

EFFECTIVE GOVERNMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF COALITION POLITICS : THE INDIAN MODEL

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I

Indian politics, in the 1990s has witnessed the clear emergence of a competitive party system. In four successive Lok Sabha Elections (1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998), no party has been able to secure a clear majority, resulting in the formation of coalition/minority governments. Several commentators have stressed that the 1989 Lok Sabha Elections heralded the end of one party domination in Indian politics. Subsequent elections — both to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies — have further contributed to the emergence of multiple centres of power in the Indian polity.

The dynamics of the impact of social change on the democratic process is very clearly mirrored in the recent political developments and its implications for governance have been far reaching. 'Managing contradictions', as V. P. Singh rightly stressed, has been the focus of political activities in this emerging phase of coalition politics (Deccan Herald, 4 June 1996).

The electoral verdict — both in the 1996 and 1998 Lok Sabha Elections - conclusively demonstrate that the voters favour the formation of a government that will work on the basis of national consensus (and) --- reflect the plurality of the people's verdict (1996). The United Front government led by Deve Gowda and Gujral, saw itself not as a mere replacement of one set of rulers by another, but as offering as alternative

model of governance (which was) guided by the principles of probity, responsibility with accountability and openness and transparency in all decision-making (Common Minimum Programme 1996). The effect of this alternative model of governance—involving coalition politics.

II

It needs to be stressed that while coalitions and power sharing arrangements are quite common in Parliamentary systems, the nature of the party system in India (till the late 1980s), did not require frequent experiments with such an arrangement, at least at the national level. However, in the States, coalition governments have often been formed, especially in the post 1967 period.

The interim government, formed in preparation for independence, was a coalition government, with the representatives of both the Congress and Muslim League participating in the government. The 17 member Cabinet that assumed office after independence, had six ministers who were non-Congressmen. The first non-Congress government formed at the centre in 1977, was a coalition government in which the Janata Party and the Akali Dal shared power. The government headed by Charan Singh in 1979, was also a coalition, consisting of representatives from the Janata (S), Congress (U) and AIADMK. The National Front government headed by V. P. Singh, was a five party coalition consisting of the Janata Dal, Congress (S), Telugu Desam, DMK and Assam Gana Parishad. The ministry headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 1996, though essentially consisting of ministers drawn from the BJP did have one representative from the Shiv Sena. The 13 party United Front government was—in terms of the number of parties who form part of the ruling coalition—the largest coalition government formed at the national level.

Several factors are believed to contribute to the stability of coalition governments. What was said in the context of European coalition politics appears relevant in the Indian context too:—

First, there is the number of parties in the system, with multi-party systems assumed to make both coalition formation and coalition maintenance more difficult. Second, there is the 'size' of the party system... in terms of the 'effective number of parties' in a system. Third, there is the presence of anti-system or other 'extreme' parties, assumed to have a destabilizing effect. Fourth, there is the

degree of ideological polarization or 'cleavage conflict' assumed to make it more difficult to form and maintain governments. Fifth, there is the level of policy influence open to the Opposition, based on the effectiveness of the Legislative Committee System. Sixth, there is the salience of elections to the government formation process, with higher electoral salience assumed to make for more stable government. (Laver and Schofield 1990 : 147-48)

The coalition experiment at the Centre, in the past, has not always been a very satisfactory experience. The stability of the government was invariably in doubt, the inevitable consequence of the irreconcilable differences and tensions among the members of the coalition. Ministers in the government appeared to be more pre-occupied ensuring the survival of the government rather than concentrating on policy matters.

The interim government formed before independence was, as Maulana Azad aptly remarked, born in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust between Congress and "League" (1988-179). Azad goes on to add that the principal objective of the League in joining the government was to sabotage every move it took. (ibidem : 188) Azad also felt that the experience of the conduct of the League members in the interim government was one of the critical factors that was responsible for Nehru accepting the partition plan. (ibidem : 201)

Even though Nehru did induct six non-Congressmen in the first Cabinet sworn in after independence, these ministers were gradually marginalised and were either eased out of office or resigned (in protest) from the ministry.

Morarji Desai has an unenviable task managing the coalition pieced together to form the first non-Congress government at the Centre. Ministers spoke in different voices and off the cuff remarks were the order of the day. The Prime Minister had to frequently write to Ministers requesting them to desist from making remarks on issues even before they were discussed in the Cabinet. Morarji recounted :—

How can anyone again gain faith in Ministers who were always fighting one another in public?... there were people like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and George Fernandes, besides Charan Singh and Jagivan Ram who fancied themselves as Prime Ministers. They were quite convinced about it and openly spoke of the possibility. (as quoted in Gandhi 1986 : 125)

The National Front government headed by V. P. Singh, saw frequently clashes among the coalition partners and the disagreements between the Prime Minister and his Deputy (Devi Lal) were often voiced in the open.

