

POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN INDIA: COALITION DHARMA?!

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ABSTRACT

This article, while drawing a distinction between three kinds of corruption—transactional, constitutional and political, dwells on an analysis of the latter with particular reference to the time stemming out of the call for confidence by the Manmohan Singh coalition government in India in 2008. It also makes a case for controlling the proliferation of parties, while acknowledging the need for political parties for a successful working of a democracy. The plea is to stop small, splinter parties based on individual personalities rather than any ideology, and provide proper political conduct devoid of opportunism.

INTRODUCTION

Political corruption may take many a form, the worst of which is to use, or misuse, the Constitution for political and partisan purposes, confusing or substituting party interests to that of a nation (Tummala 2006: 1-22). Then there is the perennial issue of gerrymandering by which the party in power re-writes the boundaries of constituencies in such a way to give it a polling advantage which does not occur in India as delimitation of the constituencies is given to a statutory body. There is the continuous flow of money, legal and illegal into party coffers from rich individuals and political action committees (PACs) thus buying access to power points and influence policy preferences. The 2009 budget in India proposes that contributions made to political party trusts would be tax-deductible one hundred percent. However, a certain transparency and accountability are available in these transactions since the 2003 amendment to the 1950 Representation of Peoples Act.¹ Moving from one party to another in search of wanted positions continues to be a problem despite the 1985 Anti-defection Law which would disqualify any legislator who switches party affiliation but would allow a third of a party members to change parties in mid-stream. But the most pernicious problem of political corruption occurred during the 2008 confidence motion in Parliament, and events leading to the 2009 general elections, where legislators were bought and sold like chattel while cobbling majorities in a coalition government.

If politics were to be the art of the possible, everything possible was artfully unleashed in India in 2008. It was not free market politics, but a bazaar barter that happened as the Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh won a confidence motion on July 22nd. It was Indian democracy at its nadir, and political corruption at its zenith. If a stable and mature democracy like India could indulge in shoddy political behavior, what might less stable or unstable democracies do? And how to prevent this kind of behavior? In other words what is the coalition *dharma*² the right conduct of the various constituents of a coalition? Analyzing and discussing the fortunes of the Singh coalition government, this article is organized under several headings. The first starts with a few introductory remarks. The second analyzes the 2004 general elections leading to the UPA coalition.

The third explains the 2008 politics and the consequences of the no-confidence test. The final section concludes by summing up the situation and offering some suggestions.

In a parliamentary form where there are only two prominent parties, as was the case in Britain for long, the majority party formed the government while the other party sat as the “loyal opposition,” waiting to take its turn. In times of emergencies, there however have been instances when national unity governments were formed with several parties participating in the governance of a country. But that is only an exception. Yet, over time, due to the growth of multi-party systems, parliamentary forms did turn to coalition governments. Also, in electoral systems following Proportional Representation (PR) where each party would have its members elected proportionate to its voting strength, coalition governments are also a norm. Here a coalition government is defined as one where no party gets the majority to form a government, and several parties come together to form a majority government. This could be due to three factors: the coalition partners may be like-minded, more or less; it could be just opportunism to share power; or it could even be to prevent the other group of parties from coming into office. In any case, the Prime Minister is dependent upon the support of the several coalition constituents for his/her survival in power.’

Several studies have been made in the past about coalitions. A recent noteworthy and comprehensive study is the one put together by Wolfgang C. Muller and Kaare Strom in 2000 comprising of empirical studies of thirteen western European countries covering 1945 to 1999. While Spain and Great Britain are known for their single party governments, other Western European countries such as Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, Belgium, Finland, France, Italy and others are known for their coalition governments, except the first two have seen more successful and stable governments (Muller and Strom, 2000).

Israel is yet another example of a state where proportional representation always led to coalition after coalition because any party with even two per cent of votes cast is entitled for one seat. Currently there are as many as 34 parties. Given the above, no single party ever held a majority in the Knesset. Smaller parties championing single issues, particularly the orthodox religious parties like Shas, keep holding the larger ones— be it Kadima, Likud or Labor, as hostages. That country had five governments in the last ten years leading one scholar to comment that the voting system itself is “a threat to Israel’s existence” (Doran, 2009). In the most recent elections held on February 10, 2009, no party got a majority in the 120 seat Knesset, and the two parties, Kadima (28 seats) and Likud (27 seats) fought to form a government with the latter under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu succeeding in putting together yet another coalition government.

India does not have PR, but has a multi-party system with a first-past-post electoral system. Even when the Congress Party was dominant, it could not muster absolute majorities in Parliament, but did form stable governments. However, since the late 1960s as the Congress party declined while several regional parties grew in several States, coalition governments have come to be the norm. The Centre (as the federal government is commonly known) had its first coalition put together by the Janata Party following the defeat of the Congress government of Indira Gandhi in 1977 further to the national emergency she declared (Tummala 1998: 497-510; 2002a: 43).

THE 2004 GENERAL ELECTIONS AND THE UPA COALITION

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government of 1998 at the Centre, which was put together by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the BJP was the first in a long time to serve the normal five year term. Starting with nearly 25 different parties, this coalition ended up with 18 when the Prime Minister called for new elections in 2004. He was buoyed by his own party's "feel good" factor and the perceived decline of the Congress Party. But as it turned out, his optimism was ill-conceived. BJP succeeded in winning 138 seats (of the 545 members in the lower House of Parliament– the *Lok Sabha*) while Congress garnered 145 seats (Tummala, 2004a: 31-58).

