



Diversity in unity

By allying with Ajit Jogi, Mayawati signals the BSP can't be taken for granted

Things are never as easy as they seem from a distance. If the Congress entertained hopes of being at the centre of a national-level alliance against the Bharatiya Janata Party, then it was relying heavily on the changed attitude of the Bahujan Samaj Party to seat-sharing and coalition-building. But as Assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan draw near, the Congress is beginning to realise that the agreement on the by-elections in Uttar Pradesh between the BSP and the Samajwadi Party that was touted as a precursor to a larger understanding among opposition parties in the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls of 2019 is anything but. By quickly concluding an agreement on seat-sharing with the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh led by former Congress chief minister Ajit Jogi, BSP leader Mayawati was clearly signalling to the Congress that its options were still open in M.P., and that unless given a fair share of the seats, the BSP would not back the Congress. While the BSP has understood the importance of seat-sharing after suffering successive reverses in U.P., this does not mean that it would play second fiddle to the SP or the Congress in U.P. or M.P. The Congress had run the BJP close in 2013, winning 40.29% of the valid votes, and the result could have been very different if it had fought the election with the BSP as a partner. Together with the BSP's 4.27% share of the votes, the Congress would have been ahead of the BJP, which got 41.04% of the votes. A year later, in the Lok Sabha election, the Congress fared far worse, ceding a 10-percentage point lead to the BJP in vote share. Any which way the Congress looks at the scenario, the JCC-BSP alliance is not good news.

But it is in the bigger State of Madhya Pradesh that the Congress needs the BSP more. While it is conceivable that the Congress could bridge the gap with the BJP on its own in Chhattisgarh, in M.P. the challenge is greater, and the BSP, which won 6.29% of the valid votes in 2013, is stronger. The difference between the BJP and the Congress five years ago was more than 8 percentage points, and the BSP would like to leverage its position as a serious third player. But with the tie-up with the JCC in Chhattisgarh, the BSP might have made an electoral adjustment more problematic in M.P. While Rajasthan is a polarised contest between the BJP and the Congress, M.P. and Chhattisgarh could well see the BSP cornering a chunk of the anti-incumbency vote among the Dalits. A failure in either of the two States in central India on account of a divided opposition will make the Congress's efforts to put together a broad-based front against the BJP that much more difficult. Many parties might be opposed to the BJP, but that alone cannot be the reason for them to come together in alliance.

Overnight flip-flop

The government must explain why it cancelled the Swaraj-Qureshi meeting

Within 24 hours of announcing a meeting between External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi in New York next week, India called it off. The reasons cited for this overnight flip-flop are recent attacks in Jammu and Kashmir by Pakistan-based groups, and stamps issued by the Pakistani postal service that glorified Kashmiri terrorists. According to the MEA spokesperson, both acts "expose" Pakistan's "evil agenda" and the "true face of the new Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan", rendering talks "meaningless". While the government is well within its rights to rethink any decision it takes, the reasons that it has furnished for cancelling the meeting are far from convincing. To begin with, there have been a number of violent attacks in J&K in the past few months which predate the government's decision to schedule the meeting. Since the beginning of the year, 13 Border Security Force jawans have been killed along the Line of Control and the International Border, including the latest case on Wednesday of a jawan's body recovered bearing torture marks. In the same period, more than 20 policemen belonging to J&K police have been killed by terror groups backed by Pakistan. The government's reaction to Friday morning's killing of three policemen thus appears puzzling. Equally bewildering is the subject of the stamps of Kashmiri terrorists; while there is no doubt that they are offensive, they were issued back in July before Mr. Khan came to power. The government needs to clarify its position on what prompted the cancellation of the meeting, not just for the domestic audience but also for the international community which is watching the India-Pakistan relationship very closely.

