



## Formation of Coalition Governments in India

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**Abstract:** Politics in India may not yet be the last resort of the dishonest and the corrupt, yet it cannot anymore boast of the qualities people associate with public service. Today, it is nothing more than a means to gain and exercise power. The politicians at the time of Independence had raised politics to a high level of moral idealism, setting aside personal and sectarian interests in favour of the common good. They sought power for the people, for the nation, and not for the individual.

### Formation of Coalition

In India, the formation of coalition governments at the centre started with Morarji Desai's regime, though at the state level, these had started functioning from 1967. At the centre, coalition ministries have been formed seven times between 1977 and April 1999. The first coalition ministry of Morarji Desai lasted for 857 days (between March 1977 and June 1979), of Charan Singh for 171 days (between July 1979 and January 1980), of V.P. Singh for 344 days (between December 1989 and November 1990), of Chandra Shekhar for 224 days (between November 1990 and June 1991), of A.B. Vajpayee for 13 days in May 1996, of Deve Gowda for 325 days (between June 1996 and April 1997), of I.K. Gujral for 333 days (between April 1997 and March 1998), and of A.B. Vajpayee for 394 days (between March 1998 and April 1999). Thus, no coalition ministry could complete the whole term of five years. The two National Front ministries formed at the centre between 1996 and 1998, with the support of 13 parties under the prime-ministerships of H.D. Deve Gowda and I.K. Gujral had to face serious problems from the Congress

Party which was supporting them from outside.

When the Congress withdrew the support to the United Front government, general elections were held in February 1998 and the BJP formed a ministry with the support of 18 regional parties. It was defeated in parliament by one vote on April 17, 1999. The majority party in the coalition government has to placate difficult allies, even if they have three or four members with them. The BJP-led government after coming into power had to face the blackmailing of some of its allies. At least four regional parties (from Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Punjab, and Haryana) kept threatening the government about withdrawing support at the drop of a hat.

The leader of the regional party from Tamil Nadu in the coalition ministry had no fewer than four dozen cases pending against her in the courts. Since she had a good number of members in her party in the parliament, she encashed her party support for getting many concessions by intermittently holding the government to ransom. Ultimately, she withdrew the support from the government in April 1999, which led to the loss of confidence



motion in the Lok Sabha by a single vote on April 17, 1999.

How can the majority party in a coalition ministry keep the government stable under threats from its allied partners? How can it plan development of the country and discuss trade, commerce and other relations with the developed countries? Does the withdrawal threat of a coalition partner on even a minor issue not make the government jittery? Then, each political party has the problem of intra-conflicts too. It is not easy to keep all the disgruntled party members happy. The key troublemakers within the party instigate some of the allies to raise issues which invariably embarrass the government.

Politics in India may not yet be the last resort of the dishonest and the corrupt, yet it cannot anymore boast of the qualities people associate with public service. Today, it is nothing more than a means to gain and exercise power. The politicians at the time of Independence had raised politics to a high level of moral idealism, setting aside personal and sectarian interests in favour of the common good. They sought power for the people, for the nation, and not for the individual.

Today, personal power and personal ambition have become the keywords in political vocabulary of the politicians. The public and the national interests have been replaced by personal and sectarian interests. This has disastrous consequences for the actual conduct of the polity.

The parties function not on the basis of ideological basis and

programmatic commitments but on regional, communal and caste basis. In recent times, many leaders have left behind their ideological baggage in favour of what they describe as political pragmatism, but in reality these people are political opportunists in pursuit of power. The political maneuverers of some political parties which have made opportunism a virtue are glaring examples of politics without any commitment to idealism or ideology.

The opportunism motivated by personal ambition for power, has made political ideology a matter of convenience rather than of conviction. It reflects a serious pathology of our political life and total lack of idealism, which adversely affects the functioning of coalition governments.

The fourth government being ousted from power in a span of three years since 1996 indicates that coalition governments are not good for the country—economically and politically. In economic terms, about Rs. 900 crore were spent on elections in 1998; now the most conservative estimate is that Rs. 1,000 crore were spent on September 1999 mid-term polls.

Besides, frequent elections retard economic growth, increase fiscal deficit, adversely affect business confidence, plummet stocks, and raise the prices of commodities used by the common people. Political uncertainty hampers development and affects foreign relations. Experiments in the last three years in our country have also proved wrong the assumption that coalition ministries are more logical for federal polity. The spectre is of governmental instability, fragmented national politics, and policies



on vital issue suffering from interruptions.

