

Coalition Government and Political Instability: The Indian Experience and Challenges Ahead

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Abstract

The present research paper attempts at the understanding of the system of coalition and an evaluation of its implications for the society with an Indian experience. Coalition politics is based on a system of governance by a group of political parties or by several political parties. When several political parties collaborate to form a government and exercise the political power on the basis of common agreed programs/agendas, we can describe such a system as coalition politics or coalition government. A coalition government is a collaborative or a cooperative effort in which several political parties or some political parties in association with some independent representatives form a government. The system of forming a collective government and then running such a government is usually described as a system of coalition rule or a stem of coalition rule. On the basis of facts and research we can say that the era of coalition politics in India has finally arrived.

Keywords: Political Instability, Indian Experience, Coalition, Government.

Introduction

Political parties are indispensable to any democratic system and play the most crucial role in the electoral process in setting up candidates and conducting election campaigns. In recent years we have witnessed a succession of unstable governments and the reason for such a recurring phenomenon is said to be the archaic and chaotic functioning of political parties. Alliance and coalitions are made, broken and changed at whim, and the balance of power seems too held not by those at the union level but by minor parties on the fringes. There is no doubt that Indian political parties have fragmented over the years. Frequent party splits, mergers and counter splits have dramatically increased the number of parties that now contest elections. 'In 1952, 74 parties contested elections while in recent years this number has swollen to more than 177, and has been consistently increasing since 1989.'¹ Can the instability at the union level or in the states be attributed solely? The growing number of parties or the malaise with which the political system suffers today lies in the functioning and dynamics of the party system in India apart from other causes in the working of the political system as a whole.

Political parties in India have been greatly influenced by the cultural diversity, social and ethnic, casts and community and religious pluralism, traditions of the nationalist movements, contrasting style of party leadership and clashing ideological perspectives. The two major categories of political parties in India are national and state, and are so recognized by the election commission of India on the basis of certain specified criteria. As of today there are seven national parties, seven after the split in the Janta Dal in August 1999, and more than 50 parties, recognized as such by the election commission of India. The national parties are Indian National Congress (INC), Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Rshtriya janta Dal (RJD).

According to the new encyclopedia coalition refers to ministry composed of members of two or more political parties, men of different views joining together for some common purpose. William A. Gamson defines it as, "the joint use of resources to determine the outcome of a decision." Lastly we can say that coalition politics can come into operation either through a pre poll coalition on alliance or through a post poll alliance. It can be either a negative or a positive pre poll alliance based upon shared and agreed policies and programs. Today coalition politics is in operation in India at the national level as well as in some of the states of the Indian union.

Glimpses of the Coalition Politics in India

In pre independent India, the Indian government under the Prime Ministership of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1946 was the first formal coalition consisting of the congress, Muslim league, the Hindu Mahasabha, etc. 'After independence the credit for having first ever coalition under the present constitution goes to what was then the PEPSU state. As no party could get the majority in the state assembly in the first election of 1952, a coalition of non- congress party was formed in April 1952. After independence, the Indian National Congress (INC) had fought the first five elections (1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1971) under the dominating influence of Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru and Smt. Indira Gandhi.'² Their charismatic leadership always contributed to the success of the congress party. However, the sixth Lok Sabha election in India was historic and unique.

It is without parallel and is undoubtedly a watershed in India's post-independence history. In one stroke the Indian electorate brought to an end thirty years of congress party's dominant rule, eleven years of government under the Prime Ministership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and twenty months of an emergency that has set India on a course of authoritarian government. Thus, for the first time in Indian parliamentary history, the Indian Congress party was recognized as a main opposition party of Lok Sabha. In 1977, the first coalition was established at the center under the leadership of Shri Morarji Desai as the leader of the Janta Party. This marked the closure of the Nehru- Indira congress regime, and the beginning of the Janta Party rule. Thus, for the first time in Indian parliamentary history, a non-congress government was established at the center. This was the first occasion since independence that the congress party was not in a position to form a government. Unfortunately, the Janta Party leaders could not make a proper of the golden opportunity given to them by the people of India after their success to capture the government power at the centre. The intense power struggle among the three leaders, Morarji Desai, Shri Charan Singh and Shri Jagjivan Ram proved ultimately a death-knell to the Janta government. Thus, the first non-congress government formed at the centre on 24th March, 1977 with Morarji Desai as the Prime Minister went out of office after an existence of 2 years, 3 months and 22 days stumbling from crisis to crisis primarily because of internal bickering and dissensions, although the formation of government was welcomed all over the country as the dawn of a new era. The second coalition was formed by Janta (S) party under the leadership of Chaudhary Charan Singh, on 28th July 1979, but the sixth Lok Sabha was dissolved on 22nd August 1979. The third coalition government was formed by BJP and Janta Dal with the alliance of all opposition parties during 1st Dec 1989 to 7th Nov 1990. V.P.Singh was the Prime Minister for the coalition government named as 'National Front Government' ruled for 341 days. BJP withdrew the support on the issues of Rath Yatra and Babri Masjid and the national Front Government fell. The National Front Government was split into two groups by the initiative of Congress-I resulting in another coalition government under the prime Ministership of Chandra

