

Coalitions and political stability

India's Future Prospects

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It is commonplace to assume that coalition government in India is a recent feature of the Indian polity and, in consequence will be a passing phase. Such views may have little empirical grounding given the current experience of national politics, with no single party having secured a clear majority in the Lok Sabha since 1984 and even the number of parties sharing power increasing by leaps and bounds from 12 (1996) to 18(1998) to 24(1999). But the two premier parties have even in the recent past, behaved in a different manner. The Congress has consistently refused to even consider sharing power in New Delhi and explicitly aiming for eventual single party rule. For a decade ending in 1996, the Bharatiya Janata Party pursued a similar goal, polarising voters along ideological lines and hoping to displace the Congress as the natural party of governance. But the creation of coalitions in a stable sense at the federal level is only at its very early stages. State level experiences are not an adequate guide as the longest lasting regimes (as in West Bengal or Maharashtra) have seen parties with a similar social base and ideological outlook share power. This is yet to be the case in New Delhi. Before asking what the prospects of future coalitions are, it is necessary to step back and ask how we came to this turn in the road.

The early legacy

By 1947, it was clear that the Congress would inherit power from the British in most, though not all parts of India. One of its historic strengths was its ability to reinvent itself and absorb new currents of thought and significant blocs of the populace into its fold. Even in 1946, it had key allies in two Muslim dominated regions, the North West Frontier Province and in the princely state of Kashmir. It had also shared power, in an uneasy arrangement with the Muslim League from 1946 onwards. But the programmatic adherence of the Congress to a strong Centre with residuary powers vested in it was a major stumbling block in talks. This was a key

element of the Nehru Report of 1928, which also called for universal franchise. Despite many changes, both goals were to be realised in the new post-1947 political order, and more so, with the promulgation of the Constitution of 1950. A third feature, often overlooked was the commitment under the Poona Pact of 1931 to reserve seats in the legislature for historically disadvantaged sections, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Unlike the Muslim League, BR Ambedkar gave up the demand for a separate electorate. Seats were reserved with the voters forming a unified body. Such measures enabled the Congress to recover rapidly among Dalit voters who then stayed loyal to it for decades. The emphasis on pluralism enabled similar success among minority voters.

The flexible nature of the Congress, always more of an umbrella party than a rigid or doctrinaire organisation, was critical to giving India a modicum of political stability in its early years after independence. In fact, its doors remained open for many of its critics through the Nehru period. The early Nehru government though assured of a majority had in its ranks well known critics of his party like Ambedkar, SP Mukherjee and experts like Dr John Mathai and CD Deshmukh. The expansion of franchise to all adults in 1952, was soon followed by the cession of the demand for the re-organisation of states on a linguistic basis. The Congress was able to cede such demands without in any way reducing its own political base. In much of southern and western India, the expansion of franchise built on decades of social reform movements. New leaders like Kamaraj in Tamil Nadu and YB Chavan in Maharashtra ascended to power but gave popular aspirations their due place in governance. The induction of the Backward Classes or the peasant masses into the power structure as accomplished without major social upheaval. The Congress was for long both a party of power and the logical place for many who disagreed with policies of the government. Thus contrary views were expressed in party forums: for and against more resources for agriculture, pro and anti-reservation, favouring or opposing the dominance of government over the party.

The edifice had its weaknesses, which can only be touched upon because they matter to the future of Indian democracy. The party often saw itself as the custodian of the nation, and the use of Article 356 to dismiss state governments was tried out, most famously against the Communist ministry in Kerala. Further, the party soon became a wing of the state apparatus, a development that reached its apogee in the Indira period (1966-77; 1980-84). The opposition responded by forming broad alliances to pool their votes. In 1967, the ruling party was ousted from power in 7 states; it split two years later. It is no coincidence that several of the parties that had combined against it at a state level came together to form the first ever non-Congress regime in New Delhi in 1977.

In fact, the pulls and pressures of Indian politics today can only be understood by tracing their roots to the post-1967 changes. Ousting Congress was easier than forging another political instrument of rule. In most of north India, the break up of the united Opposition governments came about due to difference of interest and ideology between the Jana Sangh and the socialists. The former had a stronger urban profile and the latter, a rural base, the former were stronger among the upper strata and the latter among the worse off sections and the middle peasantry. The collapse of the Morarji Desai (1977-79) ministry was due to similar rifts. A second significant feature was the ouster of the Congress from certain states as the party of power. This first took place in Tamil Nadu where a regional party came to power and then in West Bengal in 1977 where a Marxist-led coalition won office. Over time, a process of the steady displacement of Congress from the place of the natural party of government was at work.

