

Dynamics of Coalition Politics in India

Asima Sahu

Reader in Political science,
Ravenshaw University, Cuttack, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT: Coalition governments are perhaps an inevitable occurrence in a multi-cultural and federal polity like India. During the last two decades or so, the Indian party system has undergone a paradigm shift. The era of politics as a grand narrative dominated by a single party seems to be a thing of the past. The 14th General Election in 2004 corroborated this trend that initially appeared on the Indian political landscape in 1989. The existence of multiple forms and layers of identity in India pertaining to caste, community, region-language etc. signifies the complex social base of politics. Coalition is probably the best political arrangement in which both the values of unity and diversity are equally legitimized and respected and linked within the political layout of the country.

Keywords: Coalition, multi-party system, fragmentation, stability

There is a growing realization that coalition governments are perhaps an inevitable occurrence in a multi-cultural and federal polity like India. Unlike the Anglo-American democracies and Australia (barring Canada since 1993), in India the homogenizing effects of political institutions are found to be often inadequate to arrange social pluralities into two principal political parties in electoral and legislative domains. During the last two decades or so, the Indian party system has undergone a paradigm shift. The era of politics as a grand narrative dominated by a single party seems to be a thing of the past. The 14th General Election in 2004 corroborated this trend that initially appeared on the Indian political landscape in 1989. The 15th National Polls also presented the same story. The General Election of 1989, distinct from the previous General elections delivered a fractured mandate. The swearing in of V. P. Singh as the Prime Minister with outside support from the BJP and the Left Front, inaugurated the phase of enduring coalition politics in India. The 1989, 1991, 1998, 1999, 2004 and 2009 election results are reflective of the shift towards a new region-based, multi-party coalition system.

Coalitions are regarded as the actors' conscious co-ordination of behavior on agreed upon ends. This co-ordination is sought to be maintained for the achievement of some objectives. Normally a coalition involves four ingredients, i.e.

- i. Involvement of more than one actor
- ii. Keeness to co-ordinate the behavior of each other
- iii. Common goal and
- iv. Well-defined strategy to be updated by the actors for the achievement of the objective.

Coalitions which involve political objectives of contesting elections, occupying the

seats of power, implementing particular ideologies and programmes, unseating some definite actors from powerful positions, hindering specific legislators and weakening specific policies of a government which are detrimental to the interests of the constitutions of the coalition are known as political coalition.

The theories of coalitions propounded by distinguished political scientists like William H. Riker and Willone A Gammon in their books "The Theory of Political Coalitions" and "Coalition Formation" respectively have significantly contributed to the field of the study of coalitions.

Types of Coalitions:

As pointed out earlier, a coalition is an alliance of parties formed for the purpose of contesting elections jointly and/or forming a government and managing the governance by a process of sharing power. Thus, coalition denotes co-operation between political parties and this co-operation may occur at one or more of three different levels—electoral, parliamentary and governmental.

Electoral coalition is formed by two or more parties to fight the elections jointly against a common adversary. This may range from electoral alliance between parties at the national level to a mere understanding at the constituency level. Such coalitions need not necessarily go beyond the elections after which the parties may decide to make themselves free to enter into alliances to form the govt. The existence and nature of such coalitions will depend upon the character of the electoral system. Certain electoral systems favour a coalition formation phase before elections rather than after them, a matter which fundamentally impacts the politics of coalition.

Parliamentary coalitions take place, according to Bogdanor, when no single party secures a majority and the party asked to form the govt. prefers to rule as a minority govt. on an understanding with another for external support.⁷ Such an arrangement may be for a long period or for a limited period with a definite date of termination. It also happened when a government seeks support from different parties for different items of legislation.

Finally, a minority govt. might survive without support on a basis of toleration by the opposition parties which do not vote it out for tactical reasons. In India, in the past the governments led by Charan Singh, Chandrasekhar and Deve Gowda had been sustained by Congress support from outside and that of V.P. Singh supported by BJP. In these cases, the support had been issue-based as were claimed by the supporting parties.

The governmental coalition is a “power-sharing” coalition and it occurs when two or more parties, none of which is able to win a majority on its own, combine to form a majority govt. The parties comprising such coalitions need not necessarily join to gather in an electoral pact, they may continue to compete electorally with their own coalition partners.

