

South Asia

Mar 27, '13

'Third front' is no alternative for India

By Kunal Kumar Kundu

NEW DELHI - The Congress led UPA government of India is on the verge of completing its second term. Hobbled by corruption and partially incapacitated by its weakening political clout, the ruling coalition government was dealt a body blow when another of its allies - the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK, from the Indian state of Tamil Nadu) - withdrew its support (and ended its nine years of association with the Congress) as it felt that the government did not do enough to stigmatize Sri Lanka, which the party perceived to have annihilated the Tamils residing there.

With the DMK having 18 seats in the Indian parliament, the number of seats of the Congress and its remaining allies were reduced to 228 (out of total strength of 539 seats). As a result, the UPA is now crucially dependent on the outside support provided by the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) - the two bitter allies from the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to remain in power.

Although both these parties were providing outside support even prior to DMK's withdrawal, the numbers game means that the support of both (and not either, as was the case earlier) is now crucial for the government to stay in power.

This has given Mulayam Singh (the leader of SP) a chance to flex his muscle. For the aging Singh, who always harbored the ambition of becoming the country's prime minister, time is running out. He realizes that his party cannot be the single largest party in either of the two coalitions UPA (which centers on Congress) or the NDA (which centers on Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP), and hence he can never be a prime minister himself if he is part of either.

He now sees this as an opportune moment to revive the call for a third front, wherein his party has the chance to be the largest party in a new coalition and hence stake a claim to be a prime minister in case the new coalition can cobble up a majority, ahead of either UPA or NDA.

In the history of Indian politics, a third front has never been able to provide any worthwhile alternative save for fleeting moments of glory, when some motley group came to power but never lasted the distance.

In the post independence period, Indian National Congress was the only political party that had national presence and, of course national appeal. It continued to be the dominant political party well into mid-90s, save for a couple of occasions when some political alliance managed to challenge their hegemony, though those were short-lived.

However, as the political clout of the Congress started to diminish, the BJP emerged as the only political party that could challenge the Congress at a national level. In 1996, although the BJP emerged as the

single largest party, a motley group of regional parties came to power with outside support by the Congress. That heralded a change in political equations as coalition politics (maybe even opportunistic politics) became the order of the day.

Historically, the left-oriented parties of India (centering around CPI-M or Communist Party of India - Marxist) have been the biggest votaries of third front, given their ideological difference between either the BJP (extreme right ideology) or the Congress (which is more centre-left). A coalition strategy centered on the left parties also satisfied the so-called socialist urge of regional parties which usually identify themselves as platforms for social justice.

The halcyon days of the leftist parties were marked mostly by disruptive politics and militant trade unionism. However, over time these parties have lost their relevance and have now become mostly fringe players struggling to remain relevant at national level. True to itself, the day after DMK withdrew its support, the CPI-M again started talking about a third front, but the voice reached a crescendo after the SP chief Singh stepped up in favor of the third front.

The question though is how viable an alternative is a third front? For a democratic country like India, a viable third front would have strengthened the pillar of democracy. But does it? Not really.

A third front doesn't have a natural presence in India. Talks about a third front tend to pop whenever a ruling combine is under threat. There's hardly any ideological glue that can bind the third fronters, save for a negative ideology - being anti-UPA and anti-NDA. They do not have a common ideology and each of them is driven by their own narrow interest.

In fact, it looks more like a cricket team with multiple captains. A Mulayam Singh wants to be a prime minister, as does Nitish Kumar of Janata Dal United or JDU. The leader of Trinamool Congress (TMC), Ms Mamata Banerjee, in her eagerness to win over her vote bank, has now become a staunch follower of disruptive socialism. Having routed the Left parties from the State of West Bengal, she cannot be part of a formation which also has the left.

Her pronounced stance of strict secularism rules out the possibility of her being part of NDA, while she also cannot be a part of UPA since she has already ditched them. Interestingly, the same lady adorned both the UPA and the NDA coalitions when she was just a leader of a party. Recently, during the presidential election, Mulayam Singh conveniently ditched Mamata Banerjee with an aim of making her and her party irrelevant within UPA (at a time when TMC was still an ally).

Much like the euro, the third front is like an experiment that is doomed to fail. Third-front supporters may yet have their day under the sun in the eventuality of neither the UPA nor the NDA getting majority. Between the NDA and the UPA, the one is least likely to get a majority after the elections (despite their efforts to lure in the fence sitters) might support the third front to prevent the other from coming to power. But such a combine will be highly unstable and will not last the distance.

Kunal Kumar Kundu is a New Delhi-based economist. His website kunalsthoughts.weebly.com

(Copyright 2013 Asia Times Online (Holdings) Ltd. All rights reserved. Please contact us about sales, syndication and republishing.)