

Covid-19: Securing the present and the future

This is the most serious crisis since World War II. Politicians must step up; voters must allow them to

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History has shown us that in crises, a centralised, and unaccountable leadership can emerge. Unless carefully managed, this can lead to a breakdown of trust between the government and the public(Ajay Aggarwal/HT PHOTO)

Politicians are elected because they campaign in poetry, but voters don't always account for the fact that elected representatives must govern in prose. That chasm between the promise and the delivery becomes more dangerous at times like these. Just like wartime generals have to be different from peacetime generals, crisis-time politicians have to step up from being normal-time politicians.

In times of the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19), we need our leaders to assume new responsibilities. They must first educate themselves about the crisis by listening to, and learning from, experts. Then, they must communicate what they know to us, without creating undue alarm. They must be honest enough to admit their fallibility. They need to be inspirational enough to command our cooperation. They need to lobby for their own constituencies to get a share of central and shared resources. They need to transparently

prioritise these resources for those who may need them most. They have to be frontline responders.

Simultaneously, they also have to safeguard the future. History has shown us that in crises, a centralised, and unaccountable leadership can emerge. Unless carefully managed, this can lead to a breakdown of trust between the government and the public. Other politicians must then evolve into system leaders. They must safeguard democracy itself; to protect against a creeping authoritarianism that is hard to push back when normalcy returns. To do so, they must demonstrate the relevance of empowered local government.

Is it even possible for our politicians to step up to the plate? Will we allow them to, even if they wanted to try? Can voters respect the difficult situation their representatives find themselves in? Can we give them space to think ahead, even as they try to contain the immediate calamity?

Benjamin Disraeli once said, “The world is weary of statesmen whom democracy has degraded into politicians”.

One reason for such a deterioration is that voters expect too much from representatives. Strangely, we barely hold them accountable for their primary duty as lawmakers. We don't always appreciate that good laws make for good societies, and that our representatives have the constitutional duty to help craft those good laws. Instead, most people expect their elected representatives to be at their beck and call, to provide patronage and brokerage, to help their communities through small but urgent hardships. It is a 24/7, largely thankless job for most politicians.

I saw this personally in my husband, Nandan Nilekani's, unsuccessful Lok Sabha campaign. He would imagine big possibilities for the country, which would also make people's lives much better. Most voters, though, asked about things that affected them in the here and now — whether a community hall could be built, or the speed bumps could be removed outside their gates or if the stray dogs would be taken care of.

Inevitably, voters feel frustrated when all these requests cannot be met. Sometimes, politicians give up on this impossible quest and ride roughshod over their constituencies.

It is not too surprising that we have politicians across all parties with criminal records, who keep getting re-elected, even from prison. Many have their troops of men to fulfil some of the basic wishes of the voters, keep things in check, and appear to be locally effective.

Of course, we still have several wonderful politicians. They work as hard as they possibly can to serve their people, help pass good laws, represent the interests of their constituents at every opportunity and also reach out and communicate with their voters.

We must help their tribe increase, especially now. American theologian and author James Freeman Clarke observed: “The difference between a politician and a statesman is that a politician thinks about the next election while the statesman thinks about the next generation.”

There are wonderful instances from India’s democratic history where India’s statesmen have done just that. Former Prime Minister (PM) Jawaharlal Nehru’s government built the nation’s core infrastructure. PV Narasimha Rao’s government opened up the economy for next-generation entrepreneurs. Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s government filled critical gaps in the education system, and developed the nation’s roads and telecommunication networks for today’s digital or migrant citizen. Their eyes were pinned to the horizon.

The pandemic and the economic downturn that accompanies it offer a creative opportunity for politicians to become statesmen. As poet Muhammad Iqbal wrote, “Nations are born in the hearts of poets – they prosper and die in the hands of politicians.” If our politicians focus on the word “prosper”, and if voters allow politicians to do what statesmen must, perhaps this unprecedented crisis would serve to strengthen our democracy for future generations, and not to undermine it.

All over the world, people are looking to their leaders to guide them through the double whammy they are facing: The Covid-19 pandemic and the unfolding economic crisis. This has been probably the most challenging time for politicians since the World War II. They need our empathy and our forbearance.

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The views expressed are personal***