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POSITION OF PRIME MINISTER IN UNITED COALITION GOVERNMENT

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Abstract:

The working of parliamentary democracy in India during the last six decades has witnessed many important developments. One of these developments has been the emergence of coalition politics at the centre. With the decline of Congress as a dominant force and the subsequent emergence of some national and regional parties as powerful actors, multi-party system becomes severely competitive party system in the 1990s. This ushered a new era of coalition politics at the centre.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1996 coalition Governments have been working at the centre. The working of coalition Governments has influenced the Parliamentary system in India. One of the offices which is directly influenced by the coalition Governments is the office of Prime Minister. In a Parliamentary form of government, the office of Prime Minister is of great significance. He is the real executive head and the entire administration revolves around him. There is no administrative action which can be taken against the wishes of the Prime Minister. Richard Crossman has named the parliamentary form of government as the "Prime Ministerial form of Government".

While expressing his views about the position of the Indian Prime Minister, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has said, "If any functionary under our constitution can be compared with the President of the United States, he is the Prime Minister and not the President." The position, of the Prime Minister is like the 'Captain of the ship of the state'. He is like sun around which all the planets revolve. The Prime Minister is in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, "the linch-pin of the Government." He is the manager-in-chief of the Government's business and in a real sense; he carries on his shoulders the responsibility for the formulation and execution of the government's policy. But the working of the coalition Governments since 1996 has adversely affected the position and functioning of the Prime Minister. Even the appointment of Prime Minister has come under the influence of coalition compulsions. According to the parliamentary practice the leader of the majority party in parliament becomes the Prime Minister and he in turn selects his colleagues in the Council of Ministers. In coalition politics, the leader of the leading party is usually elected as the leader of the parliamentary party of the coalition, but he should be acceptable to the allies as well. Sometimes the leader of a minority party is chosen by the Coalition partners to lead the government. This happened in United Front coalition Government 1996-1997 when first H. D. Deve Gowda and then I. K. Gujral was elected as Prime Minister. The general principle seems to be that the head of the Cabinet, whatever the degree of standing he has in his own party, shall be acceptable to all partners of the coalition whose will may turn out to be decisive in the matter of electing the Prime Minister.

As regards the formation of the Council of Ministers, Article 75(1) of the Constitution states that the Prime Minister shall be appointed by the President and the other ministers shall be appointed by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister. The traditional practice is that the Prime Minister will choose the ministers by paying due weightage to various factors. But under the impact of coalition politics, Prime Minister is not free in the formation, re-organisation and the removal of any minister. In this respect he has

to take the approval from the partner parties.

After the eleventh parliamentary elections held in 1996, BJP under the leadership of Atal Beharijpayee formed its government and resigned only after 13 days due to lack of majority support. Then a coalition government of United Front with the outside support of Congress, led by H.D Deve Gowda was formed. Since Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda was a compromise leader of a motley crowd, he did not enjoy the usual Prime Ministerial freedom to select his own Cabinet colleagues. Deve Gowda's own Janata Dal with 46 members in the Lok Sabha bagged 10 Cabinet berths; Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party with 17 MPs got 4, while DMK with as many seats got only two. So, did its poll ally Tamil Manila Congress (TMC) with 20 seats, but Chandrababu Naidu's TDP with 16 seats got 3 ministerial berths. Baiwant Singh Ramoowalia, who was not a member of either House of Parliament, was a surprise inclusion for giving representation to Punjab. The CPI and the Asom Gana Panshad (AGP) joined the Government on June 18, 1996 and with this the contours of a real federal structure appeared to be emerging at the centre. The United Front witnessed pulls and pressures in the appointment of senior Janata Dal leader S. R. Bommai whose name figured in the Jam diaries, but another leader Sharad Yadav, who had been charge-sheeted in the Hawala Scam was kept out. To maintain a balance among coalition partners, Sharad Yadav was mollified later by elevating him to the position of working president of the Party, a special post created for him. S.R. Bommai's inclusion in the ministry was again a compromise for preventing him from interfering in the politics of Karnataka, where J. H. Patel, considered close to Hegde, had become Chief Minister against the wishes of the Prime Minister.