Political Formation, Identity Articulation and the Emergence of Coalition Politics in India:

The present political formation in India denotes a trend in the direction of coalition politics which actually is the manifestation of the dynamics of plural social base of Indian society. Coalition is probably the best political arrangement in which both the values of unity and diversity are equally legitimized and respected and linked within the political layout of the country⁸. The existence of multiple forms and layers of identity in India pertaining to caste, community, region-language etc. signifies the complex social base of politics.⁹ The legacy of the Indian freedom movement lent a strong ground for the Congress party to claim an all-encompassing social constituency representing multiple identities and interests. However, this notion has been challenged by other alternative formations from time to time. Even with the Congress party, splits in 1948, 1969, 1978 may be regarded as instances of the increasing unrest and heightening aspirations of social groups.

Of the multiple forms of identities caste, religion and region-language stand out as the most salient ones. These identities have the potential for transforming into political constituencies. The construction of new identity of Hindutva and its political articulation, political assertion of the OBCs, horizontal consolidation of ex-untouchables/Scheduled Castes under a new constructed identity of dalit and re-assertion of linguistic-regional identities are important cases in

this regard. These have to a larger extent, shaped the politics during the last one or two decades giving rise to the political formation based on coalitions. Thus, the emerging form of coalition politics in India, in its basic essence is a manifestation of the emerging social context.

With the collapse of the ‘dominant party system’, India politics in the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a competitive party system as a result of which no party is in a position to obtain a clear majority. As a matter of fact, the ‘fractured mandate’ of the Indian electorate in the last couple of elections have resulted in the formation of coalition/ minority governments at the centre. There is a general feeling that the country has entered into ‘era of coalition’ and there is no sign of its reversal at foreseeable future.

Coalition Governments at the Centre:

The Indian National Congress continued its ‘dominance’ at the Centre for thirty years in the post-independent era and in 1977, the first non-Congress coalition government was formed at the Centre under the leadership of Morarji Desai. The Government headed by Charan Singh in 1979 was both a coalition and a minority government. However, the first phase of the Coalition government at the Centre had a quick and owing to the irreconcilable differences between and among its constituent partners. The Congress was able to re-assume power in 1980. As the anti-Congress forces were able to polarize, the trend was again reversed in 1989 with the installation of a National Front Government under the leadership of V.P. Singh. It was a “minority government with majority support” as it obtained the support of the BJP and the left from outside.

The mandate of the electorate in 1996 elections was an indecisive one. It threw a ‘hung parliament’. The BJP, though secured the position of the single largest party, failed to muster the required support even after forming the govt. On the other hand the Congress was not in a position to form the govt. As a result, a coalition govt. made up of 13 parties and supported from outside by the Congress was installed. The Janata Dal government was a post electoral coalition and there were parties which fought against each other at the election and yet after the election they formed the government so there was an inherent instability built into the Deve Gowda govt.

The UF Govt. first headed by Deve Gowde and then by I. K. Gujral were formed with the outside supports from Congress and were ousted by withdrawal of such supports. It was affected by its internal contradictions. The Co-ordination committee of the Front devised to function as a policy making body and to provide for a forum for resolving conflicts failed to play effective role in the difficult situations.

The First BJP- Led Coalition, 1998 :

When the 13 day BJP Govt. collapsed, there were only three allies with it the Samata Party, the Shiv Sena and the Haryana Vikas Party. The BJP woke up to the need to widen its circle and win more allies to gain power. So in the 1998 elections, it adopted the pragmatic approach of shelving the fundamentalist issues like the Mandir, Uniform Civil Code and Article 370 and tried to reach out to other political parties who had so far treaded the BJP as untouchable. The BJP retained the relationship with the former allies Samata, Akali Dal, Shiv Sena and Haryana Vikas Party and entered into new alliances with regional parties in Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal and UP. The total came to sixteen and thus exceeded the constituents of the United Front.

Though the 12th Lok Sabha elections did not provide any clear cut majority to any of the alliances, the BJP led coalition was finally able to form the Govt. at the Centre. Since the sixteen constitutions of the BJP led alliance had reduced to thirteen when the final results came, the BJP had to accommodate only thirteen parties in the new govt. However, owing to certain developments, the Coalition Ministry under the leadership of Vajpayee had to face the confidence vote in Lok Sabha which it lost by just one vote. The Ministry continued as care-taker until after the next general election to the 13th Lok Sabha in September-October 1999. The electoral confrontation took place mainly between the BJP led National Democratic Alliance on the one hand and the Congress (I) on the other. The NDA facing the 1999 elections was different in character from the BJP-led alliance of 1998 elections with some of the allies replaced and the total strength rising to form a grand coalition of 24 parties.

