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Three years on, the mood in Modi's India is less euphoria, more hysteria

In the absence of any meaningful achievements, Narendra Modi fear-mongers have resorted to assaulting voters in broad daylight

Kapil Komireddi

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Narendra Modi promised “good days” when he became India’s prime minister, but has he delivered?

Consider the news from India this month. On the first of the month, government data revealed that Narendra Modi’s demonetisation decree has had a devastating impact on the economy. India’s growth rate dropped between January and March 2017 from seven to six per cent.

On June 9, a mob of “educated” Hindus nearly lynch a young reporter when they discover that he is a Muslim from Kashmir. He is so badly bruised that he can’t move for days.

Ten days later, more than a dozen Muslims in central and southern India are arrested and charged with sedition – one of the gravest offences on India’s statute books – after their Hindu neighbours allege that they were celebrating Pakistan’s win against India in the cricket world cup the previous night.

On June 22, Hindu passengers on a train pick on a group of Muslims, call them “anti-national”, pull their beards, and then stab-and-kill a 16-year-old boy returning home after shopping for Eid in Delhi.

The events read like a compressed commentary on the condition of India three years after Mr Modi’s election to the country’s premiership. The euphoria of 2014, having given rise to unrealistic expectations in Mr Modi’s most passionate supporters, has degenerated into recriminations and full-blown sectarian hysteria.

Mr Modi promised “good days”. In office, he has presided over the breakdown of law and order. He promised prosperity. In office, he inflicted on Indians the misery of demonetisation. Mr Modi promised to build a clean government. In office, he has enabled and rewarded grubby men with a history of inciting and profiting from violence against minorities.

The pledge to create 10 million new jobs every year has similarly fallen by the wayside. From 2015-2016, the Modi government added 135,000 new jobs – almost 300,000 fewer than the last government managed to create the year before.

In the absence of genuine accomplishment, Mr Modi has resorted to assaulting the voters with breathless publicity. There are times when this government looks unreal, like a tantalising commercial for a product that doesn’t exist. Mr Modi was an early beneficiary of what is now called “fake news”.

Mr Modi’s supporters push claims of his successes on Twitter and Facebook. Critics of Mr Modi are mercilessly bullied. A disturbing book of investigative reportage by the distinguished journalist Swati Chaturvedi, published earlier this year, revealed some of the faces behind the online avatars. Mr Modi’s keyboard warriors, it turns out, are not freelancers but members of an organised digital army.

According to a repentant former propagandist Ms Chaturvedi interviewed, the “social media unit” of India’s ruling party, which maintains a “hit list,” supervises “a never-ending drip-feed of hate and bigotry against the minorities, the Gandhi family, journalists on the hit list, liberals, anyone perceived as anti-Modi.” Even a man as wildly popular as the film star Aamir Khan could not evade the wrath of the “social media unit.”

A ferocious online campaign last year targeted the e-commerce company Snapdeal, which Mr Khan advertised, after he expressed concern about rising intolerance in India under Mr Modi. Snapdeal was compelled to drop him as its spokesman. The message for other celebrities was as unmistakable as it was chilling.

It’s not just the “social media unit” that’s spreading fake news. The official spokesperson of the BJP was caught spreading the absurd lie that India’s national anthem was “adjudged” by Unesco as the “best anthem in the world.”

A recent report published by the Ministry of Home Affairs carried an arresting photo with the caption “floodlighting along the border.” Illuminating India’s borders is not an easy job. On closer inspection, the photo turned out to be from the Spanish-Moroccan border. But the lie cannot be recalled; it has already made its way into millions of WhatsApp accounts. The damage has been done.

If Mr Modi is growing more powerful than any prime minister before him, it is because he is engaging in power grabs unprecedented in India’s republican history.

This year’s finance bill, which does not require the approval of the parliament’s upper house, where Mr Modi’s party doesn’t have a majority, contained dozens of amendments designed to expand the prime minister’s authority. There is now no cap on corporate donations to political parties. More disturbingly, tax inspectors, who have a hoary history of being deployed to exact political vengeance, now have the authority to raid any property without disclosing the purpose of the raid – not just to the person being raided but even to the tax tribunals. The law can be applied retrospectively.

Mr Modi’s most stentorian critics have already been visited by India’s chief domestic investigative agency. At the start of this month, officers from the Central Bureau of Investigation raided the home of Prannoy Roy, the founder of NDTV, one of India’s last remaining bastions of independent broadcast journalism. The message to uncooperative journalists was, yet again, unmistakable.

Mr Modi promised to make India respected abroad, and India’s engagement with the world has no doubt been energised under his premiership. But in the most important arena – national security – Mr Modi’s itinerant diplomacy has failed to make India any safer.

Three years on from his win, China’s incursions into Indian territory have not ceased and relations with Pakistan are the lowest point in recent memory.

Mr Modi has infected foreign policy with domestic prejudices. Next week, he will travel to Israel. This visit, the first by an Indian prime minister, is an historic milestone in India’s relations with Israel. Yet Mr Modi has already generated ill-will in the region by dropping Palestine from his itinerary. Why would the prime minister of India, which was the one of the first non-Arab countries to recognise Palestine’s declaration of independence in 1988, choose not to make the short journey to the West Bank? Because Mr Modi’s base believes that India’s traditional solidarity with Palestine was a form of “appeasement” of Indian Muslims, and by ignoring Palestine Mr Modi is signalling to them that he is ending this approach. A brief visit to Ramallah by Mr Modi would do no harm to India. Nor would it offend Israel. But it won’t happen.

“India,” Salman Rushdie wrote from Delhi as he surveyed a capital still recovering from the massacre of Sikhs by Hindu fundamentalists in 1984, “regularly confounds its critics by its resilience.”

More than 30 years later, India’s resilience is being tested by a man who claims to love it.