

ROLL UP FOR THE ONE-MAN BAND



HOW much better can things get for India's prime minister? Narendra Modi won a massive electoral mandate in May and he has just marked a wildly successful 100 days in office. The domestic press swings mostly from enthusiastic to fawning. Foreigners cheer, too, noting he is far more assertive than his predecessor. Certainly he puts on a much better show. This week he and Shinzo Abe, Japan's nationalist prime minister, indulged in a bromance of happy joint statements, skipping from tourist sites in Kyoto to Tokyo. That, in part, was a signal to China that the Indo-Japanese courtship is growing.

Mr Modi's style is triumphal; it casts his peers, in all parties, in the political shade. As a public speaker he is gifted. Last month's Independence Day address won plaudits from every political corner; he was passionate yet moderate, and took on difficult subjects such as the curse of religious violence. He is helping to spread confidence, which may in part explain why the economy (notably industry, which he vows to promote) shows renewed vim: it is growing at 5.7%, the fastest in two years. And his reputation as a disciplinarian cheers those who yearn for an authoritarian ruler. When Mr Modi talks of his dismay at too many power-Centre's in government, he reflects his supporters' belief that only one man should have any. He lets rumours circulate to show what a firm grip he has on subordinates. According to one, Mr Modi was tipped off that a minister en route to the airport was too casually dressed, so ordered him home to get changed.

Colleagues may bristle, but voters warm to his self-promotion. They loved his intensely personalised election campaign, when crowds chanted his name and he bragged that as a strongman, with a mighty "56-inch chest", he would get results. In office it is he, not his ministers, who launches big policies. Take his promise late last month to sign up an extra

75m households for bank accounts (plus insurance cover) by February. That is an excellent ambition. Rural Indians, especially, are woefully under banked. If they save at all, they often do so with gold. Accounts would help the government distribute welfare benefits in cash instead of by subsidizing daily necessities.

Yet Mr Modi's very popularity contains the kernel of future disappointment. One gripe is that the razzamatazz glitters more brightly than the substance. China need not yet fret greatly about India's relations with Japan: despite the prime ministerial hugs, this week's trip produced no breakthrough in strategic affairs. A hoped-for agreement on civil nuclear co-operation remained out of reach. Another is that announcing things is not the same as getting them done. The trouble with Mr Modi's banking idea is that even if people sign up for accounts, many will fail to keep them open, partly because the banks operate them at a loss. Nobody expects a politician to honour every one of his promises, but a bad habit is emerging. A pre-election pledge to bring all "black money"—ill-gotten gains stashed abroad—back to India within the first 100 days has turned out to be meaningless. A promise to clean up the filthy River Ganges in five years has not yet shown a ripple of progress. And an equally noble ambition to end all open defecation by 2019 so far amounts to little more than a few companies' promises to put a few more toilets in schools.

But the biggest worry is the least obvious. It is that Mr Modi remains in such high esteem. Instead of taking necessary but unpopular steps, he courts acclaim. Early in office, with his stock high, he should be attempting politically difficult policy changes that bring long-term electoral gains. In July the interim budget mostly underwhelmed. It failed to offer big reforms—such as a national push to ease labour laws or a decisive measure helping investors buy land—that would have suggested India is ready for the boom in manufacturing that Mr Modi says must come. He has yet to face up to the huge task of tackling persistently high food-price inflation; to do that will require scrapping prehistoric rules that keep agriculture unproductive and prevent free trade within India. Mr Modi should also shake up the dreary retail sector. But he is unready for the tough debate this will entail over letting in more foreign capital and expertise. Even plans for a national goods and services tax, an expected priority, are moving at a snail's pace, as they did under the previous government.

Delay is doubly unwise because of Mr Modi's managerial style. Although he takes headline decisions faster than his predecessor, his inexperienced colleagues hesitate, or are not allowed, to move quickly. A diplomat says progress is made when the prime minister pays attention, but that Mr Modi does not delegate responsibility to others to work on the nitty-gritty. In some cases, too, Mr Modi himself moves slowly. He promises to be rid of the Planning Commission, a legacy of India's one-time embrace of Soviet-style economic thinking. But he has not yet said what will replace it. He has not picked a chief economic

adviser or a full-time defense minister. Arun Jaitley, the finance minister, is also doing the defense job and risks being overstretched (he was admitted to hospital this week).

How long have I got?

Mr Modi might note the experience of others who won handsome electoral victories, but found they had less time to act than they thought. Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif basked in celebration of a big election success barely a year ago—now he scrambles for survival. The popularity of Mr Modi's close friend, Mr Abe, is sliding. And in India the last man to win an outright majority in parliament, Rajiv Gandhi in 1984, was washed up within a couple of years. Will India's current leader be different? It is clear he hopes for a long spell at the top. On September 5th all of India's schoolchildren have been ordered to down pens and attend to a televised broadcast from him. That suggests he is tending to future voters. But to stay in office in the long run, Mr Modi should dare to make some more hard-nosed policy choices right now.