

## COALITION GOVERNMENT—EXPERIENCE AND PROSPECTS

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The 1996 Parliamentary election has been unique in many ways. It has given new dimensions to our political system. The election has not given clear mandate to any political party to form the government. Even the pre-election alliances and understanding among different political parties, as predicted, had resulted in "hung parliament". The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) emerging as a single largest party could only form Government for a short period of less than two weeks. Consequently, a continued effort of thirteen different political parties as United Front (UF), agreeing, to a Common Minimum Programme, (CMP) and with support of Indian National Congress as well as that of Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) from outside resulted into a coalition Government. The formation and working of coalition government has raised a number of questions. How does coalition government influence the working of cabinet and parliamentary system? Does it make for weak or unstable government? What consequences does it have for the policy outputs of government? Such questions were raised, in the past, in respect of coalition governments of the Western European and the developing countries. Some of the leading political scientists have not only studied the issues involved, they have evolved a general theory of coalition. The Indian experience has also been the subject of study in the past.

In the context of contemporary political realities, coalition government it seems, has come to stay as an essential feature of Indian polity. In the light of the experience, both in India and elsewhere, question about the prospects of coalition government is being raised. This paper purports to discuss the concept of coalition government; examines the experience of working of coalition government in India and abroad; and raises issues regarding its future in India.

The word "coalition" generally refers to a group of people who come

together (usually on a temporary basis) to obtain some end. Typically, a coalition has been regarded as a parliamentary or political grouping, less permanent than a party or faction or an interest group. Coalition implies co-operation between political parties.

#### TYPES OF COALITION

Experience of different countries including India (both at Centre and States) reveals that this co-operation can take place at one, or more than one of three different levels, *viz.* parliamentary, electoral and governmental. The way in which these coalitional relationships are expressed will depend upon the constitutional framework and electoral system of a country (Vernon Bogdanor).

Parliamentary coalition may occur in a situation when no single party enjoys an overall majority. The party asked to form a government prefers to rule as a minority government, relying upon an arrangement with another political party or parties to secure its survival. Such an arrangement can be for a limited period, with a definite date of termination or for the entire tenure of the government. Sometime, a government may seek support from different political parties for different items of legislation. This is known a government by "jumping majorities". There can also be a situation in a parliamentary coalition, when a government may survive without outside support on a basis of tactical reasons by the opposition parties. The opposition parties may not like to defeat the government either to gain political advantage or not to be deprived of the existing political base.

In the electoral coalitions two or more than two parties seeking to co-operate may have agreement providing for a mutual withdrawal of candidates so as to avoid splitting of votes. Generally, it is difficult to achieve where the parties having strong local base and organisation are unwilling to surrender their rights to put up a candidate. This form of electoral adjustment has been quite common in India.

At the government level, there are different types of coalitions. The first type is the National Government which had been existing in Britain and was suggested for India. In the government of national unity, most, if not all, of the main parties join together to meet a national emergency arising out of war or economic crisis. This type of government is rare in normal peacetime conditions. This type of coalition can only operate effectively when the whole nation is agreed upon some fundamental issues. It should be established only for a limited period and dissolved as soon as the crisis is over. The other type of coalition is that which is a

prelude to the fusion of parties. Coalitions of this type can play a suitable role in securing party realignment. At times, this type of coalition may result into political parties becoming more responsive to contemporary national issues.

What we are witnessing in India, currently, is yet another type of coalition which is quite familiar to many continental countries, but comparatively unknown in Britain. This type of coalition may be called 'power-sharing' coalition. It occurs when two or more than two political parties not able to gain majority on its own, combine to form a majority government. Power sharing coalition differs from the concept of National Government as the former does not embrace nor even attempt to embrace all political parties. On the contrary, they only implement such policies and programmes as agreed between coalition partners. The partners in such a coalition do not surrender their separate political identity. The parties forming the coalition generally do not join any electoral pact, but continue to compete electorally with their coalition partners.

#### COALITION BEHAVIOUR

Political scientists have also projected a theory of coalition behaviour. They have raised questions like: under what circumstances do political parties join coalition? Why are coalition with some parties preferred to coalition with other parties? What benefits can a political party derive from membership in a coalition? The answers to these questions are far from clear. However, based on the assumption that each partner in the coalition wants to maximize their long-term influence over decision-making process, one of the studies relating to India (Bruce Bueno De Mesquita) has observed:

1. The political resources that determine political influence may be redistributed as a consequence of participation in political coalition.
2. Participants in coalition are aware of the opportunity they have to increase their political influence.
3. Because of the awareness of politicians concerning the redistributive consequences of a coalition, members of political coalitions often compete with each other over the allocation of redistribution benefits.
4. The competition among coalition partners is restricted by the degree to which each partner is willing to tolerate competitive demands on the part of its allies.

