

Coalitions: Permanent instability or reinforcing democracy?

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## THE CONGRESS SYSTEM

A quarter century has passed since a single-party government with a majority of its own emerged from a general election in India. With the transformation from the one-party dominated “Congress System” to a more competitive multi-party system, the chances of electing a single-party government have almost ceased leading to a continual succession of coalition and/or minority governments since the 1989 general election.

In the “Congress System,” the Congress was the dominant party both at the centre and at the state level. Much of the politics of the country took place within the Congress with its opponents reduced to side roles. In the new party system, the Congress became one of the many players. When it comes to evaluation of multi-party governments, the negative rather than positive perception about coalitions has dominated. While critics have primarily focussed on issues of durability and instability, the more optimistic have argued that the coalition era has reinforced democracy in India. The task of this article will be a brief examination of both sides of this argument.

## COALITION GOVERNMENTS IN INDIA: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

The Congress government between December 1993 and May 1996 was the last single-party

government before a series of coalitions that followed at the national level. This P V Narsimha Rao led government actually began as a minority government in 1991 dependent on the support of other parties for its survival, however around the middle of its term; the Congress party controversially encouraged defectors and gained a majority of its own. Barring this phase, all federal governments, or central government as it is called in India, since 1989 (see Table 1) have been coalition and/or minority governments.

Table 1: Federal Governments in India since 1989<sup>1</sup>

	Lok Sabha	Government	Coalition	Prime Minister	Begin	End	Election/Mid Term
1	Nine	National Front	Yes	V P Singh	01.12.1989	07.11.1990	1989 Election
2	Nine	Janata Dal (Breakaway)	Yes	Chandrashekar	10.11.1990	06.03.1991	Mid-term
3	Ten	Congress	No	P V Narasimha Rao <sup>2</sup>	21.06.1991	16 .05.1996	1991 Election
4	Eleven	BJP+Four	Yes	A B Vajpayee	16.05.1996	28.05.1996	1996 Election
5	Eleven	United Front I	Yes	H D Gowda	01.06.1996	30.03.1996	Mid-term
6	Eleven	United Front II	Yes	I K Gujral	21.04.1997	28.11.1997	Mid-term
7	Twelve	BJP +Allies	Yes	A B Vajpayee	19.03.1998	17.04.1999	1998 Election
8	Thirteen	National Democratic Alliance	Yes	A B Vajpayee	12.10.1999	22.05.2004	1999 Election
9	Fourteen	United Progressive Alliance I	Yes	Manmohan Singh	22.05.2004	22.05- 2009	2004 Election
10	Fifteen	United Progressive Alliance II	Yes	Manmohan Singh	22.05- 2009	Continuing	2009 Election

Source: Compiled from media reports and Government of India press releases.

1. A change in Prime Minister has been counted as a change in government.
2. This was a minority government till 31-12-1993.

Short-run governments, none of them completing their full term, marked the first decade of the coalition era as can be seen in table 1. Another feature of this period was the formation of mid-term governments. Governments that formed the Ninth, Eleventh, and Twelfth Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) did not complete their term and most of them fell because of internal dissension. Furthermore, while the Ninth Lok Sabha had two governments, the Eleventh experimented with three. Notwithstanding this initial decade of instability, post-1999, two multi-party governments have completed their full term and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) became the first government of any form -- single-party or coalition -- in nearly three decades to be elected back to power.

#### THE NEW LANDSCAPE OF COALITION GOVERNMENTS

The federal government in the first four decades after independence was a monopoly of the Congress party. However, with the emergence of a competitive multi-party system almost all parties across the political spectrum have been involved in government in some way or the other. It must be mentioned that in the new party system, the space occupied by single-state and/or region-based parties has increased substantially, and they form the 'coalitionable' core. Over time, the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have become the two dominant coalition-makers and the "nodes" around which coalitions have formed.

