

Silver lining for India in threat of tarnished games

Rory Medcalf

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The cloud of chaos, shame and fear surrounding the New Delhi Commonwealth Games may yet have a silver lining. This could turn out to be the crisis of self-confidence that a rising India had to have -- a signal to bring governance and accountability up to speed with runaway pride and economic growth.

Of course, New Delhi's immediate concerns must be about trying to rescue an international sporting event, while guarding against terrorism and public strife.

The chance of jihadist attacks remains real in the wake of shootings last weekend outside Old Delhi's grandest mosque.

And there have been fears that an ill-timed court ruling, due soon, over a disputed religious site in Ayodhya could fan the kind of street tensions between Hindus and Muslims that contemporary India usually manages to keep under control.

More widely, this has been a dismal year for India's peace and security, with bloodshed in Kashmir and Maoist insurgency across a resource-rich belt of hinterland forests. The prospect of Western retreat from Afghanistan is emboldening India's terrorist foes, chaos is spreading in Pakistan, and Indian strategists see Chinese power on the move.

With all this -- plus ever-present challenges like energy, water, transport, employment, education and a coalition-riddled federal democracy -- Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has a lot more to worry about than the circus unfolding in the capital.

Even so, his government is belatedly leading a salvage mission for the Games. It is likely that India's huge security apparatus -- now well-mobilised -- will prevent a major terrorist strike at a Games venue. India is good at policing mass events, however crudely. Yet there remains, in the words of Australia's official travel advice, a "high risk of terrorism" in New Delhi.

Militants frustrated by the security cordons at hard targets will have no shortage of soft ones. Though the chances of any particular foreigner becoming a target are very small, there could well be further plots or threats from terrorists such as Lashkar-e-Toiba or the Indian Mujaheddin, which would leave governments such as Australia's with tough decisions about their travel advice. The aim would be to combine a maximum of honesty and prudence with a minimum of panic. Even if the situation deteriorates further, ours need not be the first team to quit India -- but nor should it be the last.

This time, after hammering Australia over student issues, the Indian media can be Canberra's friend. We can point to their damnation of the Games to show our own criticism as reasonable.

The diplomatic relationship is especially delicate, since Australia has difficulties with India -- on student welfare and uranium -- that other risk-averse Commonwealth nations do not.

Yet ultimately, the troubles now on show in Delhi are for India to manage. Its power elite dearly wanted to host these Games. Indeed, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party -- now comfortably carping in opposition -- has quietly forgotten its vain dream a decade ago to bid for the 2012 Olympics.

For all that, the smaller Commonwealth affair could still have been a grand debut, a Beijing Olympics for the Indo-Pacific century's friendlier juggernaut. Instead, its preparations have tainted India's good name. The new India -- the young, the aspiring, the hard-working, the

globally-minded -- has every right to feel betrayed by this global exposure of complacency, corruption and denial among the old-fashioned political and bureaucratic classes.

India's friends and well-wishers abroad are embarrassed, too. Foreigners who thought they had glimpsed a land of promise could be forgiven for wondering if such an India really exists.

It does. It's just that it is not the India that has been running -- or ruining -- these Games. While India's economy has leapt, its governance has lagged. The gulf between rhetoric and reality is in plain view. The good news is that this week's public fiasco might just be the wake-up call this dozing mega-state needs. Previous shocks -- the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, the 1991 balance of payments crisis, the 1962 China war -- have driven change, however fitful, in India's defences and economy. This fresh jolt vindicates those calling for better governance in a country dominated by the old, yet with 550 million people under the age of 25, whose success or otherwise in finding skills and jobs will determine if India's future shines or crashes. If you live in India, it pays to keep things in perspective. Even if the Games are cancelled or marred by disaster, most Indians will not directly suffer. That is only fair, since they did not ask for this fuss anyway.

On the other hand, they might benefit further down the track. It will depend on whether the present humiliation can strengthen the hand of those who want India to win gold in the games that matter most -- the long races of development, democracy, security and self-respect.

Rory Medcalf is a program director at the Lowy Institute and senior research fellow in Indian strategic affairs at UNSW. He is a former Australian diplomat to New Delhi