5. Where tolerance is very high competitiveness is rewarded with disproportionately large increases in political influence.

#### WESTERN EUROPEAN AND THIRD WORLD EXPERIENCE

In Anglo-Saxon countries, coalition government is regarded as an aberration. On the continent of Europe, it is the norm. By middle of 1980's only three European countries—Britain, Spain and Greece—enjoyed a single-party majority government. The rest were ruled either by minority governments or by coalitions (Vernon Bogdanor). Based on experience of the working of coalition governments, the traditional view, that such governments are often weak, short-lived and ineffective has since been altered. Some have even praised coalition governments for their role in bringing about consensus and in ensuring greater continuity of policies than a single party government.

Since 1945, sixteen out of the twenty-three Atlantic countries have had coalition. About thirty countries of the Third World also had the coalition governments. Admittedly, in the Third World, coalitions are less widespread than in Western Europe; they are also less durable. According to Jean Blondell about two-thirds of the Atlantic countries were ruled by coalition, on average, about half the time; whereas only one-third of Third World countries were ruled by a coalition government, and this was on average for 9 per cent of time. Thus, coalition governments are more common and successful in Europe. There is no doubt that in the context of Western European countries, coalition governments have been as effective as single-party governments. Even the coalition governments have been not appreciably much shorter in duration than the single party governments. Earlier critiques made their observations on the working of coalition governments in France, Weimar Germany or pre-fascist Italy. In other countries, coalitions have been stable and governments long-lasting.

It is true that on an average duration of coalition governments in the Western European countries till 1980's has been under three years; while single-party government had an average of 4.6 years' duration. Three-year government is a respectable period. Countries which have the experience of both single party and coalition governments, single party governments had also shorter duration. There had been vast difference in duration between types of coalition. Two party governments lasted on average for 3.3 years, three party for 3.0 years, four party governments for 2.4 years and governments of five parties less than one year. The experience indicates that the unstable governments are the governments

of five or more parties. Even the governments of four parties are relatively stable. What about a coalition government with thirteen parties?

Empirical evidence from the comparative literature on coalition politics indicates, that coalitions do not occur only in parliamentary systems, even if one adopts a rather loose definition of parliamentary systems and includes 'modified' parliamentary and 'semi-presidential' or 'dual' system like the French model. Coalitions have occurred since 1945, not only in Switzerland (not a parliamentary system), but in a number of 'pure presidential' systems. In the Third World, at least, the number of exception is sufficiently large to cast some doubt on the linkage between the parliamentary structure of government and coalitions.

As against 'power maximization', in majority (nearly two-thirds) of coalition governments in developing countries are based on ideology. In some cases ideology based coalition is not very clear in many countries—both European and the Third World countries. In the European context parties are often close to the centre and resemble each other on some points, while distant from each others. Ideological contiguity may explain why a coalition between communists and conservatives is unlikely to occur unless other parties are also included. The present coalition with CPI as a partner and CPM giving support from outside could be an example to reinforce the hypothesis related to ideology based coalition.

There have been coalitions which are set up within the broader division between Right and Left, when either the Right or the Left is further divided into a number of parties. There have been 'bourgeois coalition' in Norway, Sweden and France between 1958 and 1981. Sri Lanka had witnessed the Left-wing coalition. There are coalitions organised around a dominant party of the Right and the Left. Italy, Denmark and Sweden have witnessed such coalitions.

Based on comparative analysis, one can conclude that the formula of coalition government has been generally successful in Western Europe. It has been adopted more frequently than the formula of single-party government. It has not led to a collapse of the parliamentary system. Coalition governments seem to have contributed to general success of Western European democracies.

Although, the Third World countries, have witnessed coalition governments to a limited extent, the experience has not been successful. Period of coalition has been relatively short. Even when the coalition governments were formed it did not create a favourable political culture in favour of coalitions. Alliances have been fluid. Coalition governments have been ineffective and riddled with internal disunity. Disagreement

within the government has often led, quickly, to resignations and to loss of authority of its members.