The decision to cancel the meeting in New York dampens hope for meaningful engagement between the two countries for the foreseeable future, perhaps until the general election in India in 2019. Delhi and Islamabad should use this period to bring down tensions. In particular, the situation on the LoC warrants immediate attention. A day before the killing of the BSF jawan, a statement by the Defence Minister that the Indian Army is "also cutting heads, but not displaying them" only highlights the need to stop the retaliatory cycle. The new hotline just operationalised between the BSF and the Pakistan Rangers is an important initiative in this regard. India's decision to call off the New York meeting is only the latest in a series of cancellations of talks with Pakistan since the Modi government came to power. There is little doubt that provocations from Pakistan, and the seriousness of the attacks launched by groups based there warrant a firm signal from India. But a credible position also requires consistency, which the government has not brought to bear on its Pakistan policy thus far.

Seeking a managed exit

A year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, the stalemate continues



RAKESH SOOD

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani was in New Delhi on September 19 for a day-long working visit. A short press release indicates the low-key nature of the visit. The reason is simple – the growing sense of uncertainty that prevails. Presumably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took up the issue of seven engineers working for KEC International who remain missing after being kidnapped this May, and Mr. Ghani would have assured him about Kabul's sincere efforts to rescue them. Pro forma references to the Strategic Partnership and the New Development Partnership were made but there were no new announcements. India reiterated its support for 'an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled peace and reconciliation process' with the Taliban though it is clear that the strings are being manipulated from other capitals.

A year after U.S. President Donald Trump unveiled his new Afghanistan policy, the stalemate continues. Incidents of violence and civilian casualties keep going up. There have been high profile attacks in recent months in Farah, Baghlan and Ghazni in addition to suicide attacks in Kabul claimed by the Islamic State (IS). The Taliban leadership and the Haqqani network retain their sanctuaries in Pakistan and enjoy the support of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI). In terms of population under control, there has been a slow erosion and the hold of the Kabul government is now limited to 56%. Repeated offers of talks by Mr. Ghani have been rebuffed by the

Taliban, except for a three-day ceasefire during Eid in June. Parliamentary elections due since 2015 are unlikely to be held in October as announced. Presidential elections are due in April 2019. The experiment of the National Unity Government has not worked and the prospects of the 2019 election yielding an outcome that is seen as legitimate appear remote. All key players, including the U.S., have now opened their own communication lines with the Taliban.

Pakistan dependency

The objectives of the U.S. policy announced last year were to break the military stalemate on the ground by expanding both the presence and the role of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. Operational constraints in terms of calling for surveillance and air support were eased. The Obama approach of announcing timelines for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan was replaced by a conditions-based approach. Pakistan was put on notice with Mr. Trump tweeting about Pakistan's duplicity in being "a non-NATO ally" and providing safe haven to insurgent groups. Earlier this month, the U.S. announced that it was cancelling \$300 million in military aid to Pakistan. However, it is clear that U.S.'s Pakistan policy, which has oscillated for 17 years between cajoling using pay-offs and punishing by withholding or cancelling pay-offs, has once again failed to change Pakistan's behaviour.

Slowly, the U.S. is realising the uncomfortable truth that it is unable to change Pakistan's policy because Pakistan's security establishment does not find such a shift in its interest. The Pakistani military and the ISI do not support the idea of a territorially united, peaceful and stable Afghanistan, never mind the public statements at international conferences. At



the same time, the ISI is unlikely to support the idea of a complete Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. It remembers that after the jihad in the 1980s, when the Mujahideen leaders finally took control in Afghanistan in 1992 after the Najibullah government fell, they stopped listening to the ISI even as they started fighting among themselves. This led to the emergence of the Taliban, assisted and nurtured by Pakistan. The ISI prefers a controlled instability in Afghanistan where the Taliban enjoys some power but wants more as this keeps the group dependent on the ISI.