After the formation of Council of Ministers, distribution of portfolios posed another problem for the coalition Government. P. Chidambaram, a former Congressman and now TMC MP was given finance with the assurance to the Congress that economic reforms started by it would continue. Mulayam Singh Yadav, former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister was keen on Home department but was given Defence Department. When the CPI decided to join the ministry, it too wanted home department for its nominee but the Congress objected on the plea that the Communists could not be trusted with the sensitive information in that department. However, finally Inderjit Gupta of the CPI did get the coveted portfolio. Ram Vilas Paswan was said to be eyeing the foreign office, but agreed to let Inder Kumar Gujral become foreign affairs minister. In return, besides Railways, he was given the charge of Parliamentary Affairs. The Prime Minister had to relent on many counts and his prerogative of distributing the portfolios got circumscribed by the presence of large number of important leaders of the coalition parties. Instead of being the centre of Council of Minister, he had to feel content by becoming first among several leaders. It was otherwise not easy for Deve Gowda to lead a Government that he did not have full control over.

This coalition government however, could last only about a year when the Congress under the presidentship of Sitaram Kesri withdrew its support in March 1997. However the prospect of a mid-term poll apparently forced both the Congress and the United Front to come to rapprochement. In this process on April 20, 1997 Gujral was elected leader of the United Front Parliamentary Party and on the same day, the United Front Steering Committee notified the President of India of its decision. The President, however, appointed Gujral as Prime Minister only after receiving assurance from Congress President Sitaram Kesri about his party's support to the United Front. On April 22, 1997 the second United Front coalition Government headed by I.K. Gujral won the vote of confidence in the Lok Sabha. Thus the second United Front coalition Government was installed and the coalition system Of governance got a new lease of life. The composition of the new Council of Ministers and the allocation of portfolios was again a difficult task which threatened to rupture the United Front. The initial idea was that I. K. Gujral alone would take the oath on April 21 as Prime Minister and the selection of ministers could be taken up later. The CPI (M) Politburo member Sitaram Yechury played a crucial mediating role in resolving the crisis. He made a simple proposal: swear in the old team in its near entirety with the exception of Deve Gowda, of course with slots kept vacant for the TMC ministers to return and send out a message of continuity and stability. The redistribution of ministerial portfolios could be taken up later as part of an overall political review. However, the proposal was not acceptable to Laloo Prasad Yadav who attempted to scoop the process by first asking for the dropping of ministers close to Deve Gowda and then also excluding C.M. Ibrahim, D.P. Yadav and Srikant Jena. The Left criticised the idea, pointing out that any such change in the ministry would serve only the Congress by weakening the United Front. Thwarted, Laloo Prasad Yadav demanded the inclusion of his man, Sharad Yadav tainted by involvement in the lain hawala scam, in the new Ministry. The Left pointed out that Sharad Yadav was not merely implicated in the scam but had also admitted in public that he was a recipient of hawala funds from the Jams. His elevation to the Union Cabinet would discredit the United Front's anti-corruption credentials and give the Congress a lever to put pressure on the minority Government for soft-pedaling other corruption cases. Ultimately, after long arduous negotiations the United Front leaders succeeded in blocking Laloo Prasad's aggressive demand; but for D.P. Yadav's sacrifice, the United Front decided to induct practically the whole of the old team.

On the swearing-in day, the Prime Minister designate Gujral learnt that not just himself, but all the other Ministers were going to be sworn in. The President and the cabinet secretary were informed about the last minute change in the arrangements. Ironically for the first time since independence, India had a Prime Minister who had borrowed his entire Council of Ministers from his predecessor, under the compulsions of coalition politics. The prerogative of appointing ministers to the union cabinet in fact, was enjoyed by the Chief Ministers of states and not the new Prime Minister. Laloo Prasad Yadav made no effort to hide the fact that it was he who had insisted on Devendra Prasad Yadav being removed from the Council of Ministers.