If the Indian electoral system were based on PR, the governmental outcomes would have been dramatically different. But because of the winner-take-all system in a plurality vote, the Congress party came ahead. Yet neither party could form a government by itself. A coalition was the only alternative. BJP could not cobble together one; Congress did. Respective coalition strengths in 2004 are shown below (as compared with the experience of 1998).

Relative coalition strength

Party	Seats (2004)	Seats (1998)	% vote share (2004)
Congress & allies*	217	137	35.2
BJP & allies**	185	302	35.3
Others***	136	104	27.6

*Congress allies: RJD, NCP, DMK, PMK, MDMK, TRS, JMM, LNJSP, and JKPDP

** BJP allies: Shiv Sena, JD (U), SAD, BJD, ADMK, TDP, Trinamool Congress,

***Others: CPM, SP, BSP, CPI, JD (S), RSP, RLD, AIFB, AGP, JKN, IFDP, LISP, KEC, AIMM, BNP, NLP, SDF, SJP (R) and Independents

Source: India Today (May 24, 2004): 9.

Note: See Appendix for the acronyms of the parties.

For a successful formation of any coalition, it is important to find out the relative policy positions of each of the parties so that like-minded parties may come together. The election manifesto of the Congress (2004) party declared that this election did not mean a simple choice between two parties (themselves and the BJP, the other main contender), but "a clash of sharply competing values, of diametrically opposite ideologies." Criticizing the BJP that it contributed nothing to the Freedom Movement leading to India's independence in 1947, and opposing its credo of *Hindutva* (Hindu nationalism), the Congress declared that its own goal "is to defeat the forces of obscurantism and bigotry...whose sole objective is to subvert our millennial heritage and composite nationhood." Thus, it put itself up as a bulwark of secularism, as opposed to BJP's Hindu nationalism.

The BJP/NDA government was criticized for its several failures: increased unemployment; lowered economic growth; distress to farmers and farm laborers leading to several suicides; weak national security due to paucity of expenditure; damaged social harmony through acts such as riots in Gujarat, encouragement of allegedly communal and fascist groups such as *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* (VHP) and *Bajrang Dal* (who have been part of BJP), and so on. It was also held responsible for subverting school curricula in favor of Hinduism and spreading hatred of others; encouraging

corruption; denigrating key institutions such as the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC), the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI); and undermining foreign policy by not speaking forcefully against the marginalization of the United Nations and flip-flopping on the relations with Pakistan.

The Congress party instead promised to: promote social cohesion and harmony; ensure to each family a viable livelihood; improve income and welfare of farmers and laborers in all the villages; unleash the energies of entrepreneurs and the middle class; empower women; and provide equal opportunity to all the backward classes and other religious and linguistic minorities.

Efforts would also be made to improve the public distribution system (PDS) of food, focusing primarily on those who fall below the poverty line (BPL). The *Panhayati Raj* (decentralization) scheme started by former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi (further to the unsuccessful 64th Amendment Bill of 1989) and launched by the 73rd and 74th Amendments (to the Constitution) of 1992, would be strengthened by the devolution of functions and funds to local governments (Tummala 1997: 49-64). Finally, Congress promised that every year on October 2nd (Mahatma Gandhi's birthday) the party will provide to the people, what it called, a *Dastavejh* – a balance sheet of accomplishments and failures.

However, once the need to form a coalition government was obvious, Congress could not rest on its own party manifesto, but needed a platform which would be more or less acceptable to the nineteen parties willing to join hands. Thus came the Common Minimum Program (CMP) (2004). Congress took pride in its electoral victory, and in writing the CMP acknowledged thus: “The people of India have voted decisively in the 14th Lok Sabha election for secular, progressive forces, for parties wedded to the welfare of farmers, agricultural labor, weavers and weaker sections of society, for parties irrevocably committed to the daily well-being of the common man across the country.”

Reminding that the CMP is a minimum starting point reflecting its priorities, the UPA government proclaimed six basic principles of governance: (i) Reflective of its indictment of BJP for its supposed Hindu fundamentalism, it promised to promote and protect social harmony; (ii) Expected to work for the economic growth of 7-8% annually to ensure a viable and safe livelihood to each family; (iii) Would provide for the welfare of farmers and farm labor; (iv) Ensure the empowerment of women; (v) Secure full equality of opportunity, in particular in education and employment, to all dalits, tribals, other backward classes (OBCs) and religious minorities; and (vi) Unleash the energies of all professionals and productive forces.

Realizing that the previous government neglected the rural populace, the CMP also emphasized the importance of rural growth. The government hoped to enact a National Employment Guarantee Act to provide to rural households a minimum wage employment in public works for at least 100 days each year. It expected to launch administrative reforms to revamp public administration, promote E-governance, and a more meaningful right to information. It looked toward ensuring the welfare of workers, particularly the 93% of work force which constitutes the unorganized labor sector. Reflecting the concerns of the Left parties, privatization of public enterprises would be carried out on a case-by-case, and with the intent of creating competition, and not to create monopolies. The fiscal deficit was expected to be eliminated by FY 2009.

As to foreign policy, the government hoped to build on a priority basis closer economic, political and other ties with its South Asian neighbors. In contrast to the criticism leveled against BJP for being close to the USA, the CMP stated: “The UPA

government will maintain the independence of India's foreign policy stance on all regional and global issues even as it pursues closer strategic and economic engagement with the USA."