Except in few cases, Constitution of the respective countries do not lay down procedure regarding the process of formulation and dissolution of coalition governments. In the erstwhile West Germany, the Basic Law sought to strengthen the democratic government, through provisions in the electoral law which has made it difficult for small parties to secure representation in the legislature. Also through the provisions in the Basic Law, it is impossible for irresponsible parliamentarian to overthrow a government without being ready to support an alternative. But German Constitution does not offer any guidance on the procedure necessary to make coalition government work successfully. Swedens' 1974 Instrument of Government seems exception. It attempts to describe the government formation process in some detail. Speaker is authorised to convene representatives of each party group within the legislature for consultation. The proposal of the Speaker to have alternative government is confirmed by Legislature unless an absolute majority of members of legislature votes against the proposal.

#### THE INDIAN SCENE

Though, between 1952 and 1967, the Congress Party's support gradually withered, with exception in 1957, and the Party continuously lost seats and votes to the opposition, yet until 1967, the Congress Party could control both at the Centre and the States. In 1967, the election results took on a radically new complexion. Not only did the Congress continue to lose votes, it also lost its majority of seats in eight States. Within a few months of the election, defection from the Congress ranks deprived the Party of its majority in another two States. Once the Congress monopoly of power was broken, State after State began a search for a viable alternative government. As the Congress party declined over the years, All-India parties and some of the regional parties were able to form governments in the States. Some of the parties could not do so and declared their desire to develop alliances with others. A large number of political parties felt through the mechanism of coalitions they would be able to replace the Congress Party as the ruling force in the State and eventually in Delhi. Various parties began to formulate a variety of election strategies, each geared toward the removal of the Congress party from power. Of late, the similar processes have occurred in respect of other ruling parties, especially BJP. Seats adjustment and alliance to keep Congress and BJP out of power have been observed in the elections held

recently. An other type of alliance of the regional parties in the form of Federal Front to gain power and share power at the Centre have come to the forefront. This trend is likely to have a tremendous effect on the Union-State relations.

#### POLITICAL PARTIES' STAND ON COALITION GOVERNMENT

All-India Congress, having not able to form government on their own, had been seeking support. The Party has also lost its base among minorities, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Party is having alliance with Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The Party, is ready to form alliance and even coalition governments with like-minded parties which according to the Party are democratic and secular. Operationally, it means Congress is willing to have alliance and coalition with nearly every party, except BJP and the Communists. Similar, position has been taken by Janta Dal.

The BJP earlier the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, had long taken the position that co-operation with other parties is possible after elections; but that the election period is an opportunity for the Party to gain popularity, educate the masses to its ideology, and expand its organisations by contesting seats on its own. The Party subscribes to the view, "alliance and adjustments may serve a temporary tactical purpose, but cannot provide the ideological inspiration". Earlier, even when other parties were attempting to forge pre-election alliances to defeat the Congress, BJP remained aloof from most of such arrangements. However, of late, contrary to earlier stand, BJP is/had been eager to participate in such alliances. The party had been having pre-election alliance with Samta Party, Shiv Sena as also with Akalis. The party had been taking a stand that their doors are open and is willing to arrive at adjustments and coalition with other parties, except the Congress, Communists, Muslim League, and others which the Party considers are anti-national parties. This, the Party feels, is the only way to maximize their potential for emerging as an alternative to form a one-party stable government. The Party maintains that in a parliamentary democracy, coalition can be accepted only as a matter of political compulsion.

In many ways, the CPI attitude towards coalition politics has been similar to that of BJP. Although, the Communist parties have long supported United Fronts of the Left and democratic parties, they were adamantly opposed to co-operate with the Rightist parties. The CPI perceives the coalition as an opportunity to expand their organisations and their mass influence.

The CPM had been more revolutionary than the CPI, especially in terms of its attitude towards co-operation with other parties. The CPM, like the CPI, supported the formation of the Left and democratic pre-election United Fronts. The Party believes that through electoral alliance, it would be possible to defeat the Congress and contain BJP from coming to power. This would help the Party to utilize its own resources to maximize its own gains. CPM is also adamantly opposed to cooperation with the Rightist parties as also with the Congress. The Party is not participating in the present coalition, though it is supporting from outside. CPM, however, have been participating in the coalition governments at State level on selective basis.

