

Fractured Mandates and Their Concoctions

The fractured mandates generated by the recent general elections reveal that both national parties, the Congress and the BJP, registered a decline in their vote shares. In a situation where results were largely decided by state level political alignments and considerations, allies and regional parties are now assuming a more important role.

MAHESH GAVASKAR

Contrary to its own expectations, the Congress has cornered a slightly larger share of the election pie this time. In a scenario of repeated fractured mandates, even this meagre gain in seats is enough for a bigger party with a national presence like the Congress to bag plum posts. The vote share of the Congress has declined despite contesting more seats – the Congress remains effectively marginalised, as it has been for couple of decades now, in UP, Bihar, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. Congress, shrank in Karnataka and in Maharashtra, despite joining hands with Sharad Pawar's NCP, it failed to put up an emphatic performance. The party put up a credible performance only in two significant states – Andhra Pradesh and Delhi. In Haryana and Assam, the Congress would not have posted the success it did, had the BJP shown the wisdom to align with regional parties of the respective states.

The parliamentary left, having created a revolution of sorts by mobilising in its strongholds maximum number of its cadres and sympathisers to the election booth, decided once more to remain cloistered. After much deliberation, it lowered its stringency to accept the speakership. Again, thanks to the fractured electoral mandate, the left parties can have their say in national policy matters disproportionate to their base. True, as the left says, 2 per cent of equity shareholders should not throw tantrums by creating a bogey of the left. But equally, the left party spokesmen, with a paltry 7 per cent vote share (most of which from just three states), cannot disdainfully dispatch the stock market to hell.

Of the various permutations and combinations of the ruling coalitions that the Indian electorate has been witnessing in the post-reform period, the recent version

adds another variation. The various components of the non-BJP, non-Congress third front that comprised the United Front government in mid-1990s are now to be found, for the first time post-reform, co-habiting with the Congress. Not long ago, some of them, like the DMK, were comfortable in the BJP-led NDA alliance. There is no contradiction in this shift as regional parties like the DMK, the RJD, the SP, the PDP are not anti-Congress per se but anti-AIADMK, anti-JD (U), anti-BSP and anti-NC respectively. So long as their regional rivals are kept out, they have no compunction joining a coalition led either by the Congress or the BJP. The left in West Bengal and Kerala is anti-Congress but given the political compulsions, it has shown readiness to dilute its stand to non-Congressism at the centre and prop up a Congress-led UPA coalition.

Regional parties like the TDP, SAD, BJD, INLD, AGP which are primarily anti-Congress and have no other regional party as a rival in their state, cannot shift their stand as their regional counterparts in Bihar and Tamil Nadu have done. The TRS, the new arrival on the scene, is not contesting TDP across AP but, like the JMM in Jharkhand, is for a separate homeland of Telangana. The apprehensions of such parties is that, irrespective of its legitimacy, their demand is open to manipulation by the national party at the centre, which by creating a separate state can claim all the honours for the deed. This is exactly what the BJP attempted to do by creating Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttaranchal. Like the left, the TRS has taken calculated precaution to maintain its brand image untarnished by relinquishing central portfolios and thereby attesting its unalloyed commitment to its (sub-) regional base. For, if ever the Congress-led government carves out a separate Telangana, the TRS should be seen as a

major recipient of the award. The Congress, for its part, will endeavour to see that, though now in alliance, the TRS does not become another TDP for it in Telangana. As of now, with the TRS winning a mere 26 out of 105-odd assembly seats in Telangana, the Congress can afford to argue that the urgency to separate Telangana does not prevail.

The case of the Congress in Karnataka is poignant. The fractured mandate in the state assembly elections has forced it to partner its rival JD (S). Advice has been given to the JD (S) and the Karnataka state unit of the Congress to work out adjustments akin to the Congress-NCP pact in Maharashtra. After all, they are 'secular', opposed to the 'communal' BJP. But the specific circumstances in Karnataka portend that it will require extraordinary maturity from the newly wed partners for their marriage to last five years. For unlike the NCP, the JD (S) is no offshoot of the Congress. The history and mindset of the JD (S) leadership has different political links. Second, couple of assembly and parliamentary elections have proved that the NCP's base does not stretch beyond the sugar belt of western Maharashtra. Even its leader Sharad Pawar has got reconciled to this fact and learned to curtail his ambitions. The Congress base remains scattered over other parts of the state. But in Karnataka, there is no such clear-cut territorial division of the party base of the JD (S) and the Congress. In fact, in south Karnataka, they are the main rivals. If the JD (S) consolidates its base in southern Karnataka, the Congress faces a genuine prospect of getting confined to northern and coastal regions of the state, where as the recent state and parliamentary elections have shown the BJP is resurgent.

UP as an Oddity

Amidst this conglomeration, the odd case of UP stands out. With the major regional parties in the state, the SP and the BSP, staying out of the UPA, this big state lacks proportionate representation at the centre. Surely, the SP-BSP rivalry has grown to assume dimensions similar to the DMK-AIADMK, rendering the national parties, the BJP and the Congress, ineffectual in the state. Yet, given the vast, diverse and stratified terrain of UP, a unilateral swing – as it often happens in TN – in favour of the SP or the BSP is difficult to imagine. For the very same reasons, despite augmenting its caste base,

it is doubtful if the SP will achieve a hegemonic position in the state similar to the Congress in yesteryears.

