicide bomber in 1991, conceded defeat without mentioning Mr. Modi or the B.J.P.

“We believe that in a democracy winning and losing is part of the game,” Mrs. Gandhi said. “This time the mandate is clearly against us. I accept the mandate with humility. I hope that the incoming government will not compromise with the interests of society.”

A Congress-led coalition won a solid majority of seats in 2009 parliamentary elections, but the term was tarnished by corruption scandals and a slowing economy. Party workers, dully flipping through television news channels in a room with portraits of four generations of Nehru-Gandhi politicians on Friday, complained that the party's grass-roots workers no longer had contact with Mr. Gandhi and his advisers, and had failed to identify shifts among young voters.

Rajendra Pal Singh, a clerk with the party for more than 30 years, sadly recalled a time when the party faithful streamed in and out of the party's bungalow as if it were "a place of worship."

"Gone are the days of the Gandhis," Mr. Singh said. "We have not seen people coming here to hug Rahul for the past decade on any of those festivals. That culture is dead and long gone, like the Congress party now."

Addressing a euphoric throng in the city of Vadodara after votes were counted on Friday, Mr. Modi was forced to pause repeatedly as he waited for the audience to stop chanting his name. Mr. Modi, normally an intensely solitary man, draws visible pleasure from his interactions with crowds, and he seemed on Friday to enlist their support for vast undertakings.

"Brothers and sisters, you have faith in me, and I have faith in you," Mr. Modi said. "This is the strength of our confidence — that we have the capacity to fulfill the common man's aspirations. The citizens of this country have done three centuries of work today."

His supporters celebrated. Drummers, stilt-walkers and women in colorful saris converged at B.J.P. headquarters in New Delhi, where party workers had laid out 100,000 laddoos, the ball-shaped sweets that are ubiquitous at Indian celebrations. Among the revelers was Surinder Singh Tiwana, 40, a lawyer.

"I can equate my jubilation today, probably, to my mother's on the day I was born," Mr. Tiwana said. "This is a huge change for our country, a change of guard. A billion plus people have announced their mandate in no uncertain terms."

Suhasini Raj, Hari Kumar and Neha Thirani Bagri contributed reporting.

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