Of the several parties in this coalition, the Communists (the Left, as commonly known) were of particular concern. There are four parties in this group: Communist Party of India- CPI; Communist Party of India- Marxists (henceforward for brevity, CPM), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP); and Forward Block. With a combined strength of 61 seats in Parliament, what could, or should, be their role? Congress and the Communists, however, are no strangers to each other, if not as "fellow travelers."

The post-independence Congress government of Jawaharlal Nehru was cheered on by the Communists at first. (Nehru himself was sympathetic to the Bolshevik Revolution in Soviet Russia, except as a Gandhian he abhorred violence.) But the dismissal of the Kerala State government in 1957- the first elected Communist government anywhere in the world- caused friction between the Communists and Congress, which was further aggravated by the war between China and India in 1962. This latter event also led in 1964 to the split of the Communists into CPI, and CPM.

The CPM, with 43 seats in Parliament, was led by a triumvirate: Harikishan Singh Surjeet, its General-Secretary; Sitaram Yechuri, Politburo member; and Somnath Chatterjee, the reputed veteran parliamentarian. Congress party needed their support, but was committed to continue economic liberalization started under the New Economic Policy (NEP) of 1990. And the Communists, as ideological opponents of multi-nationals, want to end the disinvestment of government enterprises- something which has been going on since the 1990s. In fact, the CPM manifesto categorically stated its opposition to privatizing profit-making enterprises. But both Congress and the Left professed secularism. As opponents of BJP's Hindu nationalism, both parties were also happy to see the BJP government out of office. However, the CPM were not anxious to join hands with Congress and thus jeopardize their standing in States such as West Bengal and Kerala where they controlled the governments for long (with Congress sitting in Opposition). But they knew that keeping away altogether might jeopardize the very possibility of a Congress-led government which might mean the return of BJP- an unpalatable prospect. Thus, they prudently declared their support to the Congress-led government from outside, without being a part of it. (CPI and the Forward Block wanted to be participants in the government, but were dissuaded.)³ Thus came into power the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) led by Congress. Without being a part of government, but offering their support, the Left thus came to eat the cake and have it too in that they began using their power over the UPA government policies, but without responsibility and accountability (Tummala 2007: 139-160).

THE POLITICS OF 2008

The travails of coalition governments are not unknown. In a coalition, parties with disparate ideologies and agendas come into a marriage of convenience. But when one or the other dissatisfied partner withdraws support, the government gets weakened and may even fall. In case of the UPA government, the cause celebre was the nuclear treaty which the Singh government negotiated with the United States. This treaty would allow the US access to and supervision of Indian civilian nuclear facilities. (Defense facilities are kept out of this deal.) In return, India would be allowed access to nuclear technology and fuel from the US. The Singh government felt the urgency to get this approved by Parliament as President George Bush's term in the US was to come to a

close soon. And the Bush Administration itself was exercising its own pressure to get this deal done before they went out of office. But the Opposition in India thought otherwise.

The BJP thought that India stands to lose its sovereignty, and more ominously, the United States would come to exercise control over Indian foreign policy. The Left too shared such fears. Moreover, the Left's ideological opposition to any thing American is well known. Under the circumstances, the Left struck first, declaring that they would withdraw their support to the Singh government. That left Prime Minister Singh and his UPA government vulnerable. The Prime Minister had no alternative but call the bluff of the Left and seek a vote of confidence in his government. (This was the eleventh such effort in nearly 30 years.) It is even claimed by some political pundits that the Congress party was tired of the Left for long, and actually was looking for an excuse to get rid of them from the coalition as they (the Left) kept obstructing economic liberalization (Chawla 2008: 8). In fact, the Congress would be facing the Communists in both the States of Kerala and West Bengal at the next general elections. The vote was set for July 22, 2008, preceded by a two-day parliamentary discussion. On the eve of the confidence vote Congress could count the support of 260, while the opposition could muster 263 (including 2 independents). Eighteen were undecided including 4 independents, and with two of the SP members in jail (Aiyar 2008: 13).⁴It should be noted that during the last four years, Congress had its successes in States, but it also lost power 12 times successively. Now every vote counted. (Note that Vajpayee lost his Prime Ministership with a single vote margin in 1999.)

Given such fluidity, everyone saw an opportunity, but each faced unique troubles. The first of course was the Left. The second was BJP. Third was an alliance of assorted parties– the so-called Third Front, previously known as UNPA. And the fourth of course is the Congress party. As neither of them could stand alone (the Opposition to bring down the government, and the Congress to continue in office), each began looking for new coalition partners. As the New York's Tammany leader George Washington Plunkitt famously put it: "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em" (Riordin 1995: 3). To use the native idiom in Hindi: *sub saudagar hai*– everyone is a merchant (meaning that each was ready to negotiate/deal). Finally, Somnath Chatterjee (of CPM), the veteran Parliamentarian who was elected Speaker of *Lok Sabha*, himself was dragged into this muddle. Several other almost hilarious– at the same time tragic– acts were also noted.