While it must be conceded that the political climate in which the United Front government was installed and functioned, was in many ways dissimilar to the circumstances and conditions in which previous coalition governments were formed, the pulls and pressures it has been subjected to are comparable. The editorial in a leading Daily, on the United Front, highlights this fact :—

The United Front is proving to be what it is : a front without unity ... There is nothing wrong in one constituent of a coalition holding a view slightly different from another's on any given subject. It may do no great harm if it is merely a difference in emphasis and if it is not pressed to the point of an open, ugly debate ... Various partners of the government not only have almost diametrically opposite views on serious issues of government but gleefully air them with no let or hindrance.

(The Financial Express, 2.7.96)

Coalition arrangements (in India), more often than not, have survived on a negative agenda. Even in the case of the leaders of the United Front (and those supporting it) that the main purpose of their unity (and support) was to prevent the BJP from coming to power. In the past, anti-Congressism was the glue that held together several coalitions. Anti-BJPism seems to have today taken its place. When a coalition arrangement, its support base and logic of unity is defined in essentially negative terms, the prospects of positive contributions in the form of decisive policy initiatives become remote, as the irreconcilable contradictions come to the fore sooner or later.

The major parties that constituted the United Front, came together only in the post-election scenario and had fielded candidates against each other in the elections. It is relevant to note in this context, that in the States, governments formed by parties which had a pre-election alliance had a longer average life span as compared to single-party (majority) governments. Parties entering into an alliance before an elections, invariably commit themselves to a common programme and

this factor is largely responsible for the relative stability of the government. A study undertaken at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) of the 138 state Governments formed between March 1977 and March 1996, shows that the average life of a pre-electoral coalition government was 53 months while the average life of a single party government was 41 months. Governments formed on the basis of a post election coalition, had an average life of just 20 months. The relative stability of coalition governments in West Bengal and Kerala are indicative of this trend.

The lack of ideological unity among the coalition partners had proved to be a serious impediment to effective policy making. Rajni Kothari has rightly asserted :—

The system has entered a period of rapid decline and erosion of any normative content which is so crucial for a functioning democracy. As there is no ideological consensus any more, it is witnessing wholesale criminalisation of politics, the increasing communal orientation of civil society and a highly corrupt system of governance — all of this symptomatic of a policy that has lost its bearings. ... It calls for going back to basics. This is not possible without evolving a new ideological consensus which can restore the fundamentals of a social democracy. ... the need is for new alignment of ideas institutions and a structure of power that can produce the desired alternative. (1995 : 20)

Often, intra-party and not inter-party revolts have been the principal factor responsible for coalition instability. Commentators on European coalitions have held the view that intra-party dynamics need to be closely assessed while attempting any meaningful analysis of coalition politics. Von Byne, a leading scholar on European coalitions, while drawing attention to the internal divisions within parties asserts that :—

... the image of parties acting as monolithic units is a fiction which cannot be sustained ... The united will of the party is a variation of the older fiction of the uniform will of the people.

(As quoted in Laver and Shofield 1990 : 17)

The impact of intra-party dissensions in wrecking coalition arrangements was very clearly evident, when non-Congress

governments were formed in some Indian states soon after the 1967 elections. At the Centre, both the Janata government (1977-79) headed by Morarji Desai and the National Front government (1989-90) headed by V. P. Singh were plagued by intra-party dissensions. If Morarji Desai's resignation was triggered off by the split in the Janata party engineered by Charan Singh and his supporters, the Janata Dal split was brokered by Chandrasekhar and Devi Lal when the fall of the National Front government became imminent. Even in the case of the United Front, the Janata Dal's leadership according top priority to initiating disciplinary action against Ramakrishna Hegde soon after winning the trust vote in the Lok Sabha, was proof of intra-party convulsions, becoming the major pre-occupation of leaders of coalition governments. The dissent that Deve Gowda has to face on the inclusion/non-inclusion of leaders in the council of ministers and friction with regard to the rank and status of those included, was largely limited to those from his own party. After Gujral taking over as Prime Minister, the fissures that developed in the Janata Dal and the formation of the Rashtriya Janata Dal by Laloo Prasad Yadav can also be cited as a case in point.

