

By Sidharth Mishra



In the midst of the cacophony created by the high-pitch campaign for the municipal elections in Delhi, most of the national dailies and channels failed to take prominent notice of a more serious political development. In the past fortnight, leading lights of the opposition – Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, and Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik took the first steps towards opposition unity. Given the rise of the BJP over the past few years, especially after Narendra Modi assumed the office of the Prime Minister, the concern of the triumvirate is genuine with the challenge they face from the saffron party on their respective home turfs. To them to rein in the Modi juggernaut, the earliest opportunity could be the election of the next President as the term of the incumbent Pranab Mukherjee ends this summer.

On a visit to Odisha last week, Mamata Banerjee 'reaffirmed' her commitment to creating a front of regional parties to counter the BJP. "The regional parties are enough to tackle the BJP," Trinamool Congress chief Banerjee told reporters after a meeting with Patnaik. Giving a didactic perspective to her initiative, Banerjee said that in the federal structure, regional parties strengthen the very system under the Constitution. Such assertions indicate that she was ready to walk that extra mile to accommodate regional counterparts for the cause of opposition unity. A more direct indication of the same came when she said, "It is still early for that (Presidential poll). If he (Naveen) proposes any name, I will talk to him. Don't worry. We have the best of relationship."

On the other hand Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, too, met Congress president Sonia Gandhi to explore the possibility of having a common candidate for the upcoming polls. Bihar CM met the Congress president in New Delhi on the same day Banerjee met Patnaik in Bhubaneswar. A day later, Yechury, too, called on the Congress president and the two are reported to have again held a consultation on the issue of opposition unity for the President's poll.

Nitish Kumar has been calling for forging an alliance of secular parties at the national level on the lines of the 2015 electoral grand alliance or 'Mahagathbandhan' in Bihar, which ensured defeat of the BJP in the state Assembly polls. An analysis of the votes polled in the just concluded Uttar Pradesh Assembly polls also show that if the warring non-BJP parties like the BSP and SP had come together in an alliance the results could have been different. However, the polls for the President's office are different from that of the state or the Central legislative bodies.

The President is elected by an electoral college consisting of the elected members of both

Search for opposition unity

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houses of Parliament, the elected members of the Legislative Assemblies of the 29 states and the elected members of the Legislative Assemblies of the Union Territories of Delhi and Puducherry. As of 2017, the Electoral College comprises 776 MPs and 4120 MLAs. The total strength of Electoral College is 10,98,882 votes. Halfway mark is 5,49,442 votes.

After winning the UP elections, 2017, NDA is short of only 24,552 votes. Given the advantage which the BJP enjoys in the present scenario, the challenge for Mamata, Nitish, and Patnaik to bring together disparate political groups under the Opposition unity cannot be bigger. The three together and the Left parties constitute just about 15 per cent of the votes, whereas the NDA is sitting pretty with 47.5 per cent of the votes. The Congress-led UPA controls around 25 per cent of the votes. That leaves about 12 per cent of the floating votes, which could be up for grabs for reaching the halfway mark. In the case of the NDA weaning away, just a fraction of this floating block could ensure the victory of its candidate.

There is an also outside possibility of some of the members of the UPA block like the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) could help achieve this figure by either going with the NDA or abstaining from voting. There are parties in the floating block like the AIADMK, who in the absence of a powerful leader like J Jayalalitha, could transfer their 5.4 per cent of vote share to the NDA, making it a cakewalk for their candidate.

Thus, it's more than clear that the Opposition can think of a spirited fight in the Electoral College only if it manages to put up a prominent candidate, whose nomination could create an environment for Opposition unity and undermine the profile of the candidate put up by the ruling dispensation. Some of the names which have floated around are of President Pranab Mukherjee, former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, NCP leader Sharad Pawar, JD(U) leader Sharad Yadav, former Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar, and Vice President Hamid Ansari. Given the list, other than Pranab Mukherjee, nobody else is expected to make the cut and shape up as a formidable candidate.

Pranab Mukherjee can get the support of the Trinamool, the JD(U), the RJD of Lalu Yadav, the Left parties, Naveen Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal, and possibly also the Samajwadi Party and the BSP in addition to the UPA members. But will that be enough to see him through and will the possibility of a defeat at the hustling encourage him to take up the challenge at the ripe age?

On the other hand, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is inclined to achieve, what Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the head of NDA-I government could not in 2002 -- to have somebody from the Sangh benches adorn the Presidential chair.

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