With the left announcing its support to a Congress-led government at the centre even before the elections, the chances of a third front government, where the SP can play a significant role, dwindled. Yet, it is to be noted that the SP abstained from making any pre-election commitment of supporting a Congress-led government at the centre. This should not lead to deduction that the SP is less anti-BJP than the left when it comes to defending its sole turf in UP. Rather, its inscrutable approach towards the Congress emerges from the fact that having burnt its bridges with the BSP and with no chance of aligning with the BJP (unless fractured mandate dictate such terms), the SP has largely to depend on its own base to expand to come to power in a state most prone to fractured mandates. With the BSP holding on to its distinct dalit base, it is only by cutting into the base of the BJP and the Congress that the SP can ever aspire to a hegemonic position. Moreover, given the prominent position that UP occupies on the electoral map of India, it is deeply embarrassing for parties claiming to be national to have insignificant presence in the state. Given the still relevant multi-polarity in the state, the possibilities of alliances and bagful of seats it provides, the national parties can still claim to be down but not out in UP. The Congress is at its wit's end to figure out a comeback in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu. But in UP it still nurtures a hope that the younger breed from the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, with their fabled generational ties with UP, will turn the tables for it. The BJP has its bold Hindi-centric, north-centric image and the undoused Ayodhya issue to re-occupy the heartland. Further, the shrewd Mulayam Singh knows that the BJP or the Congress, being national parties, have the option to leverage their hold on the centre to snipe at his party's resource base limited to UP.

Thus, like the left and the TRS, Mulayam Singh has calibrated his position vis-a-vis the Congress taking into account the ground realities prevailing in UP. Similarly, Laloo Prasad Yadav's participation in the Congress-led cabinet, as distinct from the distance maintained by the three above-mentioned non-Congress formations, also reflects his assessment of alignment of political forces in his state. After surviving the severe setback he received in the 1999 Lok Sabha elections, it was a pleasure for

him to see Paswan break away from the NDA. He had already thrown open the doors to the Congress ever since the JD in Bihar underwent a split, a fate that the Yadav in the adjacent state did not suffer. In this battle to maintain respective bases, Laloo displayed his sense of realpolitik by shedding the Lohiaite anti-Congressism, his erstwhile colleagues George Fernandes and Sharad Yadav remain imbued with. But now, by accepting Paswan into his alliance fold, he has to be alert that the Congress and Paswan do not get chummy at the centre and threaten his dominance in the state alliance. Having weathered the storm of corruption charges by cannily identifying himself with a victimised Bihari-hood rather than Mandalised sloganeering, he has decided to participate in the cabinet to liberate his decade-long besieged base in Bihar.

Nevertheless, against this understandable desire of various parties to protect their bases in their respective states, Mulayam Singh's foray into Bihar remains to be accounted for. Was it a part of the understanding between him and George Fernandes that having helped in installing his government in UP (Fernandes was present at Mulayam Singh's swearing-in ceremony), the former should try to cut into the yadav base of the RJD in Bihar and thus indirectly help the JD (U) which had lost its ally in Ramvilas Paswan to Laloo Prasad? If this was so then two things are obvious. First, the Mulayam Singh-Laloo Prasad duel was one more chapter, scripted by versatile Fernandes, in the congenital infighting plaguing the socialist group. With the two Yadavs, the biggest beneficiaries of Mandal revolution, sparring at each other, it sheds light on the vacuousness of pro-Mandal solidarity. Second, the fallout of this 'understanding' has been disastrous for the NDA both in Bihar and UP. In Bihar, the SP's mere tinkering with yadav votes was a poor compensation to prevent the tally of JD (U) from plummeting, while in UP the installation of Mulayam Singh government, contrary to the expectations of the NDA, acted more as a terminator of the BJP than the BSP. Mulayam Singh must be satisfied with his show of strength in UP but was he embarking upon a scheme of widening the non-Congress space post-election by indirectly helping the Congress rivals in Bihar? If so, the final results, to his disappointment, have deprived him of such a space. As for Fernandes and Pramod Mahajan of the BJP, who are credited for

displacing Mayawati and ushering in Mulayam Singh, their plans turned out to be hypothetical than realistic. The Vajpayee factor failed to steal the show over Mulayam and Mayawati even in the former's home state, conveying that the cutting down to size of their former state brand Kalyan Singh mid-way has done irreparable damage to the party's prospects in the state.

After having being squarely falsified despite minutely monitoring the election drama as it unfolded through their opinion and exit polls, a segment of the poll pundits is now busy projecting that a new cosmos has emerged out of the recent electoral verdict. Such attempts do boost the confidence of the dispensation on the threshold to imagine that it is really new. What is clear is that assuming the left votes went into the Congress kitty in states and constituencies where left had marginal presence, the Congress owes some part of its success in overcoming the BJP-led NDA alliance to the left. But the Congress should keep in mind that the left was compelled to give a helping hand on the issue of secularism. On the economic front, given the nature of formation that has come into existence, listening to the left while believing in their own wisdom will be the best course for Manmohan Singh-P Chidambaram duo. [\[27\]](#)