

Vol 2 Issue 10 April 2013

Impact Factor : 0.1870

ISSN No :2231-5063

Monthly Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

*Golden Research
Thoughts*

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Publisher
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IMPACT FACTOR : 0.2105

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2230-7850

Indian Streams Research Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial Board readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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IMPACT OF COALITION POLITICS ON THE PARTY POLITICS

SHIVAPUTRA. S. BEDJIRGE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR IN POLITICAL SCIENCE GOVT FIRST GRADE COLLEGE
KAMLAPUR DIST GULBARGA .

Abstract:

In coalition politics when no single-party is able to reach power by itself. In such circumstances one party joins another one or more parties to fight the elections and /or to form a government.

INTRODUCTION

Coalitions or party alliances may be pre-election or post-election phenomena. Some parties may cluster together, pool their resources and work jointly to maximize their gain by defeating the rivals in the election process. If there is a single alliance fighting against individual rival parties, the possibility of the alliance winning more seats than the rivals is stronger. If two equally strong alliances are pitted against each other, the effect will be that of strong two-party system, either of them getting a majority to form the government. If more than two alliances contest, the result will be either in favour of one of them or none at all, with no alliance being able to win a majority. In the last situation, a government is possible only by means of a further coalition of two or more alliances.

In the general elections to the Lok Sabha in 1996 there was a multi-cornered contest, with no strongly built alliance on the national scene. The BJP had a semblance of an alliance with three minor parties; the congress (I) almost fought it alone; and the national Front and the Left Front could not agree on a Third Front.

The result was a fragmented Parliament with more being able to form a government of its own. The BJP being the largest party was given a chance but they could not muster enough support. The post election efforts brought the NF and LF together to form a United Front and Stake claim to form a government with the outside support of the Congress (I). Thus the United Front led by Deve Gowda consisting of thirteen parties was a post-election coalition formed temporarily to keep the BJP out of power. The UF-Congress (I) collaboration could not last beyond one year and a half as there was no common interest between them, and they soon fell as under.

In the next Lok Sabha elections of 1998, the BJP alliance had expanded its base to include sixteen parties, most of them region-based. The UP consisting of thirteen parties while in power lost its cohesion and had no accepted leader. The Congress (I) was still hesitant about a national level alliance, but was a bit rejuvenated owing to the "Sonia factor". Comparatively, the BJP-led alliance was more strongly united and more regionally based than the other two, and the elections results proved the same. The BJP was determined to continue the alliance, with necessary modifications, in spite of internal contradictions. The National Democratic Alliance was forged sufficiently early to prepare for the electoral confrontation in 1999. It is apparent that in the present vortex of political relations in India coalitions are unavoidable.

According to M.Laver, Political parties make use of policy packages as store fronts to attract voters and the leaders may forget them once the election is won¹. Riker and Laver do not consider policy even as an instrument in electoral politics and coalition formation². Anthony Downs said that parties

Title :IMPACT OF COALITION POLITICS ON THE PARTY POLITICS
Source:Golden Research Thoughts [2231-5063]SHIVAPUTRA. S. BEDJIRGE yr:2013 vol:2 iss:10

formulate policies in order to win elections rather than win elections to formulate policies³. However, that a well-drawn out policy and an air of commitment to implement the same will help maintain long-term credibility of the party or coalition of parties is nowhere doubted.

Coalition involves a commitment on the part of the political parties concerned to implement a pragmatic common programme, however, much ideologically at poles they are. Partners should agree on a common minimum programme of action, the implementation of which becomes the objective of sharing power. This involves 'ideological compromises' on the part of radical and fundamentalist parties. Sometimes rightist and leftist parties come together to stall a common enemy. Or it may be a coalition of secularists and communalists or even of Marxists and anti-Marxists. In either case there must evolve a common programme for positive action. The negative objective of pulling down a government or preventing a party from coming to power cannot succeed in bringing about a coalition. When 'like minded parties' with similar ideological goals make a coalition, the making of a common programme may not have serious setbacks. Serious problems occur when ideologically polarized parties are forced to work together. The common minimum programme becomes a common manifesto for all parties that join the coalition. It cannot be the sum total of all the manifestos of the individual parties which may include contradictory ideas and promises. The Common Minimum Programme (CMP) manifests compromise, and the minimum that the partners agree upon.