The U.S. is unable to get out of this bind as long as it maintains a significant military presence in Afghanistan and therefore remains dependent on communication and supply routes through Pakistan. It is unable to take stronger measures such as directly targeting the insurgent safe havens in Pakistan, terminating its status as "a non-NATO ally", sanctioning specific military officers or considering placing Pakistan on the list of 'state sponsors of terrorism'. The U.S.'s dependence provides the security establishment in Pakistan a degree of influence in the corridors of power in Washington that has enabled it to receive over \$33 billion over the last 17 years, des-

All in the arithmetic

Without an alliance, the Congress may find the going difficult in Rajasthan



SANJAY KUMAR

Going by the electoral trend of the past 25 years in Rajasthan, it should be the turn of the Congress to form a government in Rajasthan after the Assembly elections later this year. The people of Rajasthan have not re-elected an incumbent government since 1993. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been in power in Rajasthan with Vasundhara Raje Scindia as Chief Minister since 2013. Ground reports suggest that the Congress is well placed to defeat the ruling BJP government, with visible signs of disenchantment especially against Ms. Scindia. Results of various by-elections held for Lok Sabha and Assembly seats over the past year too suggest that the Congress is regaining lost ground. It is important to note that the BJP has lost all the by-elections in Rajasthan held in the past one year.

Reality check

But the question remains, are the results of by-elections a good indicator of the mood of the voters of Rajasthan across the State? Can the Congress bounce back to power only because people are unhappy with the Chief Minister? Or does the Congress need to present its agenda to mobilise voters around its promise of better governance?

There is hardly any doubt that many voters are unhappy with how the Chief Minister has run the government during the last five years. Even sections of the BJP rank and file are unhappy with her. But it may not be easy for the Congress to win the election in Rajasthan only on the hope that voters disenchanted with the ruling party will eventually vote for it in the direct electoral contest against the BJP. Some voters will certainly shift from the BJP to the Congress, but it may take more than that to win.

The Congress needs an 8%



swing in its favour to defeat the BJP. Rajasthan has seen such huge swings only on three occasions. In the 1977 Assembly elections the Janata Party defeated the Congress by an almost 19% vote margin. In the 1998 Assembly elections the Congress defeated the BJP by a margin of more than 11%. And in the last Assembly election in 2013 the BJP left behind the Congress by about 12% of the votes. All other changes of government in the State have taken place with a very small shift of votes from one party to the other.

The question remains, does the Congress have the ability to create an 8-10% swing in its favour? The

pite the ups and downs in what can only be described as an unhappy marriage that neither side is able to terminate.

End game in Afghanistan

This is why Mr. Trump's earlier objective of "winning" in Afghanistan has been quietly put aside. The U.S. appears to be seeking a managed exit, leaving after a successfully conducted election so that the blood (2,400 U.S. lives) and treasure (nearly \$1 trillion) can be justified as having delivered an honourable outcome. For the outcome to last, at least for some time, the insurgency needs to be curbed. Having failed to defeat it through kinetic means, the U.S. opened direct talks with the Taliban two months ago. In the past, the U.S. had refrained from doing so, maintaining that this would undermine the legitimacy of the Kabul government. It had therefore prodded Pakistan to deliver the Taliban to an 'Afghan-led and Afghan-owned' reconciliation process which did not happen.

The first round in July, in Qatar, with State Department senior official Alice Wells was preliminary. The talks were explained as intended to judge if the Taliban is serious and thereby 'facilitate' direct talks with the Afghan government. It has also expressed concern about the growing presence of the IS. Last week, the Taliban made it clear that its demands include release of Taliban prisoners held in U.S. custody and a closure of U.S. bases in Afghanistan. With the appointment of former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad as Special Adviser, talks with the Taliban are likely to intensify.