(i) The Left, having flexed their political muscle in creating a near political debacle, now had not only the need to continue its influence but also find an alternate government, should the Congress coalition fall. But given their limited strength in Parliament, they could not go alone; they never did. But with whom would they coalesce? In this quest, Prakash Karat, General-Secretary of CPM, the largest group among the Left faced two hurdles. One was his own persona and his ideological commitment. With Surjeet Singh dead, Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya preoccupied with the governance of West Bengal and Chief Minister V. S. Achutanandan fighting factional feuds in Kerala (he was in fact later kicked out of the CPM Politburo), Prakash Karat was thought of as king-maker in terms of the UPA coalition. *India Today* (2007: 7) the prestigious English monthly, calling Karat "Full Marx," wrote in its "Cover Story" thus: "His dogmatic consistency has influenced governance and intimidated the Government. His ideological orthodoxy has denied the prime minister the freedom to form a nuclear covenant with America. He is the unforgiving apparatchik who wields awesome power without being in power." Satarupa Bhattacharjya and Pabhu Chawla further went on to say, quoting *New York Times*:

“Karat and his party have lately emerged as a sharp and dangerous weapon against the coalition Government, making it plain that though the communists do not have the strength to rule India, they have the power to spoil the plans of those who do” (*India Today* 2007:11). An ideologue like that may not easily be yielding to any coalition partners.

The second was the ironic conflict between his ideological orthodoxy and realpolitik. While both the Communist Chief Ministers of West Bengal and Kerala States have been ardently wooing all sorts of foreign investments, Karat keeps insisting on his uncompromising Communist ideology against capitalism and the neo-liberal philosophy. One should remember his successes in preventing the UPA government pursuing pro-market policies. In his organizational report, Karat proclaimed with pride thus (in Rahman 2008:17): “It was the firm stand of the party and the Left which prevented a full-fledged entry of FDI in retail trade, the opening up of the private banking sector to 74 per cent FDI and stopped a legislation which would have allowed privatization of government employees’ pension funds. We can claim that we have checked some of the harmful measures and retrograde policies which the Government wanted to pursue in the name of reforms. Further, we have also been able to slow down the pace of implementation of neo-liberal policies.”

Yet, Karat initially toyed with the idea of reaching out to BJP as a partner which, if successful, would have been the unholy of unholy alliances. For, BJP is a communal and Hindu religious party, and the Left are supposed to be non-communal (if not anti-communal) and anti-religious. BJP always propagated Hindu nationalism as ardent followers of the Hindu God-king, Lord Rama. The Left are secular, and even atheistic. Thus they abhor the possibility of BJP returning to power. Both the Communist Chief Ministers (in West Bengal and Kerala) thus dissuaded Karat from any alliance with BJP, however opportune it might be, as that would place them in an untenable position of having to explain collaboration with BJP to their own States’ electorate (as State elections are due soon).

More bizarre was the effort at communalizing the nuclear treaty issue by some, like M. K. Padhe of CPM, when they argued that the treaty is anti-Muslim. This argument defies logic except by implication one might argue that a strong nuclear India could be a threat to Muslim Pakistan; hence against Muslims all over. Even that argument is flawed in that the Communists could not bat for Pakistan. As the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference President, Omar Abdullah (in Ahmed and Rahman 2008: 21) observed: “The deal is either good or bad for the country. Where does the issue of Muslims come here?” Thus, this was no more than an effort to somehow wean away the Muslim vote which traditionally has been with the Congress. Given all the above, which other party is left for the Left to woo?

(ii) The Opposition BJP, with its former leader Vajpayee having gone out of limelight due to age and infirmity, had not only shed its moderate stance in terms of *Hindutva* but also recognized its more militant leader L. K. Advani as their prospective Prime Ministerial candidate, who has been waiting in the wings for long. BJP also objected to the nuclear treaty with the US arguing that future Indian nuclear exercises would be impaired if the new treaty went through. They thought that India’s nuclear future capability thus would be hampered, although it is not clear whether indeed there was a clause prohibiting nuclear tests and other developments.

Besides some of the smaller parties in their favor, BJP for a while appeared to see Mayawati, leader of BSP, and Chief Minister of the largest State in India– Uttar Pradesh (UP)– as a possible friend and partner in that she previously shared power with

them thrice in her own State. But she has her own ambitions (see below) which prevented any union between her and BJP.

(iii) Given the weak position of the Left as well as BJP, the possibility of the often talked about, and the previously dead, third party alliance (UNPA) came alive. By its very nature, this was a motley group led by various leaders from time to time. In this context, led by Chandrababu Naidu (of TDP), it started promoting Mayawati as its leader and a possible Prime Ministerial candidate. She promptly declared that toppling the UPA government as the sole objective of the Third Front.

It should be noted that Mayawati is not necessarily a paragon of virtue. She previously held the Chief Minister's position thrice for short periods in UP. There have been allegations that she amassed great wealth in the process. Starting as a school teacher, this daughter of a postal clerk, was said to be worth about \$13 million dollars. When challenged, she simply declared that a large part of that was given to her as gifts by her admirers. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) started new investigations into her wealth (as disproportionate to her income) just before the current political drama was unfolding. And she promptly characterized it as some sort of political vendetta by the UPA government. Besides the wealth issue, she never had any consistent agenda, much less a platform on the basis of which she got elected. Credit, however, should go to her for successfully putting together a rather interesting and successful caste coalition to be the Chief Minister of UP. Moreover, as the only *dalit* (backward class) leader, that too a woman, she claimed that she is deserving of national office as Prime Minister. While indeed, some thought of her as an astute politician with a great promise, others have different notions. For example, Mrinal Pande, chief editor of a Hindi language daily, *Hindustan*, was quoted in *New York Times* (July 18, 2008: 12) characterizing her as a "predator with little ideological baggage."

