



Karnataka's please-all party

Sandeep Shastri Posted online: Fri Oct 08 2010, 07:25 hrs

Ever since the BJP came to power in Karnataka, it has staggered from one crisis to another. The acid-test that the government now faces is a by-product of the compromises the BJP has had to make, assurances that the leadership gave to important people at past moments of critical challenge, and, above all, the internal contradictions in the party that remained unresolved and have now reached a crescendo. Those who have closely observed the state's unfolding political drama might not be surprised by this turn of events. In its eagerness to acquire power and remain in power, the BJP has had to make innumerable compromises for which it is now being made to pay a heavy price.

This crisis has been set off by a group of party MLAs rebelling against the chief minister and the party, and submitting a letter to the governor withdrawing support to the government. The underlying reason is the discontent over the recent reshuffle of the council of ministers. The CM should have known that any move to dislodge a few and accommodate a few more would inevitably invite dissatisfaction. It's for this reason that the state BJP president held out the promise, soon after the reshuffle, of yet another exercise of addition and deletion in the not-too-distant future. The hope was that dangling the ministerial carrot would keep dissidence within manageable limits. The party realises that a slew of inducements would be needed to a range of potential dissidents to stave off (at least for the moment) this political impasse.

The 2008 assembly elections saw the BJP inch close to power. It fell short of a majority and came to power with the support of independent legislators. In return for their support, the independents were accommodated in the council of ministers. In the run-up to the 2008 elections, the BJP strategically welcomed into its fold several leaders who did not necessarily subscribe to the party's core ideology. Disgruntled leaders from the Congress and the JD(S), influential leaders from among the politically significant caste groups, those representing the mining lobby and real-estate interests were all accommodated much to the chagrin of the party faithful. The contradictions between the original loyalists of the party and the new recruits were clearly apparent even during the run-up to power. Soon after the BJP government was installed, the leadership launched "Operation Kamala". The strategy was to induce Congress and JD (S) MLAs to resign and contest the by-elections as BJP candidates. The party hoped that it could "manufacture" a majority and reduce its dependence on the independents. Operation Kamala was partly successful but had innumerable costs. Those who joined the party had to be suitably rewarded with ministerial positions, causing much heartburn and distress among those who had been long loyal, and saw their own ambitions vanishing into thin air.

With the BJP government having to appease so many diverse interests, it was only a matter of time before controversies sprang up and snowballed into crises. Corruption charges against those in power were exposed with regular frequency. Ministers were forced out of office in view of the embarrassment they caused to the party. Rebel groups emerged within the party and sought to use these acts of omission and commission to strengthen their claims

to office. The leadership was unable to assert itself and this emboldened the rebel groups and those aspiring for ministerial berths to publicly stake their claims.

What works in the BJP government's favour is the inability of the opposition parties to drive home the advantage. Even in this current crisis, a major challenge that both the Congress and JD(S) fear is "Operation Kamala Phase-II", and both parties are trying hard to hold on to their flock. The Congress remains a hopelessly divided house and has not been able to get its act together. The JD(S) remains a force in limited pockets and the influence of its "first" family has resulted in the side-lining and exit of many potential leaders.

Will the government be able to prove its majority on October 11? Political machinations at all levels and within all parties are clearly visible. The BJP is trying to ensure a return of the prodigals by offering them a basket of promises. This is bound to lead to new pockets of rebellion. The JD(S) is keen to fish in these troubled waters and stitch together a coalition with the BJP rebels and the outside support of the Congress. The Congress is waiting for a cue from the high command and is limiting its public position to demanding a dismissal of the BJP government. The next few days are indeed decisive, and could dramatically change the course of the state's politics.

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