The IS argument was used by Russia to open up direct talks with the Taliban more than a year ago. Iran has its own channels to the Taliban. Both Russia and Iran believe that notwithstanding the ideological affinity, turf battles will

ensure that the Taliban will resent the Arab-dominated IS. This happened in August in Jowzjan, where after a pitched battle, 250 IS cadres chose to surrender to the Afghan authorities rather than face summary justice at the hands of the Taliban. With U.S. encouragement, Uzbekistan has also entertained senior Taliban leaders in Tashkent to persuade them to engage in talks with Kabul. Concerned about Uighur militants, China is planning to train and equip an Afghan brigade to be deployed in Badakhshan even as it seeks Taliban help in securing its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects. This has given the Taliban a new legitimacy – exactly as Pakistan had wanted. With the emergence of the IS, a distinction between good Taliban and bad Taliban is no longer necessary.

A shift?

Realising that the end game is approaching, the Taliban too has changed tack. In the areas under its control, instead of destroying the schools, clinics and courts, it is running them by co-opting or replacing local officials who remain on the government's payroll. It realises that it needs to emerge from being a shadowy underground insurgency and demonstrate governance skills. Mr. Ghani would like to stand again in 2019, this time as a candidate who brought peace to Afghanistan, though with so many different players pulling in different directions, peace will remain illusory. What is likely is that after the 2019 election, the U.S. will get its managed exit, which Mr. Trump will trumpet as his singular achievement.

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State Congress president, Sachin Pilot (*picture*), has been working hard to build the Congress and consolidate the anti-BJP votes in the party's favour. But the question remains, whether the Congress can defeat the BJP in Rajasthan only by building an anger against the Chief Minister or on whether voters expect something new from the party.

The BSP factor

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is not be a big force in Rajasthan, having polled 4%, 7.6% and 3.4% votes, respectively, during the last three Assembly elections in 2003, 2008 and 2013. It managed to win two, six and three Assembly seats in these elections, respectively. But what makes the role of the BSP important in the forthcoming election is the fact that its votes are not evenly spread across the State but concentrated in Matsya, North and West regions.

The strongest presence of the BSP is in the Matsya region, which has 30 Assembly seats. In this region the BSP polled 11.3%, 16.2%, and 10% votes during in 2003,

2008 and 2013, respectively. North Rajasthan accounts for 39 Assembly seats, and West Rajasthan for 43 Assembly seats. Over the last three Assembly elections, the BSP polled roughly about 4-5% votes in these two regions. The three regions together account for 112 of the total 200 Assembly seats. An alliance between the Congress and the BSP could make the going difficult for the BJP in these areas.

It is also important to note that the smaller players together polled almost a fourth of the total votes in the North Rajasthan and Matsya regions. It is important for the Congress to build some kind of alliance with these smaller players if it wants to upset the BJP's calculations. Else, by contesting elections alone in Rajasthan, the Congress may be able to pose a serious challenge to the BJP as it happened recently in Gujarat, but it may find it difficult to defeat the BJP government.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

Change in the RSS?

The dilemma being faced by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) *vis-à-vis* the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could be about the prospect of the latter's phenomenal ascendancy obliterating the very existence of the parent body in course of time (Editorial page, "Repositioning the Sangh", September 21).

A parallel can be drawn in Tamil Nadu where the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the offshoot of the Dravida Kazhagam (DK), slowly diluted its stand on the core principles of the DK and succeeded in the political field. The stakes for the BJP, as the ruling party at the Centre and in the majority of States, are different from the strident ideological moorings of the RSS. Much water has flowed down the Ganga since the founding of the RSS and it may not be incorrect to say that the priorities of Hindus have changed dramatically. They may prefer a middle path. The RSS would only stand to lose its importance if it

tries to push itself too far into national governance.
V. SUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

■ The RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat, has highlighted the role of the Congress in the freedom struggle and has now explained 'Hindutva'. Hindutva, according to this, does not exclude Muslims. If such clarifications are to be taken at face value, then why are those from the right wing being let loose on the minorities in the name of cow protection or love jihad and their leaders spewing venom in their public speeches? Are these new soft approaches in preparation of the RSS entering election mode?