In the wider context of democratic government, coalitions have often faced a serious legitimacy crisis. The several opportunistic coalition alliances that have been catapulted to positions of power, both at the national and state level, are often cited as examples of authority being wielded by those who have no popular mandate. The Post Poll Survey conducted as part of the National Election Study 96 by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) shows that only 12 percent of the respondents interviewed felt that the United Front should have formed the government. Interestingly, 34 percent of the respondents (of whom a significant chunk had actually voted for the parties which form part of the United Front) and no definite opinion on this question (CSDS-India Today, Poll 1996 : 40)

With coalition/minority governments increasingly becoming the norm, parties/alliances have formed the government with the help of 'unconditional support' of other political parties. The parties that offer this support to the ruling party are in a position to exercise considerable influence over governmental policy and decision-making, even without formally entering the government. Thus, these 'supporting parties' wield

enormous influence, but can, in no way be held accountable for the government decisions, many of which may have been taken because of the pressure exerted by them.

III

With the formation of coalition governments becoming increasingly inevitable, the management of contradictions needs to be done more effectively in order to ensure that policy formulation by the government is given due emphasis.

Ideally, a coalition government formed on the basis of a pre-election alliance and acceptance of a common programme, provides for greater stability and direction to government policies. However, coalition governments have often come to power at the centre on the basis of a post election alliance. Even during the run up to the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, though three major alliances appeared to have clearly emerged, none of them were in a position to reach a consensus on a pre-election Common Minimum Programme. In all the three political formulations a few parties had reservations on joining a government formed by the major parties in the coalition of which they were a part. In such circumstances, a strict adherence to a Common Minimum Programme becomes vital. Even those parties extending support from outside need to endorse the Common Minimum Programme. This Common Minimum Programme should be laid on the table of the Lok Sabha and endorsed by it. This consensus programme should form the basis of the policies and programmes formulated by the Cabinet. In Germany, an ideal power sharing arrangement has been worked out on the basis of the coalition contract, which guides the government in its functioning.

Secondly, coalition politics requires institutionalisation of the bargaining structures within the coalition. While the United Front formed a steering committee, its role and functions were not clearly defined. Further, the United Front leadership made little efforts at institutionalised coordination between the Front and the largest supporting party from outside — the Congress. As long as Narasimha Rao headed the Congress, the coordination between the Congress and the United Front was on the basis of personal contacts. However, the same was not effective enough with Sitaram Kesri taking over as the Congress President. The United Front in its Common Minimum Programme rightly stressed that in any coalition there will be differences, but what is important is the manner

in which these differences are aired, discussed and resolved (Common Minimum Programme 1996). Institutionalised bargaining structures would provide the platform for the amicable resolution of such differences.

Serious thought must also be given to the question of the desirability of continuing with the existing arrangement of the Union Council of Ministers advising the President on federal issues such as appointment of governors and use of Article 356. The Union Council of Ministers is essentially a 'Central Authority' and it would be in keeping with the federal spirit if a 'federal body' were to be entrusted with the responsibility of advising the President on crucial federal issues. Such a 'federal body'—consisting of those who represent both the Centre and the States—would symbolise the quintessence of federal unity. (For details see Shastri 1994)

The Inter-State Council is one such 'federal body' which could be assigned this task. Created in 1990, by the National Front government, under the provisions of Articles 263, the Inter-State Council consists of the Prime Minister as chairman, a few senior Union Ministers and the Chief Minister, of all the States. However, not much was heard of the Inter-State Council when the Congress was in power between 1991 and 1996. The United Front government made attempts to revive this body. In the context of the emergence of a competitive party system in India, strengthening the Inter-State Council appears to be the only feasible strategy for ensuring Centre-State and inter-State cordiality.

The Inter-state Council would be an ideal forum for 'investigating and resolving multi-sectorial inter-governmental disputes.' (Sarkaria Commission : 1988-242) If Governors were to be appointed by the President on the advice of the Inter-State Council it would imply an active role for the Chief Minister in the process. A counter-check would then be provided to ensure that the right people are appointed to this august office. Within the existing constitutional arrangement, strengthening the role of the Inter-State Council appears to be the one best way of ensuring respect to federal traditions and ensuring of federal fairness.

The successful working of coalitions requires the clear identification of the coalition 'nuclei.' The major partner in the coalition—the party to which the Prime Minister invariably belongs—need to play a major role in ensuring that the coalition rules are strictly adhered to.

This would also require a strict adherence to the principle of collective responsibility by the Council of Ministers. In coalition governments the past Indian experience has been, that Ministers tend to violate the principle of collective responsibility frequently. The United Front government has been no exception in this regard. A welcome development that has been witnessed in recent times has been the demystification of the office of the Prime Minister. Coalitions provide the ideal setting for a system of collective leadership, so vital for the success of Parliamentary Democracy.