Soon, she organized a tea party for the leaders of several parties. Included were Chandrababu Naidu (TDP), Deve Gowda (JD- S), and Karat and Bardhan (Communists). Other parties in attendance were BSP, CPI, Forward Block, RSP, INDL, JVM and RDL. Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) leader Ajit Singh was said to be leaning in this direction. While not publicly announcing his intentions of joining or not, K. Chandrasekhar Rao, leader of TRS joined the tea party. However, leaders of two other parties among the previous Third Front partners were missing here. One was the AIADMK leader, and former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalithaa, who could be one competing with Mayawati. She in fact by November 2008 seemed for a while to have made common cause with CPM. In fact, she and Karat announced an electoral alliance. The other was Mulayam Singh Yadav, leader of SP, former chief Minister of UP and an arch rival of Mayawati. (He in fact threw in his support to the UPA government; see below.)

(iv) With the loss of support from the Left, and having called for a confidence motion, the Congress-led UPA government had to seek support from whichever party or member of Parliament that could be forthcoming. The first to announce substantial support was SP leader Mulayam Singh Yadav along with the General Secretary of the party, Amar Singh. SP has 39 members in Parliament (although six of them were either expelled from the party, or simply rebellious or in jail).

Why SP lent its support to the UPA government is ironic, if not mysterious. For after all there was not much love lost between SP and Congress. Despite the fact that they were the fourth largest group in Parliament, SP was denied any role in the UPA government at the supposed insistence of Sonia Gandhi who did not seem to have forgotten that the SP leader Yadav did not support her in 1999 in her own quest for

power. Amar Singh himself was almost thrown out of Sonia Gandhi's home in March 2006, and he bitterly complained of the treatment accorded to him (Sahgal 2008: 19). Thus their decision to stand with the UPA government was variously interpreted. The CPM leadership believed that these two SP leaders hoped that in return to their support the government would shield them from pending court cases against them. There may be some truth given the CBI's handling of these cases so far (see below). But, whatever other reasons they might have had, preventing Mayawati from being the Prime Minister was on top of their minds. There is also their state interest in that they needed someone's support (presumably Congress with 21 Members of Legislative Assembly–MLAs– in UP) to check the ascendancy of Chief Minister Mayawati who has 206 MLAs, as opposed to their own 97. Moreover, neither Congress nor SP alone could fight Mayawati in UP. Combined they might have a chance to get her out.

Thus, Sonia Gandhi sent for Amar Singh and his boss Yadav, and they both obliged. Yet, for the SP there was the knotty problem of the nuclear treaty which was being attacked as anti-Muslim (as seen above), and the party needed to placate the sentiments of Muslims who constitute a substantial vote in UP. A statement from Abdul Kalam– former President, a nuclear scientist and a Muslim– in favor of the treaty came in as a savior, and life became easy for both Yadav and Singh. Congress and SP thus made common cause with Amar Singh stating that “rivals are not enemies.” Amar Singh, “The untouchable became the indispensable,” wrote Prabhu Chawla (2008: 8).

In an effort to consolidate its strength further, Congress turned to Shibu Soren, the leader of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). He had five members in Parliament. Soren is not a stranger to Congress; he was indeed a partner of the UPA coalition heading the Coal Ministry till he was forced to resign because of corruption charges. He was in fact untraceable for sometime, leaving his Ministry with none to head it. Earlier, he was acquitted of a charge of taking bribes to vote with the Congress Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao (when he faced a no-confidence motion). Later he was implicated in the murder of his own Secretary, but was acquitted. Despite all this sordid past, Soren was wooed for his valuable five votes. Not unexpectedly his price went up. He demanded that he be made the Chief Minister of his State failing which (a) he should be restored to his Cabinet position, (b) another colleague of his be given a Ministerial berth, and (c) his son be made the Deputy Chief Minister in his State of Jharkhand. Congress advised him that to be the Chief Minister he must first show his strength in the State Assembly. As he found himself in a weak position with the Congress, he turned to BJP as a possible ally and argued that with their support he could muster the majority in the Assembly (but not with Congress who did not have enough strength). Thus, he would support BJP if they in turn support him to be the Chief Minister of his State. The BJP did not bite it either.

Then there were other minor parties who were willing to negotiate, keeping their eyes on the general elections to be held before May 2009. Of these, Chadrasekhar Rao of TRS first approached the Congress with the suggestion that his 3 MPs would support the UPA government if he was promised a separate Telangana state (cut out of the State of Andhra Pradesh, where the Congress is in power). This has been his only plank. When the Congress demurred, he turned his pitch to BJP's Rajnath Singh. And before he could respond, Rao jumped on the bandwagon of Mayawati who is already being wooed by Chandrababu Naidu (as seen above). (Naidu, it may be noted, as former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh had not supported a separate Telangana state.)

Former Prime Minister Deve Gowda (JD- S), with three members, bargained for a Ministerial berth. He also wanted the support of Congress in his home State Karnataka

so that he could topple the incumbent BJP government there. Neither came his way, and he did not support the UPA government. Similarly, Ajit Singh, leader of Rashtriya Lok Dal, with three members in Parliament, was another target for Congress. To appease him, the Congress government in a hurry re-named the Lucknow airport after his father and former Prime Minister, Charan Singh. But he could not be bought.

(v) Among the other intriguing stories was that of the Speaker of *Lok Sabha*, Somanth Chatterjee. Although elected to Parliament on a party ticket, once elected as Speaker one is expected to be non-partisan in conducting the proceedings of the House. In this case, Chatterjee found himself on a sticky wicket in that he was elected to Parliament as a CPM candidate. Having withdrawn its support to the government, his party demanded that he resign as Speaker, rather than preside over the parliamentary session dealing with the confidence motion. He refused. There was even speculation whether he should not be voting with the government should there be a tie. Mercifully, this did not happen. He did conduct the proceedings with dignity and even indignation. When the parliamentary proceedings were rudely interrupted, not an unusual occurrence of late, he observed that it was a “very sad day.”