With a view to accommodating the ideologically distant parties, many ideological or 'fundamentalist' sacrifices will have to be made by the leading parties. Long standing coalitions will recognize the importance of CMPs and prepare them sufficiently early to face the elections. Hurriedly patched up coalitions often make hotch-potch agreements, without deep understanding between them to forge a common programme like the National Agenda of the UF of 1996 or of the BJP led coalition of 1998. According to Ajay K. Mehra the Deve Gowda government had developed a CMP which was based not only on the manifestos of the coalition partners, but also incorporated the political agenda of those parties which had not participated in the government⁴. The CMP was only a broad statement of approaches to deal with India's problems. The BJP-led coalition of 1998 elections thought of framing a CMP after the elections and set-up a drafting committee with George Fernandes as convener for the purposes⁵. The document, called the National Agenda sought to avoid the politics of confrontation and usher in an era of national reconciliation and consensus⁶. The BJP sensed the growing returns from appearing moderate and accommodating. The BJP had to change its stance on some contentious issues like reconstruction of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya, introduction of Uniform Civil Code and the deletion of Article 370 which gave special status to the Jammu and Kashmir State. These items were dropped from the CMP of the coalition government. This was a serious let-down for the BJP which had tried to build up the party organization on this plank. Moreover the AIADMK which was an ally in the election refused to give a letter of support to the BJP to form the government until some of its unreasonable demands were incorporated into the agenda⁷.

In the 1998 elections to the Lok Sabha the UF brought out a CMP and a joint policy statement on behalf of its partners, but the Left parties issued a separate manifesto highlighting their differences with the UF⁸. In Kerala State, in the 1967 Legislative Assembly elections, the seven party Left democratic front had adopted a minimum programme for the first time and continued the practice in all successive elections⁹.

In a single-member constituency multiple party system, small parties are not able to attain power by themselves and therefore they try to latch on to a bigger party for the purpose. In a single-member constituency system particularly, small parties fail to grow beyond their pockets of influence and their appeal is limited to their vote banks. So in order to expand their sphere of influence or power they have to ally with other parties. At the same time each party is constrained by the other parties from growing into the areas of the latter. Thus coalition gives an opportunity for growth as well as it puts limits to growth. One party may try to break the limits by encouraging splits in other parties and weakening them. Internal splits destroy the party themselves long run, but the split groups are accommodated for the time without destroying the coalition. The internal split of coalition party, even when promoted by other coalition partners, may be treated apparently as an internal matter of the party concerned. The tendency to accommodate split groups help the smaller parties thrive in a coalition at the cost of the parent party, and they get disproportionate political leverage.

Personality based factions and parties are a common phenomenon on the Indian Political scene. This provides personality clash as a most common cause for party splits and in such cases any alliance between two newly emerging personality centred parties becomes almost an impossibility, despite policy closeness or similarity of social base.

Party coalitions in India always try to expand their base by attracting more parties than required for keeping themselves in power. That is, in other words, large-sized coalitions are a matter of attraction in the Indian situation. Following the tradition of the Indian National Congress in accommodating a large number of groups and interests, the party coalitions tend to make themselves 'Maha-coalitions' for winning

the largest number seats for themselves and reduce the opposition to nil. So the ruling coalitions seem to be on constant search to pick and swallow from the opposition. At the center, a government can function effectively only if it is assured of two third majority to make constitutional amendments possible. At the state level even a minimum majority can support the government in power and make it effective. Although minimum winning coalitions are applicable to State Governments, and not to the Central Government, the general tendency is to accommodate large-sized coalitions in the states also. This is a characteristic reflective of political culture of the country.

Another phenomenon in Indian politics is the non-participating external support that some parties prefer to offer in order to prop up a party or coalition of parties in power without making a commitment to share the responsibilities of government. Parties think ahead about the consequences of their participation as regards the forthcoming elections to Parliament or regional elections to the State Assembly as well as about other reactions in State politics. And if they find the pay offs from immediate power lesser than the latent pay offs in store for them, they naturally prefer to stay off from immediate power.

The political culture-coalitional politics linkage in the Indian situation is clear. What may be called the Indian political culture is a composite of heterogeneous, State-based political culture further diversified by ethno-centric factors and evolutionary phases. But the common cultural elements may contribute to the emergence of stable political arrangements in most States of the country, if not in all.

Hence it follows that the plurality rule system would tend to produce two-party system may be partly established in the situation wherein the opportunistic phase is crossed over.

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