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The Third Front: Why Skeptics and Proponents are Both Wrong

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As opinion polls predict fluctuating fortunes for the two major national parties, the BJP and the Congress, in the 2014 polls, Tridivesh Singh Maini, a Public Policy Scholar with The Hindu Centre, explores the idea of a Third Front, and points out the signs that suggest that the formation of this alternative is neither improbable nor smooth-sailing.

With the 2014 elections around the corner, a number of forecasts have come out. While some pre-poll surveys do give an edge to the BJP over the Congress, it seems that the saffron party will have to gain immense momentum over the next few months to be in a position to cobble together the numbers for forming a government. A survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in November gave the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a tally of 175 seats and the National Democratic Alliance, which includes two of the BJP allies, Shiv

Sena and Akali Dal, a total of 191 seats. The same survey gave the Congress-led UPA alliance 138 seats. According to the survey, the Congress will get around 120 seats while its allies, the Nationalist Congress Party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and the Rashtriya Lok Dal will muster up around 18 seats between them.

Due to this lack of clarity, many are not ruling out the possibility of a Third Front government, which could be headed by a regional satrap. While this expression is used frequently to describe a non-Congress, non-BJP alternative, there are numerous shortcomings in the arguments of both proponents and opponents of such an arrangement.

Where Critics of a Third Front are Not Convincing

If one were to first discuss the deficiencies of the arguments against such a coalition, the first opposition to such a front is on the basis that there is no common agenda and that a grouping of regional leaders will be bereft of a genuine pan-India vision.

What opponents of such a front forget is that the Prime Ministerial candidate of the BJP, Narendra Modi, is a regional leader as well, and apart from the fact that he belongs to a national party, it could be argued that there are other regional satraps such as Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa who themselves have a reasonably sound governance record. While Mr. Kumar has been credited with being responsible in a turnaround for Bihar due to his focus on infrastructure and law and order in the State, Ms. Jayalalithaa's welfare schemes, especially the idea of 'Amma Canteens' set up by the Chennai Corporation providing food at a subsidised rate, have been lauded as being a timely and affordable initiative, particularly for a large number of migrant workers in the city amid soaring inflation.

Apart from local governance issues, most Chief Ministers have a reasonable understanding of external relations, especially in the economic realm. Although Mr. Modi hogs the limelight due to the Annual Global Investors summit, if one were to look at the record of Tamil Nadu, it still receives more Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) than Gujarat. (As per available official figures of the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion of the Union Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the pattern of FDI equity inflows in 2011-12, shows Tamil Nadu attracted US dollars 1,422 million against Gujarat's US dollars 1,001 million; but in terms of Investment Intentions for the succeeding year 2012-13 (up to now), Gujarat seems to have an edge over Tamil Nadu).

Similarly, while Mr. Modi's outreach to the outside world receives more coverage, it would be pertinent to point out that Mr. Kumar too has reached out not just to neighbouring countries such as Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan, but has also dealt with South East Asian countries, including Singapore and Japan, as both are involved in the Nalanda University project.

Ms. Jayalalithaa has received more attention for the firm stand she has taken on India's relationship with Sri Lanka. The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has repeatedly stated that India is excessively soft on Colombo and should do more to safeguard the rights of the Tamil minority in the neighbouring country. In this context, Ms. Jayalalithaa has taken a number of steps, which many believe have had an adverse impact on New Delhi-Colombo ties. They include increasing pressure on New Delhi to vote against Sri Lanka at the United Nations Human Rights Council, sending back a team of Sri Lankan footballers touring Tamil Nadu and, more recently, urging the Indian Prime Minister not to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held at Colombo — he did give CHOGM a miss.

Due to Tamil Nadu's commercial ties with other parts of the world, Ms. Jayalalitha has also had the opportunity to deal with political delegations from other parts of the world. In 2011, former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it a point to meet Ms. Jayalalitha and discuss a gamut of economic and political issues. So, the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu too would surely have some understanding of diplomacy.

Finally, those opposed to a Third Front are quick to state that such a coalition would be a disaster for the economic condition of the country. They forget that two such governments — H.D. Deve Gowda (1996-1997) and I.K. Gujral (1997-1998) — may have not been stable but were not disasters either. Economic reforms introduced in 1991 were continued with and the current Union Finance Minister, P. Chidambaram, occupied the same position in both these Cabinets, presenting reasonably progressive budgets.

What Proponents of a Third Front Forget

Let us now examine some of the shortcomings of the arguments in favour of such an alternative. The first argument is that such a coalition will inevitably need support of either of the national parties. In such a situation, it cannot really be dubbed an alternative to either the Congress or the BJP. Past experience clearly shows that arrangements banking on a national party for support have not lasted long due to excessive dependence on them.

Secondly, while the issue that is likely to bring these regional parties together is secularism, many of these were allies of the NDA in the past. This includes the JD (U) and the AIADMK. In any case, such a front cannot last long if its ambition is to keep the BJP out of power. There has to be a common agenda on economic and political issues. One such issue could be strengthening federalism. So far, none of the regional leaders, who could be part of such a front, have articulated their vision for this alternative. Such a front gives the impression of not just being opportunistic, but also a stopgap arrangement.

Thirdly, many of the potential constituents do not see eye to eye. Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress will find it tough to be part of a front which also accommodates the Left. Similarly, former Chief Ministers of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati, the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the leader of the Samajwadi Party, Mulayam Singh Yadav, may not find it easy to support a coalition, though they have both lent outside support to the current UPA regime.

Both critics and proponents of a Third Front need to remove their blinkers with regard to such a formation. Critics need to realise that decentralisation of Indian polity is a reality, while the national parties too need to do some introspection with regard to their decline. Supporters need to lay out a more cohesive vision for such an alternative.