#### STATE COALITION GOVERNMENTS

According to one of the studies (E. Sridharan), there had been 74 minority governments at the State level between 1977-1995. Out of those, only 31 arose as a result of elections; while 43 arose because of party splits or defections and only 11 governments could complete their full term, eight of them being ideologically connected policy-based Left Front coalitions, in Kerala, Tripura and West Bengal.

The study of coalition government in States indicates that most of the State had suffered severely from defection politics. In some cases even Chief Minister had defected. Many of the coalitions wanted to bring stability through expanding the ministry so as to accommodate new and often opportunistic supporters. This tactic succeeded in keeping the government in power for quite a long time, but it prevented the ministry from doing much for the people. With the exception of Kerala and West Bengal, the coalition governments composed of disparate political elements. Most of the partners of the coalition governments shared the common desire to keep the ruling party, Congress and BJP in particular, out of power. In the process, the parties were willing to forgo some of their major programmes. However, in the long run, most of the partners found that they were unable to work together. Even where there was a great deal of ideological homogeneity as in Kerala and West Bengal, parties often found their ambitions at conflict with on another. It will not be wrong to infer that the quest for power, rather than the desire to implement programmes led both to the formation and dissolution of the coalition governments. The basic requirement to make coalitions successful is that the partners surrender their own dreams of power for collective rule. Very few of the parties were prepared to make such a commitment.



## COALITION GOVERNMENTS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Though, coalition governments had been predominantly a State level occurrence, of late, it has influenced the Union Government. The aftermath of the emergency witnessed. Janata Government (1977-79) with the merger of Bhartiya Jan Sangh, Bhartiya Lok Dal, Congress (O) and Socialists into Janata Party. Technically a single party, it broke up in two years. Later on Charan Singh Government collapsed before it could win the confidence of the Parliament. It remained only a caretaker Government. During 1989-90, we had the National Front Government of V.P. Singh. It was a minority Government supported from the Parliamentary floor by the Left parties and the BJP. Another, short-lived minority Government of Chandra Shekhar had the support of the Congress party. It could last only for few months. Even 1991 to the earlier part of 1996 we had another minority government of Congress with the "jumping" support in the Parliament from some of the political parties. It remained a minority Government for nearly two-and half years, until it gained majority through the traditional route of defections in stages.

## WORKING OF THE COALITION GOVERNMENT

Traditionally, collective responsibility, homogeneity and secrecy had been the hallmark of effective functioning of government. Coalition Government presently, in power, is contradicting these principles. The working of the coalition government is being affected by the need to secure inter-party consensus. Disagreements between the Cabinet Ministries on political and departmental matters has made the deliberative and decision-making process of the Cabinet difficult. They are being confronted with a situation of preserving the unity of Government and separate identity as a partner in the coalition. It is, generally more difficult for the Cabinet to hold together as a unity when the government is a coalition. The present coalition government having been formed, not on the basis of any positive purpose or contents, but on negative basis, namely, to keep Congress and BJP out of power, its efficacy is being questioned. Some believe that the national outlook is being overshadowed by a regional outlook on the one hand and personal or party gain is having precedent over collective ones on the other. Steering Committee, rather than Cabinet is the *de facto* deliberative body. Cabinet is only a ratifying organ, rather than decision-making body.

The coalition Government is also affecting the role of Prime Minister. Since he has to share power with the leader of other parties, he has less

authority in coalition government. Prime Minister is not in a position to choose those members as ministers in the Council of Minister who do not belong to his own party; instead those Ministers are being chosen by the respective party leaders. He is also unable to dismiss them without carrying the wrath of respective party. He is acting as a mediator between different political parties.

The Common Minimum Programme agreed to by the coalition partners were to be honoured in all respect. Dissent voices inside the Parliament as well outside may weaken the Government. Party leaders must ensure discipline on its members especially those who are the members in the Council of Minister. The discipline in the coalition alone can help to bring about national unity in our divided society. The process of coalition-building is one of accommodation. Stagnation under one party domination and likely instability under coalition may be detrimental to the cause of social and economic modernisation. Since coalition government is represented by different social, political and regional interests, it is more representative in its composition. The Government will, indeed be forced to adopt an accommodative policies. Smaller parties and regional parties will have a voice in the governance and policy formulation.

