

# Is coalition government worse than single-party rule?

PARLEY

On the successes and failures of the various kinds of coalition governments at the Centre

As India approaches the last phase of the general election and talks on potential post-poll alliances pick up, Suhas Palshikar and Irfan Nooruddin discuss the successes of coalition governments, their contribution to economic growth, and why post-poll coalitions are popular in India. Edited excerpts from a discussion moderated by Srinivasan Ramani:

**The BJP, which leads the coalition government at the Centre, terms the initiatives of the Opposition to form a coalition as “mahamilavat” (hodgepodge) or “khichdi”. Has that been the case with coalition governments in India?**

**Suhas Palshikar:** To begin with, as you pointed out, this government is also a coalition government. As Professor E. Sridharan has argued, this is a “surplus coalition” government featuring a party that already has the strength to form a government but has taken on board other coalition partners. This labelling of the Opposition as “khichdi” is not new.

The real question is, what is the experience of coalitions? At the Centre, you have had a number of coalitions since the 1990s. We have had three Congress-led governments which were able to complete their full terms. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was able to complete his full term as the head of a BJP-led coalition. The criticism that coalition governments are inherently or necessarily unstable is not borne out by facts.

**In the “surplus coalition” government, the BJP has had minimal ideological differences/ principle differences with its coalition partners unlike, say, in the UPA which was supported by the Left Front from outside in 2004. Does this kind of distinction matter in the success of a coalition?**

**Irfan Nooruddin:** In comparative politics literature, we tend to distinguish between ‘ideological coalitions’ and ‘governance coalitions’. Characterising the current NDA as

an ideological coalition is not quite right. It is not quite clear what those ideological principles are that hold this coalition together. But what is true is that the BJP’s strength and the nature of Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s leadership have left very little room for the coalition partners to place their differences. If they disagree, they are no longer needed to be part of the coalition. That is the power of a surplus coalition. It is not necessarily ideological coherence, but the power of the surplus coalition that defines this regime.

Regarding Suhas’s point, while it is true that the criticisms about coalitions not lasting their terms is not borne out by evidence, coalitions of convenience tend not to have coherent policy agendas and tend to be divided from within. Whether they can frame policies and whether they can manage to put up a working Cabinet are two separate but important issues that matter to a working coalition. Coalition governments can get a lot of things done, and when they do that, they stick together too. But at the same time, coalitions of convenience tend to be more likely to be corrupt and spend more money than those that are ideological because everyone has got a hand in the pot.

**While there is indeed a distinction between coalitions of convenience and those based on ideological cohesion, it is also true that coalitions bring in a certain degree of diversity and plurality of views. In an ideal world where political parties represent certain interests, a coalition of different parties could be more democratic, right?**

**SP:** Coalition governments are not necessarily truly democratic, but they can at least be plural in the views that they represent. That possibility also arises when the parties are not adequately representative of the larger public, but only of smaller sections, regions, communities. In that situation, you need a coalition that allows for better representation. And historically, in India, coalitions only emerged when the Congress’s ability to be representative of



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the larger spectrum faded. But also, one must remember that the BJP’s coalition (right from Vajpayee’s time) was not necessarily one of ideology. Pramod Mahajan and Vajpayee, during NDA-1, carefully set aside controversial issues. They made public statements that issues such as Ram Mandir, Article 370, and Uniform Civil Code were indeed the BJP’s core ones, but since its potential partners did not agree with these, it would keep them aside while forming the coalition. In India, therefore, there has been a tradition of limited ideological coalitions.

**Demonetisation was one of the most controversial policies implemented by this government. One could argue that if this was a truly plural coalition, there would have been more rumination by the BJP before implementing this decision. What has your study found? Have coalitions come in the way of India’s economic growth or have they enabled it, especially since liberalisation?**

**IN:** The evidence in my book, *Coalition Politics and Economic Development*, is that coalitions are associated with periods of greater economic growth, less economic volatility and more foreign investment. There is more credibility to the government’s policies, because it has a harder time making radical changes. Something like demonetisation would have been hard to conceive in a coalition government of somewhat equal partners or if the largest member of the coalition was truly

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dependent on the coalition partners in order to fuel its majority.

That said, Suhasji’s point about India’s coalitions being more of convenience is quite right. Given the nature of India’s States, coalitions have been about regional pluralism. It is not only that the BJP won the majority of the seats in 2014 with only 31% of the vote share. Those votes were deeply concentrated in some areas of the country. To form a nationally representative government, it was required to bring in regional parties in the east and in the south into this coalition. This is not necessarily democratic but more representative of the country. It is true that the previous governments were able to carry out economic reforms, but some would say this was because their backs were to the wall – one would recall that the 1991 reforms were enacted under duress as there was a balance of payments crisis. So, it could be true that coalition governments are unable to make reforms of choice. In sum, we could say that coalitions are able to act when they have to, but they make fewer big changes. For some that is frustrating and for some that is safety.

**Do coalition governments featuring regional parties that**

**represent sectional interests manage to do well on the redistribution front?**

**IN:** Evidence from Western Europe shows that coalition governments tend [towards] greater fiscal spending. Some would say that is due to redistribution, while some would argue that this is due to lack of fiscal discipline – smaller parties could extract more than their fair share as they could threaten to walk out.