The internal fissures among opposition parties led them to give up attempts to merge after the 1979 collapse. But the rifts on issues and the clashes at the base found expression during the next non- Congress government of VP Singh (1989-90). But this time, the ideological polarisation was sharper. Reservation of seats in Union government posts

for the Other Backward Classes, long a feature in southern and western India, sparked off strong adverse reactions among the upper castes especially in the Hindi belt. The announcement in August was followed by the October campaign of the BJP leader LK Advani to a disputed site in Ayodhya. Though neither the Mandal nor the Mandir cards worked in a narrow sense, in that it did not give the men who played them a key to hold on to or to attain power, they left a deep mark on the Indian polity. In fact, the Congress was reduced to the sidelines, and failed to win a majority in the 1991 elections. Both caste and community would now play a more explicit role in political mobilisation than in the past, and the old party of consensus was caught between two stools. It implemented a diluted version of the OBC reservations, but the failure to protect the Babri Masjid contributed to the erosion of its image and eventually prevented it from staking a claim to power in 1996.

The search for a dominant partner

The VP Singh regime of 1989 was the first of a new breed of Indian governments. It was not the first coalition but it lacked a dominant party at its core. The Janata Dal soon split, even though all parties took up its platform of Backward Class assertion in varying ways. The Congress government of PV Narasimha Rao (1991-96) survived for five years, initiating major economic reforms, but the party was clearly past its peak. The divisions in north India among large sections of voters on the lines of community and caste for the first time gave India a government that lacked a majority in Uttar Pradesh. The regional parties with a 58 MPs bloc dominated the United Front governments (1996-98). It was only by recognising this new feature of Indian politics, namely the power of regional players at the Union level that nay combination could aspire to office.

The successive Vajpayee regimes of 1998 and 1999 thus rest on a common programme on two counts. The first is to forswear the older political programme of the BJP while in office: this calls for curbing the

basic instincts of several front organisations of its fraternal organisations. Whether it will involve a basic change of heart remains to be seen. Ideological Hindutva runs counter to the need for broad basing support for the parties in power: the contradiction has been side stepped for now. The second is to cede a key role to partners who often have a presence in one or at the most a handful of states. It is unclear if the changes are in style or will have more substance in the coming period. Irrespective of subjective feelings there are two critical elements in such an arrangement. One is to force an ideologically aligned party to eschew extreme positions in order to hold power. The second is to force open the issue of the structure of Union-state relations, which are undergoing sea change. Much hinges on the ability of the coalition in power to address these challenges. There is an on-going power struggle at the heart of the ruling National Democratic Alliance. The BJP as the largest party hopes to exercise dominance but is as yet unable to do so.

Coalitions: The price of stability

Coalitions come into existence because they are a political necessity, but different partners may have mutually conflicting interests. There are clear divergences between the interests of smaller and larger parties. The BJP would aspire to a position of dominance much like that enjoyed by the dominant party in the mixed ministries of Kerala, whether by Congress or the CPI (M). Smaller entities like the Telugu Desam would prefer a United Front type arrangement in which the smaller parties hold the key to power and can command more influence than their numbers might indicate. But there is a further divide at the heart of the party system. Both the Congress and the BJP are more comfortable with a stronger Centre. The former was its chief architect and the latter is its prime ideologue today. Yet this looks a line very difficult to hold in the coming years.

There are different factors at work that are chipping away at the ability of the Union to intervene in state level politics and economies. One has been the decline of the role of the government in economic affairs with the

onset of market led reforms in the Nineties. State governments are now able to raise funds directly from private investors and foreign agencies. Even the recommendations of the Eleventh Finance Commission had to be recast to take account of the views of the economically more advanced states. Even the role of the Union in balancing the disparities between regions is coming under pressure. Such pressures are bound to grow as disparities deepen and widen. Several studies indicate that over three fourths of all fresh investment over the last decade has flowed to a handful of states in the west and south. Fiscal federalism is bound to become a major plank, with the poorer states demanding a larger share of the cake, and others resisting this. The rising wage bills of state governments have accentuated such crises though these have only resulted in all of them asking for more resources. It is not often realised that states undertake most welfare functions in India and still have a key role in infrastructure development. But they collect less than 40 per cent of all revenues. Earlier this was widely regarded as essential to ensure all-round development. In the coming years, there are bound to be calls for more devolution of economic powers. This is in addition to mutually contradictory demands regarding the transfer of resources from and to the different categories of states. Given the degree of centralisation, it may be possible to buy time by ceding certain key demands for devolution. But this may have to await a coalition or government with a very different complexion from the ones we have seen so far.