Along with, agitational politics by some of partners of coalition, unrepresented in the Union Government, is influencing the decision making processes in respect of issues of national importance. It is important to keep in mind the present coalition Government has been formed under peculiar situation. The participating political parties are, to some extent, ideologically divergent. For the purpose of increasing the political base and not to be deprived of the existing caste, class, regional or social base, the partners are adopting competitive politics. This was clearly demonstrated in the elections held recently. The same may happen in near future. This is the basic contradiction. Coupled with this are the conflicts and personality clashes within the party. Doubts are being raised on the continuation of the Government, especially, from those who are not partners in the Government. Fear is being expressed that parties in the coalition or those supporting the coalition may blackmail Government and may withdraw the support at an opportune time. Manipulative and opportunistic politics may affect the coalition government. Some also argue that the pattern of regional and caste based alliance may result into decreased governmental accountability in a collective way. It can be also argued that increase in politicisation of region and caste with low level of political efficacy and low level of public accountability may result into political corruption. The record of the working of coalition governments

both at the Centre and State compel many to conclude that the present government may not be stable. Recent events in Gujarat have demonstrated that even, supposedly, disciplined party like BJP is becoming increasingly prone to opportunistic politics.

During the current and also the ensuing elections at State levels during the tenure of the present government will witness great competition among the partners of the coalition Government. For a coalition government to take up and implement CMP consisting of social and economic policy package is not going to be an easy proposition. Pull and pressures and counter pressures among the partners and the parties supporting the coalition are likely to pose problems for the Government. However, the optimistic view can also be taken. Large number of political parties and pressure groups have certain commonality of ideas and programmes. This may result in the continuity of some of the economic and social programmes. The speed at which those programmes will be implemented will determine the continuation of the present coalition government.

#### SUMMING UP AND ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

The formation and working of coalition government, currently in power, has raised new issues regarding its prospects. Let us examine those issues in the light of conceptual framework and in the backdrop of international experience and experience at the State level and limited experience at the national level. Owing to the plurality of the Indian society, resulting into multi-party system, it seems that minority governments and coalition governments has come to stay in contemporary political scenario. The basic issue relates to the effective functioning for good governance. A number of constitutional, structural and electoral reforms along with healthy convention are needed in this direction.

The important issue which need be discussed can be related to amendments in the Constitution which may ensure a certain degree of stability of the coalition government. Should we have a Presidential form of Government as is being advocated by some? Should we have provisions relating to the circumstances in the Constitution under which the President can constitute National Government? Should the power be given to the Speaker of Lok Sabha to work out an alternative government as is the case in Sweden. Basic Law of Germany, the Constitution of Denmark and the Instruments of Government in Sweden have provisions to deal with such situation. Is it possible to have similar provisions in India?

The other issue relates to the role of the President. For a coalition system to succeed the Head of State is always liable to find himself playing a more active role in the government formation process, especially in a situation where there is no clear majority to any political party. In a multi-party situation where coalition government is a necessity, preserving the dignity of the institution of the President will depend on the tact and wisdom of the Head of State and the willingness of political parties to do everything possible to avoid the Head of the State in the process of party politics. The power of dissolution of the House, either on the advice of Prime Minister or his own, should be exercised by the President after weighing all possible alternatives of having an alternative and a stable government. The constitutional consequences of coalition government will require a changed role of the President. His role in nominating Prime Minister and dissolving Parliament may no longer be merely a formal one.

The another issue relates to electoral reforms. Should we have proportional representation, list system, single transferable vote system or multi-members constituencies? Some of these methods have been encouraged pre-election alliances, rather than post-election coalition? What steps should be taken to reduce the number of political parties? Should only national parties take part in national elections? What constitutes a national party?

What should be done to bring polarisation of political parties and thereby bring three party system, namely, Left, Right and Centralist parties.

Based on the working of the coalition government the key question is how long the present coalition would survive. Some experts are predicting next elections in two year's time. Even if it is able to complete its tenure; would it be in a position to implement effectively Common Minimum Programme? To what extent the coalition government does affect the administration? Owing to political compulsion to what extent investigation machinery would be effective? Is it true that the bargaining costs in an enlarged coalition are going to be too big?

The coalition may have an adverse impact on bureaucratic performance. In an uncertain and fluid political situation, is it not true that it leads to dysfunctionality of bureaucracy? Greater the power of bureaucracy less is the socio-economic development.

At the political level, is it a right observation that the ideological base of the political parties is eroding, effectiveness of Prime Minister as leader is declining, and secrecy in decision making is being violated? What are the possible consequences of these observations? To what

extent the decision-making has shifted from the Council of Ministers to Steering Committee? How long and how effective would be Steering Committee?

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