

ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP: THE OPPOSITION'S GAME PLAN FOR COMBATING NDA

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ABSTRACT

The tally of 353 seats for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance in the Seventeenth Lok Sabha has created a kind of oppositional vacuum both inside and outside the parliament. The recent statement by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on the oppositional unity and the role of Congress could be seen as an effort to fill that political vacuum and create a storm that by 2024 parliamentary elections would become cyclonic completely wiping out the BJP. To chart out the greatest common factor among various political factions that would possibly confront BJP is a challenging task. Thus, the political aim with which the JDU and the other regional satraps are planning to come together as an oppositional front against NDA and trying to expand their outreach beyond their respective borders needs a more inclusive, integrated, and holistic approach. Making a semi-balance in terms of achieving a national stature and at the same time keeping the regional ties intact would be the prime challenge.

KEYWORDS: 2024 Parliamentary elections, Democracy, Opposition, BJP, JDU, & volatility.

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The statement made by Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on February 18, 2023, regarding the need for oppositional unity against BJP and the role of Congress in making the formal announcement for opposition unity as soon as possible is indicative of the turmoil which the political space is going to witness in the upcoming days (Hindustan Times, February 2023). The creation of a formidable opposition that could pose a considerable challenge to the incumbent government is widely being debated and discussed in recent days. The tally of 353 seats for NDA in the seventeenth Lok Sabha has created a kind of oppositional vacuum both inside and outside the parliament. The recent initiative by Nitish Kumar, Chief Minister of Bihar, is an effort to fill the political vacuum and create a storm that by 2024 parliamentary elections

would become cyclonic completely wiping out the BJP. However, it would be interesting to see who would be declared the captain of the ship. i.e., primus inter pares, as most of the party chiefs considered themselves as the most suitable candidate for the prime post.

The different parties which could come together to form a formidable opposition lists JDU, TMC, NCP, AAP, BJD, DMK, AIDMK, RJD, SP, BSP, JD (S), Shiv Sena (UBT) including Congress. To what extent the left parties will come up with the necessary ideological flexibility if they are also to be included on the board seems to be another important question. Hence, it would be interesting to see how the reconciliation of interests among these regional parties would be worked out to build a formidable opposition that could pose a real challenge to the political juggernaut of NDA under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. On the one side, there is a party that has a popular face commanding respect and hegemony from the organization as well as the masses. A party that worked hard to connect with the aspirations of people and has been even successful in transforming that imagination into political choices favorable to them. On the other side, we find an opposition that is divided with no popular pan-India face.

Emboldened by the huge victory in the West Bengal Assembly elections in 2021, Mamata Banerjee was projected as a possible political figure who could be struck a chord with the public imagination and successfully oust the NDA (Wikipedia, West Bengal Assembly Elections, 2021). Her clean image and

political acumen along with more than 35 years of political experience are some of the positive factors encouraging her candidacy for the prime post. Moreover, the aggressive approach against the BJP has been also one of the supporting factors which are adding popularity to her image. She has been quite successful in using political rhetoric and jargon like 'khela hope in counter to the BJP's politics which she claimed to be mostly of a 'jumla' kind. However, it is also not to be ignored that the BJP is slowly and slowly gaining political space in Bengal as the BJP's tally to 77 has raised future hopes for the party.

The political landscape has been nowadays in continuous flux, so volatility has become a common political phenomenon. Though volatility as a factor is detrimental to political stability, in the longer run it is quite helpful for democratic ideals as it forbids the mistake from being permanent (Deep, 2021,48). The anti-incumbency issue is one of the many prominent factors contributing to volatility. However, volatility is not always from the demand side, it occurs sometimes from the supply side also. Formation of a newer party or alliance or separating from an old party also provided the electorates with newer choices. The recent talk of alternative leadership could be seen in the light of the above-mentioned context. Moreover, in today's digitally driven world where most of the information is just a click away, befooling people in the name of ideology or caste or class could not be sustainable. Though it does not mean that these identities are not important as caste and class identities are still relevant and acted as a catalyst for vote mobilization. Moreover, the son of the soil concept and the binary of insider/outsider are also gaining prominence and the political parties are exploiting this much to their advantage as we saw in the last West Bengal Assembly elections. But it is also true that with participatory politics and new social movements like the farmer's movement and others gaining more prominence, these primordial identities have taken backstage.

The statement made by Mamata Banerjee- "No UPA left" signified the status which the grand old party holds in the eyes of a block that is planning to take the government face to face in the 2024 parliamentary elections (The Hindu, December 2021). However, thinking of an opposition block exclusive of Congress makes the task more challenging as at least the grand old party has an organization that is pan-India, though it is also quite true that their political base is tapering substantially as observed in recent times. This pan-India organization could at least provide the necessary platform and cadre which the other parties in the opposition block could use further to restrict the chariot of the BJP. However, the major problem is the issue of Rahul Gandhi being considered the divine and de facto chief of

UPA, which most of the would-be alliance partners considered disadvantageous for them. Though every effort has been made to makeover the image of Rahul Gandhi after the Bharat Jodo Yatra, how much it would help Congress electorally in the upcoming elections is yet to be seen. Moreover, the congress is facing a kind of organizational crisis as the internal bickering and rife factionalism within the state units like in the case of Rajasthan or Chhattisgarh or Punjab posed a real threat to its very existence and stature. In this kind of background, it would be naïve to think that the opposition parties would consider coming under Congress with Rahul Gandhi as the main contender challenging the BJP in the 2024 parliamentary elections. However, recently the electoral outcome of the Karnataka Assembly elections has certainly boosted the morale of the Congress leaders and their supporters (Wikipedia, Karnataka Assembly Elections 2023).