While everyone agreed that the Speaker was exceptionally impartial and conducted the proceedings of the House fairly, within 24 hours of the vote in Parliament the CPM politburo on July 23rd expelled Chatterjee from the party for having defied the party. And no sooner, the Prime Minister went to the Speaker’s home assuring him of UPA support. After the confidence vote, the CPM leadership itself in a rather patronizing tone suggested that Chatterjee can seek reinstatement in the party (which is allowed by the party constitution). In turn, it is reported that Chatterjee in fact would quit politics altogether, miffed as he was.

Other parties followed by expelling their errant members. SP in its turn expelled six of its MPs as they defied the party whip and did not vote for the UPA government. TDP kicked out one of its members for voting with the UPA government, and sought an explanation from another. The BJP expelled eight of its members for similar reasons.

(vi) Not unexpectedly, a lot of political drama unfolded with numerous charges and countercharges. CPM leader Bardhan alleged (providing no proof) that Congress was buying support of members of Parliament paying them exorbitant sums of money. (The actual amount quoted varied from one day to another.) In fact, on the day of voting, BJP allowed three of its members to walk into Parliament with wads of money which they waved claiming that it was a bribe given to them by Amar Singh of SP seeking their vote for the UPA government. A private TV channel claimed that it had secretly taped the transaction and given the tape to the government the day before the vote took place. BJP leader Advani, while denouncing the TV channel for its underhanded workings nonetheless not only used that information to criticize the government but also demanded an inquiry into the alleged scandal. It is of interest to note that a parliamentary committee later found Amar Singh innocent of the bribery charges. But the Delhi police registered a case, and an investigation is on. What the outcome of this might be is any one’s guess. The police after all must know that the case concerns members of Parliament, and thus is highly sensitive.

Then there were six other members who were in jail, convicted of several crimes including extortion, kidnapping and murder. They had to obtain special permission from courts to attend the Parliament session and vote. The most notorious of these was a Mohammad Shahabuddin, who won his election to Parliament from the state of Bihar while he was actually sitting in a jail. There were other members, who were allowed to

vote from the lobby of the *Lok Sabha* as they were indisposed. At least one who had heart surgery in Mumbai was flown in to vote.

As scheduled, the confidence vote was taken on July 22, 2008. While 275 of the total effective strength of 541 in the *Lok Sabha* voted with the government, 256 voted against, with 10 abstentions. While indeed the government survived, the occasion gave rise to low politics at the lowest with several charges of corruption and horse-trading, as seen above. Harish Salve, former Solicitor-General of the Government of India was quoted by *Times* (London, 2008: 25) saying: “This is the defeat of Indian democracy that we have seen. The spectacle they created was disastrous.”

CONCLUSIONS

Before we draw some conclusions, it is of interest to note what has been happening since the confidence vote was taken, and as a prelude to the general elections scheduled for April-May 2009. The first concerns Shibu Soren who landed as the Chief Minister of his State of Jharkhand. The Constitution (Article 75 {5}) prescribes that a Minister must be a member of the legislature. If not, then (s)he must be elected to the legislature within six months. As he was not elected to the legislature at the time of assuming the position of Chief Minister, Soren chose to contest an Assembly seat four months later. Normally, a safe constituency is selected (by asking the incumbent legislator to resign by offering alternate public office or some other allure, or if there is a natural vacancy for whatever reasons— death of incumbent, or a re-election). But Soren found no safe constituency which would guarantee his election. On the contrary, the available constituency turned out to be his Waterloo. He ran from Tamar where the sitting legislator was gunned down by the Naxalites. And the electorate on January 8, 2008 shot Soren down. This was an unusual experience where a sitting Chief Minister was not elected to the legislature. Worse, instead of resigning as the Chief Minister as required by the Constitution and also by convention, and despite the calls from Congress leaders among others that he resign, Soren wanted to think through the issue, as if there was one. First he declared that he would contest the election, again. Another legislator in fact resigned thus vacating a constituency to accommodate Soren. Then, he said he would go to New Delhi to consult with UPA leaders. In the meanwhile, he also began canvassing the UPA allies that they accept his son, Champai Soren, as the leader of JMM (which was not so covert a way of stating that he be made the Chief Minister). There were also rumors that Soren himself would like to be taken back into the Central Cabinet— an unlikely prospect. In any case, nearly a week went by before he resigned on January 12, 2009. He continued as a care-taker Chief Minister as tradition goes, till such time a new Chief Minister is chosen. But none came forward to form a new government. Consequently, the Governor sent a report to the Centre stating that there was a failure of constitutional machinery in the State. Based on that, President’s rule was declared on the 19th. The 81 member Legislative Assembly whose term expires in March 2010 itself was left in a limbo.