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Shekhar who ruled for 224 days. 'The fifth coalition government started in 1996 which took the title of United Front Government. This government was formed by the alliance of regional parties which was supported by the national political party and the congress –I Mr. H.D.Devegoda as the prime Minister for 325 days from 1st June 1996 to 21st April 1997.' Again Congress-I opted for a change in the Prime Ministership, the reason being the Bofors case. United Front Government changed the prime Minister and Mr. I.K. Gujral became the Prime Minister of the sixth coalition government.'³

After the few months Congress-I withdrew the support by stating that the Jain Commission report should not include the name of DMK in its charges to which the United Front Government rejected. The Seventh coalition government was formed in the 1998 by BJP with the 13 regional political parties. In this AIADMK withdrew the support due to the internal politics. In 1999 Lok Sabha Election, the BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance secured a comfortable majority and Shri A.B.Vajpayee became the Prime Minister of India. In addition, the NDA govt at the Centre is only coalition government in the Independent India with the partnership of 18 political parties to complete the full term of five years in the office. However the period between 1996-1999 witnessed a personality-specific than policy-oriented and all the contentious issues were thrown out of window by the respective ruling parties in the name of the stable and good governance. After 2004 general election to the Lok Sabha the UPA led by Congress-I party has formed the tenth coalition government at the Centre, on 13 May 2004, under the Prime Ministership of Dr.Manmohan Singh with the outside support from the left party and completed five years of its journey on 13 May 2009. Both experts and the political parties agree that the era of coalition politics has just begun and it's here to stay. "At the time when regional political parties are assuming significance and the days of single party rule are over there is no escape from coalition politics."⁴

Coalition Government and Enhancement of Democratic Legitimacy and National Unity

Coalition government can be better understood when we go through the under mentioned merits of collaborated government-

1. We need to understand that the concept of coalition government originated in India because of regional disparity and the failure of national parties to meet the aspirations and needs of all the states. The coalition government addresses the regional disparity more than the single party rule. I agree that it may not perform at its full throttle but it is always good for inclusive growth of all the regions, of all the people of a country than the high growth of only selected people and region.
2. Coalition government is more democratic, and hence fairer, because it represents a much broader spectrum of public opinion than government by one party alone. In almost all coalitions, a majority of citizens voted for the parties which form the government and so their views and interests are represented in political decision-making.

3. Coalition government creates a more honest and dynamic political system, allowing voters a clearer choice at election time. In countries where coalition government is very rare, such as the UK or USA, the main parties straddle a wide spectrum of opinion and can be seen as coalitions of competing interest groups and ideologies. At elections, however, such parties present themselves, perhaps fraudulently, to voters as united behind particular views and policies, whereas in power their internal divisions may have a serious, and often unseen, impact upon decision-making. In countries with coalition governments the greater number of political parties gives the voter a more honest choice and brings differences of opinion out into the open for debate. It is also easier for parties to split, or new ones to be formed, as new political issues divide opinion, because new parties still have a chance of a share in political power.
4. Coalitions provide good government because their decisions are made in the interests of a majority of the people. Because a wide consensus of opinion is involved, any policy will be debated thoroughly within the government before it is implemented. 'Single-party government is much more likely to impose badly thought-out policies upon parliament and people, perhaps for narrowly ideological reasons (for example, the emergency rule under Mrs. Indira Gandhi). When difficult or historic decisions have to be taken, for example in wartime, or over an issue such as membership of the European Union or NATO, the consent of politicians representing a wide range of interests and opinion is important in committing the country and its people to difficult but necessary courses of action'⁵
5. Coalition government provides more continuity in administration. In countries without a tradition of coalition governments, parties can remain in government or opposition for long periods, and an adversarial political culture develops. When a change does occur, the members of the new administration seldom have any experience of government to draw upon, and often embark upon a wholesale reversal of the previous regime's policies; neither of these things is in the public interest. In states with coalition politics, however, there are usually at least some ministers with considerable experience under the previous government. A more consensual style of politics also allows for a more gradual and constructive shift of policy between administrations.
6. Such government functions on principle of politics of consensus. Besides, states are given more powers, and the base of concept of federalism is strengthened. I am of the firm opinion that stronger the states of any nation, stronger will be government at the Centre.
7. In coalition politics, one have to compromise with all your principles to accommodate the other and finally you will stand nowhere. The communist one time severe opposition to congress is today supporting them. It is the time for India to learn

