

Our cities need a new leadership model

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It cannot be Arvind Kejriwal. His populism will deplete Delhi's coffers without improving the lot of the poor



The whispering game That's the business of politics S Subramaniam

Many Indian cities, especially metropolitan ones, are badly governed, with corruption eating away finances meant for roads, garbage clearance, police, and so on. They need leaders of reform movements. But the new leaders, even if they're not stealing public funds, must not squander money to court vote banks. Is the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi a model for them to follow?

Since taking office, the Delhi government has made water supply to small users free. However, the majority has to use public taps. Power prices for small users have been halved. As retail onion prices went up to Rs. 70 a kg, the government is subsidising prices so that it is now Rs. 30 a kg. No doubt this action will be repeated for other products if prices go up.

Guards are to be posted on city buses at all times. Many thousands of CCTV cameras are to be installed in public places. These will cost hugely as they will require people to watch them and take action when necessary.

The government has announced a spend of Rs. 500 crore this year on advertisements to announce its achievements. Raising taxes on petrol and diesel is the only additional revenue so far.

Where's all this going?

The effect of all the additional expenditure on the Budget has to be seen. Clearly, this giving away of goodies to vote blocs will consolidate the AAP's vote bank. But It is not economically viable unless there are revenue raising measures in place. New political leaders in other cities have to carefully balance vote bank economics with practical budgeting.

The AAP claims that low-level corruption that affects the majority, has now almost stopped, but there has been no study to prove this. Still, city leaders must study the AAP's method for reducing corruption. Low-level corruption on all government interactions is the bane of the poor urban citizen and reducing it must be a priority.

In Bengaluru, for example, abysmal public services (roads, pavements, traffic management, garbage collection and disposal, traffic police corruption, violent crimes against women and

children, a forever-under-construction metro project) have to be tolerated since there is no political accountability; unlike in Delhi, it is not possible to lay the blame on the Centre here. The new city leaders must have the skills to manage effectively so that promises are delivered and the citizen is neither harassed nor exploited.

Delhi's paradox

Delhi is a 'State', but it's not like the others. It is almost entirely urban. The Delhi government has neither the authority to govern and make laws on public order, police and land, nor authority over the principal agents of change such as the Delhi Development Authority, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, the New Delhi Municipal Council, the Cantonment Board and the police. Each of them functions autonomously, and reports to the Centre.

Other cities have a different problem. Many of their functions are under other autonomous bodies. Accountability is absent in Mumbai, Bengaluru and many other cities. The State legislature, its members and ministers like to keep these bodies under them. They are a valuable source of income.

India against Corruption (IAC) was a mass agitation led by Arvind Kejriwal; it used a so-called Gandhian as the face of the agitation, to begin with. It tapped into the public disgust at the large-scale scams under the UPA government. Anna Hazare was a puppet leader, known for simplicity of dress and speech. A former soldier now in his 70s, he successfully rid his village of Ralegaon Siddhi of corruption and alcohol consumption, worked towards improving literacy levels and introducing higher education, and helped introduce better agricultural practices that brought prosperity to the villagers. Over the years, Hazare became the scourge of corrupt politicians in Maharashtra. Outside Maharashtra, he was unknown.

Wooing the people

As Kejriwal lost hopes of IAC becoming a national movement, he focused on Delhi. Here he had a ready population of the worst-off that he wooed with promises that they bought.

Leaders such as Kejriwal can emerge from among idealistic professionals. But for mass support, they need a figure like Anna Hazare to be the public face, at least for a while. Kejriwal used the media which was already concerned about corruption. He was projected on television, always with Hazare. He often enlarged on Hazare's responses. For the public he became Anna Hazare's *alter ego* and was seen to be as committed to the cause. Thus, Kejriwal quickly became an easily recognised national figure.

Wannabe urban leaders must study and emulate Kejriwal. Like him, they must invest in years of work on the ground, and associate with a 'saintly' leader so that the 'saintliness' can rub off on them.

Just a scold

IAC had a single agenda: It was for strong legislation for a Lok Pal. Hazare faded after he went on a long fast. Kejriwal became the sole public face of the anti-corruption movement. Soon he converted it into a political party. The Lok Pal was shelved. Anna Hazare was rarely referred to. Kiran Bedi went with Anna Hazare.

After AAP's founding, Kejriwal broke with his equals — Prashant Bhushan, Yogendra Yadav and others. This was classic realpolitik. It demands a great deal of self-confidence and a very calculating outlook.

Kejriwal wooed Delhi's large population in unauthorised colonies and slums. They fell for his promises of regularising their status, providing housing, free water and cheap electricity, and

eliminating corruption. He even promised to redistribute the “regulatory assets” of Delhi’s electricity distribution companies (approved expenses by DERC). This was theft and a false promise. But as far as the voter was concerned, it added to his charm.

He has remained a street agitator in both his tenures as chief minister of Delhi. However, Kejriwal is a scold who will govern less and agitate more. He will fail. This is a warning other urban leaders must heed.

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