In the Indian context, Pradeep Chhibber and I published a paper 15 years ago that suggested that two-party competition or tighter competition would result in greater public goods spending, while in a fragmented party system, there would be greater distribution of ‘club goods’ which would involve spending for specific communities represented by smaller parties in some States. This is at the State level. So, yes, you would get redistribution, but not necessarily in the way you would ideally want it to be.

**Why is there a reluctance to form pre-election coalitions despite a larger commonality of interest and a greater inclination to form post-poll coalitions in India?**

**SP:** The simple reason is that in India, there is one national-level player and several regional parties. In both cases, the national party seeks to expand its geographical reach across and within States. In such situations, these parties seek to keep their cards closer to their chest and play them after the elections based on the outcome. If there was a situation where there were only State parties and no all-India party, this would have enabled pre-election coalitions. Besides this, there is an absence of ideological coherence (at least in the last 25 years or so) that would bring parties together for a pre-election coalition.

**IN:** What it means to be a party in India is to allocate tickets. For pre-election coalitions, parties will have to tell constituents – people who have worked for a party for years and expect a reward in the form of a ticket – that they won’t get tickets to contest. This causes unhappiness and bickering. So it is much better to say, take your ticket and contest

and we will form a coalition later based on how many seats we have.

**Would a prospective coalition that could come to power do so on the basis of a common minimum programme?**

**SP:** Neither a BJP-led coalition nor a Congress-led coalition would do that. If it is a BJP-led coalition, the BJP will be in a pre-eminent position and wouldn’t require any ideological coherence and would want to keep its ideology. It would still want to keep its partners intact for the time being – the Shiv Sena, the JD (U), and so on.

In a non-BJP coalition, there would not be any ideological coherence because they wouldn’t have probably given enough thought to what kind of governance programme they would have if they come to power. Their single unifying agenda would be to remove the present incumbent from power.

**IN:** The Congress has spent five years of near irrelevance in the legislature. This is a rebuilding exercise for it. The notion that it has a common programme to articulate, and that it will use that to bring a lot of other parties on board, is hard to imagine. There is just a single-point agenda: to keep the BJP out.

In either case, there will be a coalition. It will be difficult for the BJP to replicate its 2014 success in this election. Now the question is whether it will be a coalition in which the BJP will bring 250 seats to the table or whether it will bring 210-220. If it’s closer to 250, it will be able to push its own agenda. But if it’s 210-220, then it would have to make some compromises with its coalition partners. And it will be interesting to see how Mr. Modi and BJP President Amit Shah manage that – ceding authority to coalition partners unlike the centralised scenario we see today.

**SP:** I think even if the BJP wins 210, it will buy the support of its partners by giving them various ministries, promising special packages for their States, etc. Concentration of authority and power within the Prime Minister’s Office will still continue, and Mr. Modi will act exactly the same way as he has acted in the last five years.



**Suhas Palshikar** taught political science at Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, and is chief editor of *Studies in Indian Politics*



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## SINGLE FILE

### Encourage citizen science

New models are needed to supplement the traditional scientific method

MANU RAJAN



Science advances by making discoveries and developing new ideas. But our scientific institutions are yet to implement new ways of developing and transmitting knowledge. The idea that there is only one scientific method of obtaining scientific results – a method in which most

scientists in academic settings are trained – is not adequate for the new information age of Big Data, crowd-sourcing and synthetic biology. The hypothesis testing approach made sense in an era of information scarcity. New models are now needed to supplement the traditional scientific method.

Our institutions of science need to adapt to the reality that informally trained individuals are just as able to contribute to our knowledge of the world as those with formal academic training. These “citizen scientists” face many barriers that institutionally funded individuals take for granted. Scientific institutions need to engage with the external community recognising that knowledge exists both in the institution and the community and not just as a one-way act of philanthropy. Collaborative learning needs to be adopted as the core model of pedagogy. If scientific research is conducted solely by individuals trained to be successful in academia, we are potentially biasing and limiting scientific questions and interpretation of results.

Creative experimentation and asking unfamiliar questions are as important as funding and infrastructure. Technology has made it possible to conduct even big science by operating on a small scale. The promise of citizen science is that if you can make a task small and simple enough for someone to do in his or her leisure time, you can aggregate a lot of talent. There are several instances where research problems have been repackaged into online multi-player games. Ordinary citizens can help transform a modest PhD project into a path-breaking global science initiative. Galaxy Zoo, the pioneering online citizen science project, became successful because the academic scientists involved in the project overcame their inclination to keep their discoveries private until they were ready to publish. Earthwatch Institute India is a leader in implementing the citizen science concept. Their volunteers have taken part in biodiversity enumeration, collection of data on pollinators and studies related to lake conservation in Bengaluru. However, there is scope for much more in terms of scale and complexity. The U.S.-based Citizen Science Alliance is nurturing new citizen science projects in disciplines ranging from data engineering to oceanography. The University of Oxford, Johns Hopkins University and the University of Minnesota, amongst others, are part of this alliance. It is time that our scientific institutions took the lead in collaborative learning and knowledge production as part of a larger reform process, not just with others within their own scientific community and discipline but also with the larger external community.