The compulsions of coalition compelled the Prime Minister to transfer the CBI Director Joginder Singh to the Ministry of Home Affairs as Special Secretary. Actually CBI had decided to prosecute Laloo in the fodder scam and also it named Rajiv Gandhi as chief conspirator in the Bofors bribery scandal. Gujral's dependence on the Bihar unit of the Janata Dal for his seat in the Parliament on the one hand and the lifeline of the Government- Congress became compulsions of the Prime Minister to affect this transfer. Commenting upon the transfer Prime Minister explained that his transfer was in fact a promotion.

The India's experience with coalitions had shown that the politics of consensus threw up helpless leaders and Gujral made no efforts to hide this fact. In October 1997, Prime Minister transferred Probir Sen Gupta, Chairman of Maruti Udyog Limited as Secretary in the Department of Petroleum, the Industry Minister M. Maran protested against this decision and refused to attend the cabinet meeting, with the result that the Prime Minister had to reverse his decision. "Similarly the opinion of the Prime Minister in the Lok Sabha on the bill granting 33% reservation to women in Parliament and Legislative Assemblies, was criticised by his own party president Sharad Yadav.

Similarly under the compulsions of coalition politics, the Prime Minister I. K. Gujral, recommended the President to impose constitutional emergency in UP under Article 356 and dismiss the Kalyan Singh led BJP Government, which secured vote of confidence in the assembly with the help of Loktantrik Congress a breakaway group from the Congress.

Earlier the BSP withdrew support to the BJP Government led by Kalyan Singh with the result that Government lost majority in the assembly. However, 37 members Congress Legislative Party split and supported the BJP Government. The split came as a rude shock to the Congress President Sitaram Kesri. He immediately conveyed to the Prime Minister I. K. Gujral that the Kalyan Singh Government be dismissed and the President's rule be imposed in UP. The Prime Minister was against such move. Even the legal experts were against dismissing a Government after its leader had demonstrated his strength on the floor of the House. But it was the time for the Congress President to get reward for his outside support to the United Front Government. He made it clear to Gujral that the choice was between Kalyan Singh and his own survival as Prime Minister. Under the compulsion of survival, Prime Minister decided to recommend to the President to impose constitutional emergency in UP under Article 356 of the Constitution. However, President sent the recommendation back to the cabinet for reconsideration. Yielding to unprecedented intervention by the President K.R. Narayanan and strong internal opposition, the union cabinet reversed its recommendation on imposing central rule in UP and decided to allow Kalyan Singh to continue as Chief Minister. The UP crisis was however, over but it left a severe dent in the credibility of United Front Government in general and the office of Prime Minister in particular. In the meeting of United Front's Steering Committee, the members criticized the Prime Minister and argued that the attempt to invoke Article 356, after the floor test was held in UP was misconceived.

During one party dominant system Prime Minister is treated not as equal to any other minister but at a much higher pedestal. His pre-eminence rests on his commanding position in the cabinet, coupled with fact that he is the leader of the majority party. During the Congress rule at the centre the Prime Minister was usually the President of his party, the major campaigner in the elections; all these positions of power when combined in one person make his rank much above an ordinary minister. But in case of United Front Coalition Government first H. D. Deve Gowda and then I. K. Gujral was selected to be appointed as Prime Ministers as a compromise among the United Front partners. They even did not enjoy full control over their party members. More so their party Janata Dal created problems in the way of successful functioning of the coalition Government.

So under the impact of coalition politics the position of Prime Minister has undergone a big change. He is no longer a sun around which all the planets revolve. He has become first among equals. He does not enjoy free will. He is bound to follow common minimum programme of the coalition Government. Moreover with the establishment of an extra-constitutional body, the Steering Committee, the powers shift from cabinet and its leader Prime Minister to this committee. Prime Minister has to endure its decisions as its displeasure can cause the fall of the Government. Hence, the position of real executive head under the impact of coalition Governments has undergone changes in terms of strength, stature, influence and authority.

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