The second incident was about Mayawati. Each year in January her birthday is celebrated with great pomp and circumstance, when huge amounts of money were collected as gifts to her. As usual this year, collections went on. When one of the civil servants (a public works engineer— Manoj Kumar Gupta) refused to contribute, he was beaten to death allegedly by one of Mayawati’s supporters, a legislator, who is now in jail awaiting trial on murder charges. The family of the murdered engineer, having initially refused assistance from the Mayawati government and demanded a CBI

inquiry, soon changed their mind. In return to dropping their demands, they were given (they accepted) a nice bungalow in the Raj Bhavan colony (where senior Indian Administrative Service officers live), a Class II job to his son and other financial perks. This volte face occurred on January 13th— just two days before Mayawati's birthday, leading to charges that the family was bought off, after all. In the meanwhile, the SP General Secretary, Amar Singh, complained to the Election Commission wherein he claimed that he has evidence (he released a CD) that large sums extorted for Mayawati's birthday were being transferred into small demand drafts to show, wrongly, that they were all small contributions from several of her small-time donors.

Mayawati, previously petitioned seeking that corruption charges against her be dropped saying that they were politically motivated. The CBI claimed that in 2003 whereas her assets were Rs. 10 million, by 2007 she was showing the same as Rs. 500 million. And in July 2008, they told the Supreme Court of India that they have sufficient evidence to prove her assets were disproportionate to her income. On January 12, 2009 the Supreme Court gave four weeks to her to respond to the CBI claim, but nothing is heard so far. (One should note that these charges were levied some five years ago.)

As the general elections are coming closer, the usual and inevitable efforts at alliances are under way. The first such concerns CPM. So far as Karat is concerned, his goal still is to prevent both Congress and BJP from coming to power. CPM and Congress continue to be bitter rivals in both the States of Kerala and West Bengal where they would be facing each other. And their opposition to BJP is already shown. But they started working out electoral arrangements with other parties. At the Central Committee meeting in Kochi, CPM's Sitaram Yechury said: "We have an understanding with the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and Janata Dal (secular) in Karnataka." Yet, there would be no alliance with BSP although they would still consider that party as a part of non-Congress and non-BJP group. Mayawati for herself announced that her BSP will contest all the 80 Parliament seats from UP on her own although she might reconsider only if the CPM earmarks a few seats for her party in Kerala and West Bengal (Radhakrishnan 2009: 6-7).

Amar Singh of SP, who played the most significant role in bailing out the UPA government, expressed reservations about that government's limited progress and the purported weak response towards Pakistan (since the Mumbai terrorist attacks on November 26, 2008). He even thought that Congress leaders "betrayed" the SP when they allegedly tried to lure four SP members of the State legislature into their fold. For a while, SP's continued support to UPA coalition appeared doubtful. But Mulayam Singh Yadav denied any such eventuality whose own fate was hanging in balance due to a case against him in terms of disproportionate wealth he allegedly accumulated. In fact, once Yadav supported the Congress-UPA government, the CBI has soft-pedaled the case which angered the Supreme Court to the point it accused the CBI of acting as agents of the Congress government. What turns up in this context is an imponderable.

BJP had its own troubles. For one, there had been an internal struggle between Advani and Rajanath Singh for the leadership of the party. Bhairan Singh Shekawat, former Vice President of India, too challenged that he shall be considered as Prime Ministerial candidate of BJP because of his seniority and past position. High powered and financially strong industrialists such as Anil Ambani and Sunil Mittal went on record that they would support Narendra Modi (Chief Minister of Gujarat, and a rabid Hindu nationalist) as another possible Prime Ministerial candidate of that party. The RSS (a component of BJP) has been pushing the party to be more pro-Hindu while resurrecting the issue of building Ram Mandir (over the site of the demolished Babri

mosque). Advani had to remind everyone that he did not forget that – an issue that lost steam a while ago, though considered useful during the previous elections. Thus only two small parties– Indian National Lok Dal and Asom Gana Parishad– threw their lot with BJP.

Within Congress’s “dynastic” politics there has always been the unresolved issue of what Sonia Gandhi’s position is as a possible Prime Minister. The meaningless issue of her foreign birth (she was born in Italy) keeps coming up despite the fact she was married to a former Prime Minister (Rajiv Gandhi) for long. But more importantly, her son Rahul Gandhi is being promoted as Prime Ministerial candidate by some Congress leaders. And then, Manmohan Singh underwent open heart surgery in February 2009, thus raising the question whether he would be able to take the burdens of the Prime Minister in future although both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi themselves announced that he would indeed be the head of government.

SUMMATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The above analysis shows that among the several political parties, there are no saints. In politics, it appears that all is fair. And political bargaining continues; opportunism abounds. The essential question thus is whether these coalitions are meant to pursue office and thus power, or in pursuit of some policy preference. Indeed, the UPA government led by Congress has been pursuing economic liberalization, and BJP keeps arguing for *Hindutva*– Hindu nationalism. And the Left, who in a way played the villain with their ideological commitment against the Congress efforts at economic liberalization, also ardently wish to keep BJP out. Thus, the crucial issue is whether there is an alternative in the form a Third Front. Given all the varied demands of each of the several constituents, and more importantly, the individual ambitions of the leaders of the several units, this appears to be unrealistic. A coalition cobbled together only with a negative intent of keeping other larger parties (be it Congress or BJP) away from power cannot last long, even if it were possible to form such a coalition. In the CPM Central Committee meeting mentioned above, the Third Front was not even mentioned. Thus, it is obvious that coalition governments are the only possibility which also means bargaining and jockeying for power resulting in “unholy alliances,” as had been known, will continue raising the fundamental question: What should be the proper conduct of the coalition constituents?

