

RETURN OF COALITION POLITICS: BJP WALKS A TIGHTROPE

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



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Introduction

Indian elections have concluded with the **Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)** emerging as the single largest party, though still short of simple majority. It has since formed a coalition government under the **NDA** banner, with Prime Minister **Narendra Modi** assuming office for the third consecutive term. The election results have brought up coalition politics again after a decade-long single-party dominance of the BJP in the Indian parliament. The BJP could secure only 240 seats, 32 short of the simple majority. Prime Minister Modi, whose policies were more interpreted as authoritarian for two consecutive terms due to centralization of power, is now dependent upon the allies. Two major allies of BJP including **Telugu Desam Party (TDP)** and **Janata Dal United (U)** have secured 16 and 12 seats respectively.¹

During the election campaign, the BJP claimed that it would be able to win more than 370 seats, as part of the 400-seat markup for **National Democratic Alliance (NDA)**. On the other side, **Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA)** has bagged 243 seats, raising a strong opposition voice in the Indian Parliament.

¹ Smriti Kak Ramachandran, "BJP Prevails over Allies for Now," *Hindustan Times*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bjp-prevails-over-allies-for-now-101717995092542.html>,

Historic Overview

It was in 1977 that the first phase of one-party rule ended in Indian politics. The coalition government of Janata Party replaced the Indian National Congress (INC). Major reasons behind the emergence of coalition politics in India were the unequal economic development and the emergence of regional parties as a result of rising nationalistic response towards centralized policies of Congress.² The regional parties were neither in favour of BJP nor Congress as was seen when the National Front (NF) led by VP Singh from Janata Dal was able to form the government with the help of TDP, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), and Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in 1989. Furthermore, Vajpayee's NDA and Dr. Manmohan Singh's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments were also dependent upon allies. These allies not only supported the leading parties in establishing governments, but at times also created troubles for their vested interests. As in 2008, the Left stopped supporting Dr. Manmohan Singh's government on the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal issue, with the latter only able to stay in power with the help of non-allied SP and BSP.³

NDA Allies and their policies on Domestic Issues

As the BJP is now dependent on JD (U) and TDP, it raises the question whether the Modi government would be able to fulfil its promises such as 'one nation, one election,' a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), amendment in Constitution and delimitation. For its part, Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal has reiterated that UCC and 'one nation, one election' are part of the government's agenda.⁴ Both the JD (U) and TDP's leaders, Nitish Kumar and Chandrababu Naidu respectively, are seasoned politicians. The TDP and JD(U) are regional parties and more concerned about their respective states - Andhra Pradesh and Bihar. Janata Dal (U) spokesperson KC Tyagi said that the party will support the government on 'one nation, one election' and UCC, and has reservations against only the 'Agniveer scheme' that upset a section of the party's voters.⁵

On the other side, TDP's Chandrababu Naidu said the "TDP will ensure that decisions on contentious issues such as delimitation and the UCC are not taken unilaterally." So far, there is no official opinion

² Aditya Nigam, "Burden of the Allies," *Outlook*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.outlookindia.com/elections/burden-of-the-allies>.

³ The left front in Indian politics includes Communist Party of India (CPI), All India Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Socialist Party, Marxist Forward Bloc, Revolutionary Communist Party of India and the Biplabi Bangla Congress. While Right wing parties are more conservative including Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party, Shiromani Aklai Dal, Shiv Sena, and Bharat Rashtra Samithi etc.

⁴ "One nation, one poll' & UCC very much part of government agenda, asserts law mantra," *Times of India*, June 12, 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/one-nation-one-poll-ucc-very-much-part-of-government-agenda-asserts-law-mantra/articleshow/110920550.cms>.

⁵ "NDA ally JD (U) backs 'one nation, one poll' and UCC wants review of Agniveer scheme," *Firstpost*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/nda-ally-jdu-backs-one-nation-one-poll-and-ucc-wants-review-of-agniveer-scheme-13779474.html>.

from TDP on the 'one nation, one election' policy, but the party contends that it would not allow the BJP to take actions unilaterally in a coalition government.⁶

Alliance Politics and Modi-led BJP

The BJP under Narendra Modi has a bitter history of sustaining relationships with allies. It was last in Vajpayee's coalition government from 1999-2004 when allies remained in sync with the government policies.⁷ In the past, Modi has been unable to sustain relations with its current allies TDP and JD (U). In 2014, Nitish Kumar parted ways from the NDA as he opposed Modi's selection as Prime Ministerial candidate. However, in January 2024, he joined the alliance again after leaving INDIA because of power sharing issues within the alliance. The TDP also left NDA in 2018 because of Modi government not granting special status to Andhra Pradesh. Just before the assembly elections in 2018, he decided to leave the alliance and contest independently. He had continuously been raided by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) the department which came under severe criticism amidst its recent misuse by the BJP government to suppress opposition. The third ally Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) also parted its ways from BJP on the issue of the controversial farm laws.⁸

Conclusion

In the last two terms, the Modi-led BJP government enjoyed stability. However, in the present dispensation, it is dependent upon allies to stay in power. Hence, the BJP walks a tightrope and will have to be careful while formulating or implementing any controversial policies as compared to what it used to do in the previous two governments. The allies look less concerned about foreign policy issues, but no major initiative for domestic reforms will sail smoothly for the BJP if it was carried out without the consent of its allies. PM Modi will have to make necessary adjustments in his governance style and learn to take allies into confidence on major domestic issues.

⁶ Sreenivas Janyala, "UCC, Delimitation, and Muslim Quota: Day before swearing-in, TDP flags discussion points," *Indian Express*, June 9, 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/ucc-delimitation-and-muslim-quota-day-before-swearing-in-tdp-flags-discussion-points-9380605/>.

⁷ Nigam, "Burden of the Allies."

⁸ Abhik Bhattacharya, "Echoes of 2004: The Evolution of Coalition Politics in India," *Outlook*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.outlookindia.com/elections/echoes-of-2004-the-evolution-of-coalition-politics-in-india>.