- coalition politics and in future India will only see coalition governments.
8. Government will be more consensus based: resulting policies will be broadly approved of for the benefit of the nation.
 9. Better representation of the electorate's wishes
 10. Better Quality of Policy: enhanced scrutiny and increased attention paid to each policy
 11. Increased Continuity: election does not lead to dramatic overhaul which can produce fragmented rule
 12. Yet instability apart, coalition governments have been effective in enhancing democratic legitimacy, representativeness, and national unity. Major policy shifts like neo-liberal economic reforms, federal decentralization, and grass roots decentralization, in theory or practice, are largely attributable to the onset of federal coalitional governance. Coalition governments in states and at the centre have also facilitated gradual transition of the Marxist-left and the Hindu-right into the political establishment, and thus contributed to the integration of the party system as well as the nation. The same major national parties that initially rejected the idea of coalition politics have today accepted it and are maturing into skilled and virtuoso performers at the game.

Problems of A Coalition Government

1. Coalition government is actually less democratic as the balance of power is inevitably held by the small parties who can barter their support for concessions from the main groups within the coalition. This means that a party with little popular support is able to impose its policies upon the majority by a process of political blackmail. 'Possible examples of this might include the role of religious parties in Israel, the Greens in Germany and France, and the demand of constitutional reforms by the Lib Dems in the UK as their price of coalition support in a future hung parliament. Democracy may be further undermined if the process of coalition-making is subject to the whim of a monarch or president, able to decide who to ask to attempt to form a government, whether to call new elections, etc.'⁶
2. Coalition government is less transparent. Because a party has no real chance of forming a government alone, the manifestos they present to the public become irrelevant and often wildly unrealistic. Real decisions about political programs are made after the election, in a process of secretive back-room negotiation from which the public is excluded.
3. Coalitions provide bad government because they are unable to take a long term view. Sometimes an ideological compass is necessary for governments to navigate in difficult political and economic waters, and coalitions lack such a unifying philosophy. In addition planning for the long-term often requires decisions to be made that are unpopular in the short-term. Coalitions often fail such tests because temporary unpopularity may encourage one of the parties involved to defect, in search of a populist advantage. It might be agreed that sometimes exceptional circumstances, such as war, require

a coalition government (although the USA did not have one in either World War). This does not mean that such governments are better in normal conditions. Major constitutional decisions are better dealt with through referendum

4. Coalition governments are very unstable, often collapsing and reforming at frequent intervals—Italy, for example, averages more than one government per year since 1945. In India all non-Congress coalitions except last Bajpayee's ministry didn't completed its full term and the first Bajpayee ministry lasted for only thirteen days. This greatly restricts the ability of governments to deal with major reforms and means that politicians seldom stay in any particular ministerial post for long enough to get to grips with its demands. At the same time, this squabbling between political parties erodes the confidence of the public in their political system and in their elected representatives.
5. Coalition governments are definitely far less effective, not durable, and non-dependable as compared to the governments formed by any one party with a definite ideology and principles.
6. In coalition governments, MLAs and MPs from all the parties are given portfolios / ministries and appointed as Ministers. These ministers are appointed on the recommendations of the parent party, without taking the qualification, character and criminal / clean record of the MLAs and MPs.
7. Many times it is found that the numbers of ministers are so very large that the leaders run out of portfolios to be given to the incumbents. That means there is no office existing and some MLAs and MPs become ministers. We have even seen ministers without portfolios or minister with some meaningless portfolios. Such ministers are asked to run their office without portfolios from their residences, with hardly any officials working under them.
8. This is a blatant misuse and waste of the revenues collected out of the hard-earned money of the people of India.
9. I think coalition govt. cannot be able to provide proper development of country because the government does not have the power to take decision himself.