The 14th Lok Sabha elections of April-May 2004 have led to the formation of a United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Coalition government at the Centre replacing the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). A notable feature of the UPA govt. led by Manmohan Singh is that a number of state level based parties and groups which agreed to participate in the govt. led by the Congress Party, supported from 'outside' by the party M.P.s, have interpreted that their mandate is to promote and solidify the secular forces. The Congress Party was quick to structure new alliances on the eve of the 14th Lok Sabha elections the DMK, MDMK, PMK combine in Tamil Nadu, the TRS and left in Andhra Pradesh, the RJD and LJS in Bihar and NCP in Maharashtra.

When Dr Manmohan Singh assumed office as Prime Minister for the second consecutive terms in 2009, India had its 10th consecutive coalition govt. in 20 years. The UPA led by the INC formed the govt. after securing the majority of seats based on strong results in Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, UP & West Bengal. The UPA was able to put together a

comfortable majority with support from 322 members out of 543 members of the House. Though this was less than the 335 members who supported the UPA in the last Parliament(14th one) , UPA alone had a plurality of over 260 seats as opposed to 218 seats in the previous Lok Sabha. Hence the Govt appeared to be more stable than the previous one. External support came from Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party(SP), Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S) ,Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and other minor parties.

Coalition and Stability:

Early writers and commentators were of the opinion that coalition politics undoubtedly led to short-lived governments. E. Sreedharan enumerates four sets of factors that affect the stability of coalition governments.

First, the regime-level attributes or the institutional structures within which coalitions are formed. These include the fragmented character of the parties, the degrees of ideological polarization, the opposition's access to policy influence, the legal provision for election in case of a government collapse and the provision for a constructive non confidence vote as well as for a formal confidence vote after investiture.

Second, the attributes of the coalition itself , such as the majority or minority status of the coalition, the number of parties in the coalition, its ideological cohesiveness etc.

Third, the nature of the ideological spectrum, that is, whether the coalition is ideologically single-polar, bi-polar or multi-polar. Fourth, the incidence of any political event that creates divergent reactions among members of the coalition.

Gregory M. Luebert finds the kind of compromise reached between partners on the basis of their respective policy attributes as the key to stability.

In an elaborate study of Coalition politics in India, N. Jose Chander has pointed certain factors which may be relevant in any assessment of the stability quotient of any coalition.

1. Coalition between an anchor party and satellite parties tends to be stable.
2. Among the coalitions, if the anchor party manages a majority by itself as in West Bengal, it is likely to be stabler. A Coalition of mutually dependent parties where no party is able obtain a majority on its own is also likely to be durable as in Kerala. Of the two categories, the former is regarded as more stable.
3. Minority Coalitions, supported from outside are less likely to be stable.
4. The anchor party tends to make more than proportionate concessions to the smaller

ones who gain more than proportionately to their strength.

5. Factions within the parties, particularly the anchor party, pose threats to the stability of the coalition.
6. Political cultures of Indian states vary, and some are more conducive to stable Coalition politics than the other.

Impact of the Coalitions on the Executive:

In Coalition politics, the leader of the leading party is usually elected as the leader of the parliamentary party of the Coalition, but he shall be acceptable to the allies also. At times, the leader of a minority party may be chosen by the Coalition to head the Cabinet. The general principle seems to be that the head of the cabinet whatever the degree of standing he has in his own party, shall be acceptable to all the partners of the coalition.

As far as the appointment of Council of Ministers, the usual practice is that the Prime Minister/ Chief Minister will choose the Ministers after giving a lot of attention to most of the considerations. In Coalition politics in India, the Ministers are chosen by the respective parties themselves and the Prime Minister, Chief Minister may not have any more to play ordinary circumstances. The situation further affects adversely the position of the PM/CM in relation to his own party.

The Coalition is a bargaining process between the constituent partners and this is particularly evident in matters of the representation of the partners in the Ministry, the allocation of proportionate seats and the distribution of portfolios among them. In India it is often seen that the smaller parties demand for a disproportionately larger pay-off in terms of the number and importance of positions and they often succeed in winning them. This is specially the case when the leading party is dependent on the major parties for the maintenance of the Coalition. At times in some Coalitions, all MLAs of an alliance partner are made Ministers in order to drop up the Ministry.

As far as distribution of portfolios is concerned, there is always competition for 'plum post' like Finance, External Affairs, Railways and Defense at the Centre and for similar prestigious portfolios in State Governments.

In common parlance responsibility, homogeneity and secrecy have been considered as the hallmarks of effective functioning of government. However, Coalition governments are found to be contradicting these principles.