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## NOTEBOOK

### The polluted water bodies of Kanniyakumari

An unbelievable transformation has taken place in just a few decades

B. KOLAPPAN

Nanjil Nadu, a large part of Kanniyakumari district in Tamil Nadu, was the rice bowl of erstwhile Travancore before it was annexed to Tamil Nadu. Its importance is explained by Manonmaniam Sundaram Pillai, the author of the Tamil prayer song *Neeradam Kadai*, also known as the *Tamil Thai Valthu* (Invocation to mother Tamil). In his verse-drama *Manonmaniam*, Pillai says there is hardly anyone who does not know about the fertile lands of Nanjil Nadu.

Anyone who travels the length and breadth of the district will agree with Sundaram Pillai. The district, which benefits from the South-West and North-East monsoons, is covered by acres of emerald green paddy fields, and banana and coconut groves.

I remember from my childhood innumerable water bodies, both big and

small, being full of water and covered with lotus plants. The place looked like a painting. I used to see crystal-clear water oozing from the foundations of every house back then. Brooks lining the streets of Parakkai, my village, housed carps, tilapia, eel, snakeheads, panchax, fresh water prawns, water snakes, frogs, crabs and snails. I would go fishing every day. I would then transfer the fish into a small pit dug near my house. It was a visual treat to watch the snakeheads, both male and female, guard golden yellow-coloured fishlings in the water bodies around the village. Eels would catch frogs and small fish. The air was chilly back then. Ceiling and table fans had not yet made an entry into every house.

The introduction of sewerage canals in every street and bylane changed the picture gradually. The situation was further aggra-

vated when concrete streets and bylanes were paved. All this affected the groundwater table. Till then, the water that was used to wash clothes and vessels would flow till the coconut and banana trees that stood in the backyard of the house. Slowly, the backyards were paved with concrete and, in many cases, accommodated new construction. Wells were converted into septic tanks, and the waste water was let out in the sewerage canal. It joined the clear unpolluted water flowing in the brooks. The brooks, in turn, flowed into water bodies used by many generations for cultivation and community bathing. Every household today depends on the water supplied by the village panchayats and local bodies.

Today, almost all the water bodies in Kanniyakumari district are polluted beyond belief. Gallons of untreated sewage enter

them, making them unfit for use. Of course, farmers still use the water for cultivation. But it is unsafe to drink from and bathe in many of these water bodies. Paddy fields and wetlands are being converted into plots at a frenetic pace. In 2016, Lal Mohan, convener, Nagercoil chapter of the Indian National Trust for Culture and Heritage, told me that the district is losing about 1,000 hectares of paddy field every year.

When I stroll along the banks of the polluted Cooum river in Chennai in the evening, I cannot stop myself from visualising a similar situation for the water bodies of Kanniyakumari. Pachaiyappa Mudaliar, the merchant and dubash whose wealth was used to lay the foundations of many educational institutions, used to bathe in the Cooum every day. Can anyone do that today? A similar fate awaits the water bodies of Kanniyakumari.

## FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1969

### Soviet spacecraft lands on Venus

The Soviet inter-planetary station, Venus-5, made a soft-landing on Venus this morning [May 16] after uninterruptedly transmitting information for 53 minutes as it made a parachute descent to the planet’s surface, Tass reported. The soviet news agency said Venus-5 took 130 days to cover the 350 million kilometres to the planet. Another space station, Venus-6, launched five days after Venus-5, was approaching the planet and would enter its atmosphere to-morrow morning (at 11-33 hours L.S.T.), the Agency said. Venus-5 was launched on January 5 this year. Venus-6 took off on January 10. The two spacecraft are following up the mission of Venus-4, which made history in October, 1967, by parachuting through Venus’s atmosphere and transmitting 90 minutes of data back to earth.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MAY 17, 1919.

### League of Nations.

Lord Grey has furnished Reuter with his views as regards the Covenant of the League of Nations. He is delighted that much has been accomplished, having feared that the Conference would achieve much less. It has proved the downfall of Germany and convinced the Allies and associated Powers that the national development of each could be better assured by security or permanent peace than by attempts to promote separate national interests. The Covenant has made a good beginning respecting labour, disarmament and responsibility for backward races, which Lord Grey opined were the three essentials. It was good that the Covenant accepted the provisions of the Labour Convention. The most effective reduction of armaments would come from the security of the League and they would diminish as the League grew strong and vital. Consequently, public opinion within the League must secure the utmost publicity on the question of reducing armaments.

## POLL CALL

### Coalition government

A coalition government is one in which multiple political parties come together and often reduce the dominance of the party that has won the highest number of seats. Coalition governments are formed when a political party win the necessary number of seats to form the government on its own. In India, the first coalition government to complete its full-term was the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance from 1999 to 2004. While some say that coalition governments generate more inclusive policies, others believe that coalitions impose constraints on policymaking.

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