The second dimension of federalism is in the political realm. In many, though not all states, there is more political stability than in New Delhi. Chief ministers like Chandra Babu Naidu (1995-) in Andhra Pradesh or Digvijay Singh (1993-) may not have been in power for as long as Jyoti Basu in West Bengal (1977-2000). But they have outlasted many incumbents in New Delhi. At a systemic level, the use of Article 356 has increasingly proved difficult due to a mix of factors, all of which have reduced the scope for its abuse by the ruling regime at the Centre. But there is a significant difference in the way issues are perceived within and

beyond the Hindi belt. In the former, a strong Centre is seen as a must. In the latter it is seen as the sign of an overbearing and distant power. Until recently, an all-India party was able to paper over such cracks. This is no longer the case. In the successive general elections through the 1990s, on no occasion did the two largest parties poll more than just around half the popular vote. This will mean that cross-party negotiation will have to become a more developed mode of conflict resolution than in the past.

The third dimension of the changes underway is demographic and is closely related to economic and political processes. If present estimates hold true, then all of peninsular and coastal India will have attained zero population growth on or by 2020. This is already the case in much of southern India, with Kerala (1988) and Tamil Nadu (1993) being the leaders. But the north is in a different situation altogether with population growth expected to taper to net replacement ratio only between 2050 and 2100. Already, this has resulted in the decision to freeze the ratio of seats in the Lok Sabha in line with the level of the 1971 census. Changes were resisted. The less populous states argued that they would be penalised for having fewer births. The more populated regions felt they had a right to representation in line with numbers. The result was a stalemate, with the decision being postponed to 2025, when the present arrangement will be reviewed.

In economic, political and demographic terms, the next quarter century will be one of unprecedented changes. Stability in political terms is not unattainable in the narrow sense. The peaceful transfer of power through the ballot box and the higher turn out at election time of the historically disadvantaged sections are both now permanent features of the Indian landscape. Social upheaval via parliamentary politics have given India its first two south Indian Prime Ministers and a Dalit woman chief minister. Separatism in states like Tamil Nadu and Mizoram has given way through gradual integration without endangering the cultural personality of the region in question. Economic reforms have continued apace despite

several changes of guard in South Block. All these point to a maturing of democratic institutions. There are elements of uncertainty and unwholesome moments, but the system is stronger. But new challenges loom ahead. While their exact nature defies prediction, the contours can be sketched out.

The Challenges Ahead

There are four levels of challenges. The first are those to the territorial integrity of the Union. These stem not only from external assistance to insurgency and militancy in states like Jammu and Kashmir but also from deep-rooted failures of governance within. In much of the North East, especially in Manipur and Nagaland, the level of alienation is often deeper even if it receives less attention than it should. Much will rest on the ability of Union leaderships to respond with sensitivity to legitimate aspirations for power even as they reject armed attempts to browbeat democracy. Calls for more local autonomy are being voiced not only in Srinagar and Chandigarh but also by ruling parties in Dispur, Assam and Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Devolution can be an antidote to separatism but it has to be accompanied by a genuine feeling of trust and respect.

Related to this is the issue of fiscal autonomy. To my mind, there is no recourse but to embark upon this process. It is better if attempted in an orderly and planned fashion than in an ad hoc manner. Better sooner than later. How the all-India parties respond to this is another matter. So far they have not applied themselves to it. But it will be the key to stability not only in states but even at the Centre. Should regional parties become stronger in coalitions in New Delhi, issues of autonomy and fiscal reform will get the attention they deserve; not other wise.

Third, there is the issue of sectarian rivalry that resulted in the tragedy of partition in 1947. Despite several other differences, leaders like Patel and Nehru, Azad and Ambedkar, agreed never to let such a chapter be repeated. The combination of firmness and sensitivity that was attempted

then broke down over the years. In the recent past, major players in politics have exploited sentiments of community, to reap an electoral harvest. Should the Congress play the communal cards it did (1983-93) or the BJP do so again (1986-96), the rifts among people will only widen, not deepen. Several other players in politics have also done so, but stable government will only be possible if all eschew this path. Will that happen? And soon enough for long enough? The question awaits a resolution. Should any national party embark on such mobilisation, it may even find it yield diminishing returns.

Finally, political stability rests on the ability of a polity to provide for minimal aspirations, something India has yet to do. There have been several significant milestones over the last half a century. But the aspirations for food, clothing and shelter, especially among the one third of the people who do not have adequate access to them will become an explosive political issue over the coming period. India is attempting to industrialise while being a democracy. There are signs of such awareness in many key state leaderships, not so much at the Centre. The stability of the political order will eventually depend its ability to deliver on development.