The party system and subsequently coalition formation in India has been has been greatly influenced by the territorial organization of the political system with the division of powers between the centre and the states. Consequently, electoral coalitions and alliances to make up for geographic deficits have been an integral feature of coalition experiments in India.

#### COALITIONS AND ENDEMIC INSTABILITY

The short-lived nature of the early coalitions naturally raised questions about the longevity and stability of coalition experiments. On almost similar lines as the Anglo-Saxon critique of multi-party governments when they were formed in Europe, in India too, coalitions have been associated with endemic instability, parochialism, short sightedness, populism, and have been viewed as marriages of convenience carried out for the sake of achieving power.

Much of this criticism is based, however, on a set of unfounded assumptions about the superiority of single-party governments. First, it assumes that a single party majority is necessary for a strong and efficient government, as a government composed of numerous parties is likely to be mired in “unholy” bargaining and compromises of principles and therefore likely to be weak. In reality, negotiation and accommodation are an integral part of everyday politics and is not specific to coalitions. Furthermore, while bargaining may be very visible in coalition experiments, divisions and factionalism could tear even governments run by single parties apart.

Second, as durability indicated stability, critics assumed that durable governments were also effective. Here again there is nothing specific that makes full-term governments more effective than short-lived governments. Despite lasting a full term, a government could still end up being

declared as a non-performer by the voters. Findings from coalition studies, both theoretical and empirical clearly show that coalitions are not non-performing, weak, unstable, and unrepresentative as has been popularly conceived.

#### REINFORCING DEMOCRACY AND INCREASING REPRESENTATIVENESS

The argument that coalition politics has reinforced Indian democracy is primarily based on the contrast between the coalition era and the contiguous period before it. With the democratic transformation that began after independence gathering pace, the Congress used every available means to continue its dominance. The Congress assumed that it had monopoly over representation. Consequently, the period towards the end of one-party dominance was marked by deep stress and strain within the political system. The high tension in centre-state relations with the Congress not allowing any other party to settle into power is a conspicuous feature of this period.

It is in the light of this background, that coalitions are seen as being more representative where they are a power-sharing device intended to accommodate multiple territorially based identities. Here coalitions are seen as an institutional solution to mitigating problems of diversity in heterogeneous societies. They are not merely seen as a form of government arising in a multi-party competitive situation, but as a democracy reinforcing solution that increases representativeness and makes governments more inclusive.

#### FEDERAL COALITIONS: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

Coalition studies in India have argued that federal coalitions, which bring together polity-wide

parties and numerous single-state or multi-state parties on the same platform, have while recognizing the needs of diversity also reconciled the demands of national unity. Federal coalitions have enabled multiple diversities including regional, religious, caste, linguistic and cultural to not only be represented at the centre but have also given them access to exercising power. In a way, it plays an integrating role bringing together different sections of a diverse polity.

While coalitions have allowed distinctive interests space, they have also tempered uncompromising positions making the polity more inclusive. While both the Congress and the BJP are actually reluctant coalition-makers, the strategic imperatives of government formation have constrained them to moderate their stands. Just as the BJP was forced to dilute its extremist positions on numerous issues, the Congress too was pushed into accepting the “legitimacy” of coalitions in order to attract coalition partners. Likewise, many state-based parties too have sidelined previously hard-line positions to become ‘coalitionable’.

#### FEDERAL COALITION AND GOVERNANCE

Federal coalitions have over time institutionalized sophisticated coordination and management mechanisms that have not only helped take care of relations between political parties but also issues of governance. For instance, the Group of Ministers (GoM) device -- essentially an inter-ministerial panel composed of three to six ministers -- primarily intended to minimize differences within the council of ministers has also been used to engage various coalition partners and also allow state-based actors space in national level decision-making.

Though India's early federal coalitions were transient and unstable, coalition experiments post 1999 have not only completed their term but have also governed as well as or as bad as single-party governments. Federal coalitions have allowed for greater representation as well as recognition of diversities and most importantly given state-based interests space in national level decision-making. This most definitely has been the defining feature of the coalition era in India.