It has been argued that coalition politics involves the shifting of the Centre of power from the executive to the legislature. If the chain of Parliamentary control is to be strengthened and the dynamics of Parliamentary surveillance made operationally purposive, the committee system needs to be strengthened. In 1993, it was decided by Parliament, to establish Department Related Subject Committees, to permit a more comprehensive review of the financial proposals put forward by the government. It has rightly been argued that 'these new structures constitute significant improvements in the existing instrumentalities' (Parameshwaran 1995), for the scrutiny of the government and 'are indicative of the potential for effective change in our Parliamentary system' (ibidem). The positive contribution that these committees have achieved in other systems include, the 'extension of the range of parliamentary scrutiny, deepening of parliamentary accountability and a widening of the public policy debate' (Giddings 1994 : 684).

The emerging phase of coalition politics, would also necessitate, a second look at the working of Parliamentary procedures, with a view to initiating suitable reforms to expand the democratic space and ensure greater democratic intensity.

Within the broader framework of the Parliamentary System, a reform that has been suggested is the formation of an all party national government. This suggestion has been put forward frequently — ever since 1989 — with political parties not being in a position to secure a simple majority in the Lok Sabha on their individual strength. The need to re-think the majority principle was emphasised on the ground that if we fall back upon the principle of majority decision, not only would the solution elude, but each of the problems would divide the nation and undermine its unity. (Chakravartty 1991 : 11) Soon after the 1996 Lok

Sabha elections, R. Venkataraman, N. A. Palkhivala, C. Subramaniam and H. R. Khanna called for the formation of a national government in view of the election results. The scheme outlined, envisaged the Lok Sabha electing the Prime Minister by means of single transferable vote, from among candidates (who need not be members of Parliament) who secured the support of at least 100 Lok Sabha MPs. Political parties were to be represented in the Council of Ministers in proportion to their strength in the House. A Common Minimum Programme 'acceptable to most of the political parties if not all the political parties' must be formulated and placed before the two houses of Parliament for approval. A no confidence motion to remove a Prime Minister should take effect only when the Lok Sabha elected an alternative leader. (Hindu 1996) The above scheme, it was felt, would ensure 'stability of administration,' cooperation of all parties in the administration of the country' and 'elimination of rancour in the governance of the country.' (ibidem)

Earlier in April 1995, the then Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Shivaraj Patil had suggested a Constitutional Reforms Package to ensure stability in government. The various suggestions made included (a) The Prime Minister be elected by the Lok Sabha and resigns only when an alternative leader is chosen; (b) the Prime Minister be elected by 2/3 majority of the Lok Sabha; (c) the Prime Minister be elected by a majority of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha; (d) the Prime Minister be elected by a majority of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha and can be removed only by 2/3 majority of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha; and (e) the Prime Minister be elected by a simple majority of the Lok Sabha and a No Confidence Motion to be passed must secure the support of 2/3 majority in the Lok Sabha. (Statesman 1995)

The suggestion that the Prime Minister be elected by the Lok Sabha needs to be given serious consideration in the light of recent developments. Any candidate who has the support of 100 Lok Sabha members should be allowed to contest the elections. The system of single transferable vote should be followed and the members of the Lok Sabha should be asked to rank the candidates. In the event of there being more than two contestants, through a process of elimination (of the candidates with the lowest first preference votes) and transfer of votes (second preference votes of those eliminated) the candidate who secures a majority of the votes polled should be appointed as the Prime Minister. Such a

system would also insulate the office of the Prime Minister from controversies (President Shankar Dayal Sharma's inviting Vajpayee to form the government can be cited as a case in point) as the person appointed as Prime Minister has already secured majority support in the Lok Sabha. Further, the process of choosing the Prime Minister or leader of the coalition which enjoys majority support would be more democratic in the event of the Lok Sabha Members directly participating in the process. Then Deve Gowda and subsequently Gujral were chosen as the leaders of the United Front, many argued that the decision was made by a few leaders (some of whom were not even members of Parliament) and not by the Lok Sabha MPs belonging to the United Front. If the Prime Minister were to be elected by the Lok Sabha, he/she could be administered the oath of office first and the other members of the Council of Ministers could be sworn in once their names are approved by the Lok Sabha.

Finally, in the event of the government being defeated on the floor of the Lok Sabha at the time of voting on a Confidence/No-Confidence Motion, the Council of Ministers should be required to vacate office/submit its resignation only after the House has been able to choose an alternative leader to head the government.

The above mentioned institutional safeguards could provide the appropriate political setting for the successful working of coalition governments and the effective discharge of its responsibilities.

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