Future Scenarios

Given that this is an exercise in futuristic scenarios, it may be necessary to go further and assess the nature, scope and kind of coalition-based politics likely to arise over the next quarter century. There are, as will be evident, two kinds of coalitions, one being those based on an agglomeration of distinct if changing interests, and the other being a grouping of political parties. The former may exist within a party, as was the case with the Congress during its long years in power. The second type are those that may arise between parties as exists between the Congress and the Third Front groups on pluralism, or between the BJP and its regional allies in terms of an anti-Congress platform. It is the latter that concern us here.

Before sketching out a scenario, I will underscore why a simple optimum versus pessimistic sketch may be overly simplistic. On critical issues, there are clear, often stark choices. This is true when one looks at the merits of a two party as opposed to a multi-party set-up, or of a strong Union versus autonomous states. It equally applies to the meaning of political stability should be equated with the longevity of governments or the viability of the system of governance, there are strong biases in any option one chooses. How should accountability be balanced with stability? What do we mean by economic prosperity: less inequity or simply higher growth rates? In order to avoid a direct entanglement in such issues, I have chosen to outline two scenarios below. One looks at the forces that impel us towards a strong Centre and a two-party model and the other is a de-centralised system.

There have been many votaries of a strong two party or two front systems in recent years. They have gained in force due to the inability of any party to win a clear majority since 1984, and the inability of any multi-party coalition to last a full term in office. For a variety of reasons, these arguments whose validity cannot be critically examined here, will not make a fundamental breakthrough. This is so for four distinct but inter-related reasons. One is political: there is as yet no one strong nation-wide political organisation to match the Congress of the pre-1967 era. There has been no consensus on basic issues such as a review of the Constitution between even the Congress and the BJP. Secondly, despite convergence on specific political issues such as removing from power the National front regime in 1990 or the United Front Government in 1997, there is still a yawning gap in the social base of the two premier parties. Through the Nineties, a host of credible surveys indicated that the Congress is weaker among those at the lower end of the social and economic spectrum and weaker the higher the educational, social status and economic well being of the social group. The reverse holds with the BJP. This means the former will have a slight left of centre bias and the latter a more pronouncedly pro-market tilt. Third, there are too many smaller players that have gained

in clout who will resist strongly any moves to limit their power. This includes powerful regional parties who have made and unmade governments in the 1990s. All the indications are that a grouping of some 50-60 MPs in the Lok Sabha have emerged as critical even to enable a party to come to power in New Delhi. Fourth, and this is crucial, the ideological support base for a two party system is strongest among those social groups whose level of participation in politics is the least. The middle class voting figures are abysmally low, and those of under-privileged groups correspondingly high. The latter often feel that the politics of the present sort has given them more room to bargain than the older system of one party dominance. This is a view articulated with great force by leaders of the Bahujan Samaj Party who go so far as to claim that instability is essential for their constituents. One does not have to endorse their extreme views to realise that they do echo the views of significant groups of actors.

The converse scenario is an interesting one, which needs to be given more time and attention. A more federalised arrangement would follow from the inability of Congress to recover its former space and that of the BJP to substitute the former. It would see a coalition built around three poles: federalism inclusive of fiscal autonomy, the expansion of a welfare network combined with carefully calibrated market reforms and the expansion of opportunities for groups that have historically been denied a right to live with dignity. This may sound too positive for a variety of reasons. Firstly, there is as yet no clear indication how the Congress and its regional, leftist or centrist opponents can share power at the Centre. No such model has yet been tried out and is a non-starter for obvious reasons of conflicts of interest. Secondly, there are major divergences between the economic projects of the left wing parties and the regional political formations. The latter are more market-friendly than the former. Thirdly, there are major cleavages between two major social groups in many key states: the Mandal classes and the Dalits. These may be serious enough to work to the detriment of both but as was evident in Uttar Pradesh in 1993-

95, even a working arrangement may be only a temporary one. Fourthly, and finally neither Congress nor the BJP is about to disappear from the political map. They occupy centre stage with half the popular vote between them. It is possible that one and then the other will try to divide and co-opt some of the opposition groups. This was the case with the United Front supported by the Congress in 1996-97 and the BJP led alliance regimes from 1998 to the point of writing. The future may see other models tried out, including one in which the head of government is from neither of the major parties but one of them takes part in ministry making.

The latter scenarios a different one from the former. It does not rest on major constitutional changes that are a non-starter. Nor does it assume there will be a facile consensus on issues that are profoundly ideological ones, on which debate is as essential as it is inevitable. It also anticipates and allows for the expansion of autonomy to the states as well as space for smaller groupings to share power and assume responsibility.

The tussle between the first and second scenarios will be played out over the future. There is little doubt to my mind on which is more likely as well as more desirable. But the subjective judgement apart, the former is unlikely to materialise. The latter may come about in programmatic terms but will not be easy to put into practice. It is impossible to predict the future in such fluid conditions but it is wise to prepare for it.