The functioning of the Coalition govt. gets greatly hampered by the need to obtain inter-consensus. The decision making process of the cabinet is affected when differences arise between the Cabinet Ministers on Political and departmental matters. The national outlook at times gets eclipsed

by some regional perspective the one. As a consequence, Steering Committee or Co-ordination committee rather than Cabinet turn to be the de facto deliberative body.

Another office of great importance which gets affected by the process of Coalition govt. is of the Prime Minister. Since he has to share power with the leaders of other parties, he enjoys less authority in Coalition govt. The Prime Minister does not have a free hand to choose those members as ministries in the Council of Ministers who do not belong to his own party. These ministers, on the contrary, are picked up to the respective party leaders. The PM also finds it difficult to dismiss them without incurring the wrath or invoking ill will of the concerned party.

In majoritarian governments, there is always the Cabinet to formulate policies and coordinate Ministries or govt. departments. The party apparatus exercises control over Prime Minister, Chief Ministers and other Ministers directly. Since in a Coalition Ministry consisting of several parties, there exists no single-party machinery which can control all of them, institutionalized bargaining structures become relevant in such a set-up. However, there have been instances of the co-ordination committee getting very powerful as a super cabinet.

Impact on the Party System:

Political parties occupy the centre stage in Coalition Politics as it involves games played by the former to obtain the maximum pay-off. Coalition politics only becomes a possibility when no single-party is in a position to acquire political power on its own. Coalition essentially denotes an alliance of political parties that opt for working together in the election process or after the elections and sharing political power in running the government. The coalition government which necessitates a commitment on the part of the concerned political parties to agree on a common programme may not be a huge problem. However, grave problems arise when ideology polarized parties are forced to work together.

In a single-member constituency multiple party system, small parties are not able to attain power by themselves and therefore they try to log on to a larger party for the purpose. In a single member constituency system particularly small political 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. But at the same time with each party is constrained by the other parties from growing into the area of the latter. Thus coalition provides an opportunity for growth as well as it puts limits to growth.

Conclusion

Coalition govt., it seems has come to stay as an inevitable phenomenon in the political landscape of India. The mandate of the people has been in favour of one or the other coalition in the past few general elections. The mandate to share power is of indicative our country's socio political plurality and the need to govern through consensual mode. Since our country is divided into numerous regional, ethnic linguistic, religious and social groups, there must be a mechanism for accommodating diverse interests. Coalition is that mechanism which incorporates the multiplicity of interests. It becomes a mechanism for effective governance where objectives and interests are shared. Since the 1990s (barring the last 16th

General Election of 2014) no single party has been able to win a majority in the national elections, a turning point that political scientists have characterized as the "post-Congress era" of Indian politics. The ascendancy of regional parties – representing India's diverse caste, class, and ethnic groups – has dented the support of the country's biggest political formations, the Congress and BJP. Coalitions are the inevitable outcome of this new political configuration: as regional parties garner more and more support, larger parties, with shrinking vote banks, are compelled to constitute alliances to capture office. With a wider range of constituencies getting representation in office, coalitions contribute to "deepening" and "widening" of India's democracy.

REFERENCES:

- 1.E. Sridharan, 'Electoral Coalitions in 2004 General Elections: Theory and Practice', Economic and Political Weekly, 18 December 2004, pp.5418-19
- 2.Sukadeb Nanda. Coalitional Politics in Orissa, (Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1979), p12
- 3.Ibid, p.13
- 4.Naresh Chandra Sahni, "Theory of Coalition" in N.C. Sahni (ed.), 'Coalition Politics in India'. (New Academic Publishing Company : Jullunder, 1971), p.20
- 5.Vernon Bogdanor (ed.) 'Coalition Government in Western Europe' (London, 1983) p.1
- 6.Michal Lever and Norman Schofield, 'Multi party Government The Politics of Coalition in Europe' (OUP: New York, 1990.) p. 202
- 7.Ibid
- 8.Bidyut Chakrabarty, 'Coalition Politics in India', (Oxford University Press: New Delhi,2014),p.169
- 9.Kumar Suresh, "Identity Articulation and Emerging Formation in India" in Akhtar Majeed (ed), 'Coalition Politics and power sharing' (Manak : New Delhi,2000) p. 37
- 10.E. Sreedharan, 'Principles, Power and Coalition Politics in India: Lessons from Theory, Comparison and Recent History' in D.D. Khanna (ed.), Principles, Power and Politics (Macmillan: New Delhi, 1999), pp. 275-77.
- 11.Ibid
- 12.N. Jose Chander, 'Coalition Politics: The Indian Experience' (Concept: New Delhi, 2004), pp 120-121.