

Gadkari's Conclave Could Give Direction to Wayward BJP



The mostly air-borne jetset leadership of the BJP in Delhi finally decided to land on planet earth last week. After ignoring the real leaders and achievers of the nationalist movement for nearly two years, the party high command chose to hold a dialogue with them about the fate and future of the party, which has neither identity nor ideology.

For the past seven years, its leaders have been speaking in many voices on almost every national issue. Finally, wisdom seems to have dawned on its youngest party president in history, Nitin Gadkari. Early last week, when he summoned all BJP chief ministers including a deputy chief minister, the agenda was crystal clear. Contrary to general perception, they weren't convened to be made accountable for any lapse in governance. Nor were they summoned for their performance to be audited by the occupants of 11 Ashoka Road, who themselves have nothing to show. Instead, all the chief ministers were given an agenda in advance and were told to come prepared to educate their ill-informed party leaders in the Capital about their achievements and performance. The chief ministers who attended the two-day summit were Narendra Modi (Gujarat), Arjun Munda (Jharkhand), Raman Singh (Chhattisgarh), Prem Kumar Dhumal (Himachal Pradesh), Shivraj Singh Chouhan (Madhya Pradesh), Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank (Uttarakhand) and Sushil Kumar Modi, deputy chief minister (Bihar). The conclave, presided over by Gadkari, was also attended by all the members of the BJP Parliamentary Party Board, those in charge of various BJP-ruled states, and its general secretaries. Gadkari had summoned all of them to put in place a system that would ensure better accountability, transparency in governance and perfect coordination between the state governments and the party.

During the 14-odd hours of marathon debate, dialogue and discussion, all the chief ministers left for home with an assurance that they would not only get their deserved place in the party's decision-making forums but would also receive full support in fighting the Central government. The meeting also concluded on a confident note that if the party was to rule the country in 2014, the big shots in Delhi had better sink their differences and bury their inflated egos. The chief minis-

ters also resolved to meet more frequently and conduct proper scrutiny of their delivery systems. Gadkari outlined the future contours of the BJP's politics when he thundered that 36 per cent of India's population is governed by the party while the Congress rules only around 31 per cent.

Though such meetings have been held in the past, never before has the party given a collective hearing to the woes of its

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chief ministers who continue to perform well in their states; some have even beaten the incumbency factor by winning elections twice in their respective states. All the chief ministers made powerful presentations to Gadkari on their accomplishments which they claim have been recognised even by their opponents, while remain unappreciated by their own leaders.

While the objective behind the meeting was to prepare for a massive offensive against the Centre on corruption, the state bosses exploited every opportunity to plead their case with the party bosses. The tone and tenor of the chief ministers left no one in doubt that they were fighting a lonely battle without any visible support from the central leadership. Since one of the topics for discussion was Centre-state relations, almost all the BJP chief ministers poured out their sorry tales of discrimination by the Central government. Almost all gave details about the delays in releasing legitimate funds by the Centre for schemes that are Centrally sponsored. Chouhan set the tone. He complained that

the Centre has invented convoluted means to defame BJP state governments by not implementing and completing Central projects and then blaming the state government for their failures. He gave the example of the pathetic conditions of all the national highways passing through Madhya Pradesh caused by negligence of the Centre-controlled National Highways Authority of India—something the local Congress leaders blame the BJP government for. Similarly, Nishank expressed his helplessness in fighting the Congress propaganda of not providing enough food and funds for people living below the poverty line because the Centre simply wasn't releasing the needed funds.

A majority of the chief ministers were upset with the lack of support from the central party leadership in fighting the interference of the governors who were stalling pro-people legislations in BJP-ruled states. According to them, over half-a-dozen bills are pending with the governors of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka and Gujarat for their consent. As one put it, "The governors are behaving like Congress agents. They interfere in our daily affairs and encourage dissidence within the bureaucracy."

The chief ministers were particularly annoyed with the Centre for inciting senior civil servants against the state Government and promising lucrative assignments in Delhi as rewards.

Expectedly, it was Narendra Modi who stole the show and left no one in doubt that he would like the performance of the BJP's Parliamentary Party to be audited. He conceded the need for accountability, evaluation and transparency. But he asked the leadership to also conduct an appraisal of the performance of its MPs who are also looking for direction. In an indirect criticism of the BJP high command, Modi wanted to know how a party with almost 150 MPs in Parliament isn't able to fight the misuse of Central government agencies against the Gujarat government and him personally. If Gadkari succeeds in his agenda of getting the real winners and performers in the BJP on board the decision-making apparatus, he may succeed where his predecessors failed—making the national leaders without a territory of their own in the party irrelevant.

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