There is always an inevitable conflict in any coalition which is succinctly put thus by Timmermans and Andeneg (2000:393): “In coalition systems, a fundamental tension exists between the formulation of joint policies and the preservation of a distinct identity by each of the governing parties.” In this context some credit must be given to CPM, given their ideological commitment. Yet, they inflicted upon the UPA government the indignity of not being a part, but only to drive its own agenda with no responsibility, worse no accountability. And the other parties seem to be pushing for being in office for whatever reasons. That is irresponsible and an injustice to the electorate and would guarantee further political corruption.

Being only “in office and not in power,” (Cronin 1935: 534) resulting in stalled or under-development of the nation is not something that one would like to see. One might argue what all this fuss is about in that India’s economy is doing well with an expected growth of 6-7 percent even in the current world-wide economic meltdown; it is a nuclear power; and an IT powerhouse. The answers are many. India’s new found wealth is pretty much restricted only to the urban areas; India’s villages remain poor, or

even getting poorer. How much more growth could have occurred if somehow corruption is curbed is any one's guess. Finally, economic well-being cannot offset the political mess that is being created and perpetuated. So what could be done to ensure right conduct of the parties?

1. Opportunistic alliances should not be encouraged and not allowed to be formed. More so, when two parties fight each other at the States level, but allied together at the Centre. This smacks of nothing but simple opportunism be it to be in office one way or the other, or keep the other "rascals" out. If they are opposed to each other at one level, there is no logic or sanctity in being allies at another. There is already a common parlance to this kind of arrangement—"unholy alliances." Once the number of small and opportunistic parties is reduced, silly alliances may not even be necessary.

2. The alliances are abetted further by the thought that "today we might fight, but tomorrow we could be friends." This perpetuates the unworthy alliances.

3. Joining and leaving a coalition willy nilly, not based on any ideological grounds but to suit the needs of the day, must somehow be stopped. When a party joins a coalition, it must be bound by whatever minimum program they agreed to. Thus, a coalition should stand or fall in its entirety.

4. The practice of giving support to a coalition without being a member of the government must be prevented. This is the worst kind of opportunism. If a party successfully pushes for a policy stance, then that party must also take the responsibility for governance and be held accountable. By not being a part of the government, and running a government by stealth is not democracy.

5. Proliferation of parties, however undemocratic it might sound, must be stopped. How many parties are needed for a successful working of a democracy is a debatable issue. But there does not appear to be any reason to have many fragmented, small parties, particularly those with no well defined ideological positions, and not a ghosts's chance of coming to power, and run a government. Many of the small parties are also organized around individual personalities, who either were thrown out, or themselves walked out when it was no more lucrative to be with a bigger party. Just notice that when a party's name is mentioned, it is the so-called leader that comes to mind, and not any philosophical position. To weed these out, it is possible to set some floor ceilings such as the requirement of a minimum number of votes in an election to continue later, or show a required strength by way of signatures of voters or a certain amount of funds in each coffer. The Election Commission (EC) has already been talking of de-recognizing those parties which are only on paper, and had not contested elections for more than five years.

Most of the above can be accomplished without touching the Constitution, and only by simple legislative measures such as amending the Peoples Representation Act and empowering the EC. But then this argument assumes that the EC itself insulated from the hurly burly of politics and certainly not brought under the control of the government in power. Again, the burden is thus on the political parties and their leaders.

The need of the hour is a disciplined party system led by honorable and just party leaders who shall abide by the admonition of Mahatma Gandhi not to indulge in one of the seven sins— politics without principle. Otherwise, the adage that “tomorrow is another day” when all things are possible as usual will continue to operate abetting political corruption.

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NOTES

¹ However, it is noted that of Rs. 4 billion (about \$80 million) raised by 16 political parties in 2006-07, but sources of raising only Rs. 160 million (about \$3.2million) were disclosed. See the story, “Cleaning It Up,” in *India Today* (July 20, 2009), p. 7.

² The dictionary meaning of the Sanskrit word *dharma* variously denotes obligation, justice, charity, ultimate law of all things, and perhaps more appropriately here, right conduct.

³ In 1996-98, the CPI in fact supported, along with Congress, the two United Front governments from outside, and held even Cabinet portfolios of the Home Ministry (Indrajit Gupta) and Agriculture (Chaturanan Mishra). Strangely enough, the CPI also supported from outside, along with the BJP, the V. P. Singh coalition government in 1989.

⁴The 260 UPA supporters were thus: Congress 153; SP 35 (without some rebels, but with two of the rebels)); RJD 24; DMK 16; Nationalist Congress Party 11; PMK 6; JMM 5; Lok Janashakti Party 4; Muslim League Kerala 1; Republican Party of India (A) 1; Sikkim Democratic Front 1; National Loktantric Party 1; Bharatiya Navashakti Party 1; People’s Democratic Party 1.

Among the opposition 263: BJP 130; Shiv Sena 12, Biju Lok Dal 11; Janata Dal (United) 8; Shiromani Akali Dal 8; CPM 43; CPI 10; All India Forward Block 3; Revolutionary Socialist Party 3; Bahujan Samaj Party 17; Telugu Desam Party 5; Asom Gana Parishad 2; Kerala Congress 2; Veerendra Kumar JD-S; 1; MDMK 4; (SP rebels) Munawar Hasan and Jai Prakash 2; Independents 2.

Among the undecided 18: Telengana Rashtra Samithi 3; AIMIM 1; Janata Dal (S) 2; Rashtriya Lok dal 3; National Conference 2; All Indian Trinamool Congress 1; Mizo National Front 1; Nagaland People’s Front 1; Independents 4.

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