If you turn the pages of Indian History after Independence, we can clearly see that most of the time coalition government failed to give the good governance to the people of India. We can take the example as follows:

1. Janta Dal government at centre in 1989.
2. Previous state government in Karnataka (Congress Janta Dal alliance)
3. BJP lead alliance headed by A.B. Bajpayee had not smooth run
4. Last government alliance in U.P. before Mayavati government.

Political Stability and Challenges Ahead

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 turnout at election time of the historically

disadvantaged sections are both now permanent features of the Indian landscape. Social upheaval via parliamentary politics has 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 movements, but the system is stronger. But new challenges loom ahead. While their exact nature defies prediction, the contours can be sketched out.'⁷

What I feel strongly is that there are four levels of challenges. The first are those to the territorial integrity of the union. These stems not only form 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 deeper as 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. Devolution can be an antidote to separatism but it has to be accompanied by a genuine feeling of trust and respect.

Secondly, 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 years. In the recent past, major players in politics have exploited sentiments of community, to reap an electoral harvest. Should the Congress play cards, it did (1983-93) or the BJP do so again (1986-96), the rift among people will widen, not deepen. Several other players have also done so, but stable government will only be possible if all eschew this path. Will that happen? The question awaits a resolution.

Related to this is the issue of fiscal autonomy. To my mind, there is no recourse but to embark upon the process. It is better if attempted in an orderly and planned manner than in an ad hoc manner. Better sooner than later, How the all- India parties respond to this another matter. So far they have not applied themselves to it. But it will be the key to their stability not only in the states but even at the Centre.

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 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 industrialize while being a democracy. There are signs of such awareness in much key state leadership, not so much at the centre. The stability of the political order will eventually depend on its ability to deliver on the development of the nation.

Is The Era of Coalition Politics Over?

The fever of general elections might be over but the results are marking the start of the new era. The majority win of Narendra Modi shows the people's anger against the congress led coalition government. Modi has got a huge support right from his campaigning days and it is getting stronger day by day. The mandate has provided him with the golden opportunity to put his thoughts into the real action where he might not require any kind of bargaining with the heavy regional players. Does it suggest that the era of coalition politics of over now?

Indians have been longing for such a government for a long time. A government formed with full majority is real governance and a good politics. This could provide more stability to the country and definitely help in the economic growth and good market appraise. But, with a single performance in fact with just the beginning of the show, we cannot call this to be a cease point for the coalition politics. This government needs to stabilize, fulfill their commitments and bag a tag of excellence in order to carry on with this trend ahead. If Modi government happens to excel in their performance, then definitely this could be a new beginning for Indian politics.

The era of coalition politics definitely requires a quick wrap up, as the hung parliament had already caused much hazard in to the governance and economy of the country. We Indians keep our fingers crossed and wish this government to succeed and end the era of coalition government.

Conclusion

The continuity of coalition government (first under the NDA and later UPA) confirms not merely the decline of one party rule and rise of regional and smaller parties, but a crisis of majoritarian political culture, based on the dominance of a single party led by a charismatic leader over a duster of smaller parties. Both the coalition have faced the problem of internal disputes due to dusting of parties having differing manifestos, for the sustenance of a stable future of coalition politics, the parties must keep their common minimum programs ahead of their own ideologies. 'The era of coalition government has given both positive and negative signals. We should catch hold of positive signals like understanding and cooperation among regional and national political parties, common minimum programs, coordination committee, politics of consensus, culture of coalition politics etc. and try to evolve a unique model of parliamentary government something like 'Popular National Government' which will be most suited to our multi-cultural multi-religious polity.'⁸ If however, God forbid, we succumb to the degenerating forces unleashed by the era of coalition politics like pressure tactics, black- mailing, criminalization of politics, politicization of criminals, misuse of power for economic and political gains, nepotism, casteism, communalism etc. then not only democracy is doomed in the country but our survival as a constitutional state will be also in doubt. Thus our political system is on trial. We have to prove that we are fit for democracy and constitutional government.

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