

# Will Modi magic work post-repeal of farm laws?

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How could one view the repeal of the three contentious farm laws? While the farmers declare it as their victory, the BJP camp feels it has divested the opposition of issues. However, it is clear that the government has given on the platter what the agitating farmers had been asking for, without getting anything in return from them. It is clear that the government did not approach the farm unions to get any assurance regarding withdrawal of agitation, otherwise, the farm union leaders, outspoken as they are, would have blurted out to score a brownie point or two. This lack of give-and-take in such an exercise hints at the lack of serious deliberations by the cabinet or even by the chosen few who might be close to the PM, which suggests the matter was left to the Prime Minister who decided it all by himself and made the announcement on the auspicious day of Guru Nanak's birthday hoping to sway the sentiments of the Sikh community. The sentiments were swayed, but for a while only.

When the announcement regarding repeal was made by the PM, the industrialists and businessmen all over Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, and UP had heaved a sigh of relief and expressed hope of revival of business and industrial activity which had been suffering due to roadblocks put up by the farmers. But the farmers' intransigence has once again dampened their spirits. Also, the Supreme Court was expected to help remove the roadblocks by the protesting farmers and resolve the tangle between the government and the protesting farmers by giving a clear verdict but it has failed to do so thus far.

The impact of this one-sided generosity by the government has been seen in the rise of other demands including, but not limited to the minimum support price for many crops. It is for sure that even if these demands are met, the farm unions will come up with some other demands because after all, it is the failed or aspiring politicians who are fanning fires of farmers' protest and in this, they are being supported by opposition parties which are riding piggyback on the agitating farmers. The goal is to keep the pot boiling till the elections that are due next year in several states or better if the agitation can be dragged on till 2024 when the Parliamentary elections are due to be held. The demand for repeal of other laws like the CAA or Article 370 has also been raked up by vested interests.

On the other side, many economists have rued the decision and the stock market has taken a hit. The withdrawal has been interpreted as sacrificing the economic reforms at the altar of bad politics. The most worrisome aspect is that the announcement and later

cabinet approval have put a question mark on the liberal economic roadmap that the BJP had prepared to take the country forward and which had been showing a good result. The privatization of Air India happened without any hassle but now that the government is scheduled to privatize some twenty public sector undertakings including two public sector banks, this may not be a cakewalk for it. It would be folly to believe that the bank staff unions will easily acquiesce in the privatization move. And BJP has a big stake in the upcoming elections in states! Needless to say that despite its bravado, the BJP government at the center finds itself caught in a cleft stick. The road ahead seems daunting and it requires Modi magic, if there is anything like this, to put things on track.

Mercifully, the Shetkari Sangthan leader Anil Ghanwat has come to retrieve the image of the government by threatening to send one lakh farmers to protest against the withdrawal of the farm laws. That should be music to Modi's ears. There are other farm unions in the country which might come out to demand the reinstatement of scrapped laws. These will surely not lead to reinstatement but may provide a boost to the government to carry out reforms which it must in the interest of the nation. After the repeal of the farm laws, the farmers' additional demands have not got the same public sympathy that the basic demand against the three laws did.

The government is left with the only option of taking strong action to remove the protesting farmers and the roadblocks. It will bring respite not only to the businessmen but also to ordinary people who have to waste a lot of money and time circumventing the protesting sites and taking a long detour to reach or leave Delhi. There is no doubt that the heavy-handed action will mean loss of some votes for the BJP but it will be able to show its commitment to reforms and help the country move forward on the economic front besides putting a cap on the surge in other demands from other quarters. It will also help salvage the dented image of the Prime Minister. Hopefully, the loss in the 2023 state elections will be more than offset in the 2024 Parliamentary elections because by that time the BJP economic roadmap will have borne fruit for all to see.

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