A.G. RAJMOHAN,
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

Caste kills

Two instances of brutal attacks on inter-caste couples in Telangana have once again illustrated how caste continues to define everything in India. Breaking unwritten caste rules is met with terrible retribution. That caste discrimination has

been outlawed seems to have made no difference on the ground. Caste is racism and is what keeps people apart despite sharing space on the subcontinent. The abomination of the caste system, which is rooted in Indian society, remains an erasable blot on Indian democracy to this day. Caste is antithetical to humanity and as long as it exists we cannot claim to be human in the true sense.

G. DAVID MILTON,
Maruthancode, Tamil Nadu

The Hindu at 140

The Hindu's long journey would not have been possible had the newspaper not adhered to its core value of balanced, unbiased journalism. However, the balance becomes wobbly when it tilts towards the Left and the Congress, and uses the BJP as a punching bag. It is no surprise that the front page on the eventful day, September 20, did not have a picture of a single BJP leader. However, the daily's popularity has been growing exponentially as it covers a whole gamut of current

affairs – national as well as international. Its journalism is impressive (24-page Tabloid, "The Hindu@140", September 20).

KANGAYAM R. NARASIMHAN,
Chennai

■ My association with the grand old daily began when The Hindu's office came up near my house at Thycad, Thiruvananthapuram. I have been a reader for more than 80 years now and the best part of the day begins by reading the paper over a cup of hot coffee. It is distressing when there is no edition and any other newspaper is a poor substitute. It is hard to believe that the daily is 140 years young. In a nutshell, age cannot wither the daily or custom stale its infinite variety.

S. KRISHNAN,
Hyderabad

■ It works out to be about 1,680 months, or 6,13,200 days, in the service of the nation. The Hindu has been an indispensable companion from boyhood. It has achieved an astounding success story, largely because it is a daily that

appeals to different sections of society. Moreover, when it came to the medium, it was always recommended to a language aspirant.

DAVIS VITHAYATHIL,
Tripunithura, Kerala

■ It is heartening that the daily has completed 140 years of existence in the newspaper industry, which speaks volumes about its quality and credibility. My association with the paper goes back to the early 1980's when I was not only an avid

reader but also a contributor to the 'Letters to the Editor' column. My first letter, captioned "Build up a better team", was published on March 28, 1981. Those were the days of snail mail and I recall penning down my thoughts on pieces of paper and dropping them off at the reception. The letters would often be published after a gap of three or four days.

N.J. RAVI CHANDER,
Bengaluru

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CORRECTIONS & CLARIFICATIONS:

In the front page box item, "Stop-start process" (Sept. 21, 2018), the date of the Mumbai attack was mentioned as 9/11 instead of 26/11.

In a report, "Sex offenders' registry launched with 4.4 lakh entries" (Sept. 21, 2018) the expansion of POCSCA Act was given as Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act. It should have been Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.

A sentence in the first paragraph of a report, "Cabinet clears ₹3,466 crore dam improvement project" (Sept. 20, 2018) said: "... a project to improve the stability and working of dams in 11 States. It should have been 7 States.

Mr. Tarak Sinha is the *sixth* cricket coach to be bestowed the Dronacharya award and not *fifth* as mentioned in a report, "A reward for grass-root level devotion" (Sport, Sept. 21, 2018). The report had omitted the name of Raj Kumar Sharma.

It is the policy of The Hindu to correct significant errors as soon as possible. Please specify the edition (place of publication), date and page. The Readers' Editor's office can be contacted by Telephone: +91-44-28418297/28576300 (11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday); Fax: +91-44-28552963; E-mail: readerseditor@thehindu.co.in; Mail: Readers' Editor, The Hindu, Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860 Anna Salai, Chennai 600 002, India. All communication must carry the full postal address and telephone number. No personal visits. The Terms of Reference for the Readers' Editor are on www.thehindu.com