Democracy should not be limited to its procedural connotation rather it should advance ways for substantive one i.e., debates and deliberations with proper feedback mechanisms should exist before any law is implemented. The rights and opinions of the individual should always be respected, no matter how conventional or unconventional it seems to be. The legitimacy for bringing any new or changed law is equally important as the law itself. Hence any law or reform should be brought in after due deliberation with the stakeholders. It is also to be understood that the issues which need to be discussed and debated in the parliament are coming out on the roads in the form of protests and agitations like the farmer's agitation and before that the CAA issue. The opposition continuously blamed the government for such kind of chaos and a total failure in handling such sensitive issues. This kind of ruckus which the country is facing in recent years is not only to be blamed as a failure on the governmental part, but at the same time it created a big question mark on the role of the opposition itself. The easiest way that the opposition is following is to create a ruckus in the parliament by disrupting the sessions, most recently on the Adani issue, but we can all see how this kind of approach is bringing the issues on the roads and making democracy questionable.

In the wake of the farmer's agitation, the opposition got a golden chance to attack the government, but the opposition never seemed to be united in its effort to chalk out any possible remedy which could have trodden a golden path. In these kinds of situations, the role of opposition becomes more significant in a democratic set up as they could have played the role of negotiator/arbitrator between the government and the protestors. Though most of the opposition parties tried to hijack the farmer's agitation in their way the grit and perseverance of the protesting farmers never led them

successful in making the issue political. Instead, interest groups like Bhartiya Kisan Union took center stage and to date have been the sole defender and representative for the farmers.

It is here that the opposition parties need to rework the issues and devise ways that could boost the confidence of the people regarding their capabilities as a viable political alternative. Sharad Pawar being considered as the farmer's leader and as one of the political Chanakya of modern times was also not successful in capturing the temporal and spatial landscape of the ongoing protest. The NCP missed a great opportunity to make their presence felt beyond Maharashtra. This could have provided him the necessary push for being projected as a political figure across India.

The recent meeting at Patna on 23rd June called by Nitish Kumar could be seen as a starting point for the opposition parties to come together to take on the Narendra Modi-led BJP. Congress president Mallikarjun Chargo, party leader Rahul Gandhi, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, her West Bengal counterpart Mamata Banerjee, Punjab's Bhagwant Mann, Tamil Nadu's MK Stalin, Samajwadi Party supremo Akhilesh Yadav, Jharkhand's Hemant Soren, Maharashtra's former chief minister Uddhav Thackeray, and NCP president Sharad Pawar are among the leaders who attended the first high-level Opposition meeting (Times of India, June 2023). To chart out the greatest common factor among various political factions that would possibly confront BJP is a challenging task. Moreover, allying is completely a policy decision and often taken from the above i.e., upper echelons of the party decide about it. As it is mounted from above it is highly probable that the electorates might feel alienated from such a move and, in that case, it would even dent the support base of regional parties planning to ally. Thus, every effort is also to be made to convince the local/regional voters about the feasibility and cause of bringing any such kind of alliance. Discounting public perception would be a blunder that no political party would like to even think of.

To conclude, we can say that the political aim with which the JDU and the other regional satraps are planning to come together as an oppositional front against NDA and trying to expand their outreach beyond their respective borders needs a more inclusive, integrated, and holistic approach. Making a semi-balance in terms of achieving a national stature and at the same time keeping the regional ties intact would be the prime challenge. The most important element for any alliance to be successful is the vision and for that, a common minimum program is needed which has the potential to sail the boat even in topsy-turvy situations. Allying with a single-point agenda of defeating NDA/BJP would not be a sufficient and enduring strategy as once this is achieved nothing could be there which

could hold their strings together. Another challenge is to come out with a consensual face commanding respect and authority among the oppositional parties constituting the block and even having a popular image among the public across India. The desire among the contenders for achieving the prime post must have to pass the above-mentioned litmus test. Even the Assembly elections in different states in 2023 would be a kind of semifinal and how the oppositions strategize their ways to counter NDA would define the route chart for 2024 parliamentary elections. However, it is also to be noted that the BJP is not a political novice and would wait to sit idle for the opposition to make any such game plan that would be problematic for them in the parliamentary elections due in 2024. It would try to puncture each effort of the opposition with the same Vigor so that by the time elections would come, the opposition would be left with nothing but air bubbles.

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