



The party's many faces

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The suspension of Punjab's Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Badal, a four-time MLA of the Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal), and his subsequent resignation from the cabinet can be more clearly understood if we distinguish between the different faces of a political party. Studies have often disaggregated political parties into three different elements: the party in public office, the party on the ground and the party in central office. This organisational perspective not only situates a party in the wider political system but also helps us understand how these different facets interact with each other.

Each element serves a different purpose. While the office element deals with government and legislative aspects, the ground element deals with membership and the electorate. The party in central office is its leadership, which is usually representative of the party on the ground. This demarcation is only for heuristic purposes, and in reality these elements largely overlap with each other.

The current crisis in the SAD may therefore at one level be a Badal vs Badal succession and/or factional conflict. At another level, it also highlights the motivations and constraints of different organisational elements. While Manpreet Badal represents the party in office, his cousin Sukhbir Singh Badal, the deputy chief minister and anointed heir to the leader, represents the party on the ground.

The point of disagreement between the two leaders clearly corresponds to the demands of the different faces of the party they represent. The party on the ground, which represents the members at large, the activists, its financiers and core supporters, is involved in the mobilisation of voters and this face often assumes that electoral success is a result of its efforts. However, given that it's not in office, it would always want the party in office to use the government and make decisions to suit the interests of the ground.

The disciplinary committee of the party specifically charged Manpreet with anti-party activities. These "anti-party" activities were basically his public statements over the last three years on the health of the Punjab economy and its finances. He has constantly harped on the elementary economic fact that "you can only spend if you have the money" and has warned that the state is likely to default on its debt in another few years. To get out of this morass, he suggested reducing and targeting subsidies like free power, the free atta-dal scheme, exemption from canal user charges and water and sewerage charges. These are "anti-party" primarily because of the entrenched interests in the subsidy regime, whose support is mobilised by the party on the ground.

The party on the ground does not however, understand the constraints of holding office. Government roles carry with them certain "expectations" which cannot necessarily be partisan and self-centred. In a federal system, especially with a strong-centre framework, there are additional constraints imposed by governments at other levels. Consequently, party leaders in office have to look beyond their own core constituencies and are accountable to a wider section of the population. Manpreet Badal in his letter of resignation clearly alluded to this fact, when he noted that it is "better to spend a few difficult years today, than allow opportunities for an entire generation to be wiped out".

The other two main parties in the state, the BJP and the Congress have also used this opportunity to push their case.

Any weakening of the SAD only increases the bargaining power of its alliance partner, the BJP. Similarly for the Congress, this could be a useful handle to go one-up as it prepares for legislative assembly elections in 2012. This is important because, since 1992, governments in Punjab, as in Kerala, have alternated between the two dominant political formations in the state.

This episode shows that despite the public face which gives a party unity of purpose, within parties there are always different shades of opinion as well as competing organisational interests. The SAD case is, however, different from other experiences. Many political parties, when in government, fail to connect with the party on the ground. The party leaders in office tend to acquire a degree of autonomy from the party citing government

“expectations” and begin to run the show. Parties only realise the importance of the party on the ground when an election has been lost. In this case, though there is no certainty that an SAD victory is guaranteed, it highlights clearly the tensions between different organisational faces of a party.

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