Out of 12 Lok Sabhas constituted between April 1952 and April 1999, seven could complete their 5-year term (1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 7th, 8th and 10th), the fourth Lok Sabha (constituted in March 1967) could complete 3 years 9 months, sixth (constituted in March 1977) could complete 2 years 6 months, ninth (constituted in December 1989) could complete 1 year 3 months, eleventh (constituted in May 1996) could complete 1 year 7 months, and twelfth (constituted in March 1998) could complete 1 year 1 month. How long the 13th Lok Sabha constituted in October 1999 lasts is yet to be seen.

**Some alternatives are suggested for the success of the coalition governments which now seem inevitable for India:**

1. Only national parties should be permitted to contest elections for parliament and regional parties should not be given this opportunity. At present, there are six national parties and 48 state recognised parties in our country. The regional parties may best articulate the regional aspirations but at national level, regional aspirations harald disintegration of the country. Allowing only national parties in parliament elections will reduce, if not wipe out, political opportunists. Some parties (like Bahujan Samaj Party) openly say that they want political instability in the country. How can such parties, having no programme of national development, be ever entrusted with the task of ruling at the centre or even in a state? Only that political party may be recognised as a national party which contests elections at least in half of

the total states in the country and secures at least 5 per cent votes. At present, the Election Commission declares a party a national party which has achieved the status of state party in at least four states. However, if several regional parties form a National Front and submit a common national programme, such Front may be permitted to contest the parliamentary elections.

2. Second option could be that a no-confidence motion mover against the ruling government should name the successor to the Prime Minister in the motion so that an alternative is already there.

3. Third option in case of a fractured mandate could be directing the House to elect its leader or the Prime Minister.

This indirectly is a suggestion for a National Government. But is National Government practical? My contention is that it is unrealistic. Parliamentary democracy has to function through political parties. After Nehru's death, or say after 1971 general elections, the Congress Party in particular and our political system in general got fragmented and localism and sectional politics came to dominate over the larger issues of national concern.

It is doubtful whether the National Government can rectify this malady. We can focus on national rather than the regional issues by strengthening our political parties. They should make themselves more representative, responsive and accountable.



Talking of single individuals as candidates for prime-minister ship is to ignore the crucial role which political parties play in sustaining and enriching the entire process of politics. Even an outstanding individual will remain an individual without a good organisation. Participation of large number of people in politics through the political parties is an important ingredient for a successful democracy. Of course, there are the usual criticisms against the political parties. Some of these are: they promote corruption and partisanship, work on the basis of vested interests, are factional and divisive, and often lead to political instability.

Assuming that these criticisms are true, it cannot be denied that political parties do perform some important political functions, including one of controlling the policies and programmes of the party in power. The leader of the national party, howsoever charismatic he may be, cannot bridge the wide gap between the ruler and the ruled and redress the genuine grievances of the masses. Only the political parties focusing on national interests can ensure political stability.

Some people suggest that parliamentary democracy is inappropriate for India and it should be replaced by the Presidential form of government. My contention is that it will be wrong to make short-term assessments, particularly on the basis of what has happened in the last three years.

The important thing to be noted is that at no point of time did any political party question the ideological

underpinnings of the Indian Constitution or the relevance of the institutions of parliamentary democracy. All the eight coalition governments upheld the sanctity of the institutions of governance enshrined in our Constitution. Instead of having highly centralised presidential form of government or government of a one or two-parties, parliamentary democracy is very relevant for our country.

As already stated, the three vital spheres of national concern are: foreign relations, defence policy, and economic policy. The last five decades have shown that in spite of some short-period governments and coalition governments, our policies have been characterised by continuity as well as flexibility. Continuity has sustained the credibility of India's position in the international community.

Flexibility is necessary to be responsive to internal requirements. Even on nuclear weaponisation and missile development, there has existed (more or less) a national consensus. Only because of some political instability created by some opportunist politicians in coalition governments, how can we hold that parliamentary democracy be discarded? The people of India have now become mature enough to throw out such persons (and also political parties) from power who, contest elections for their vested interests, blackmails the *coalition ministries they join, and affect the arithmetic of the Lok Sabha*.

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