

India's 2004 General Elections: Institutionalization of Alliance Politics

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Abstract – *The distinctive multiparty Indian polity has transformed from 'One Party Dominance' system to a new mode of representation in the form of alliance politics. The experiments with the alliance politics started even before the independence period and after passing through the various crucial junctions of the Indian political history it established in the form of present mature and stable alliance governments. The new paradigm shift has been completely institutionalized since 2004 general elections. The BJP adopted electoral strategy of alliances early than the Congress and formed governments under the name of a grand alliance the NDA and the Congress officially adopted that policy before the 14th general elections in 2004. The alliance politics was the only panacea for the Congress to regain its lost credibility and eroded support base. Although there were other political formations in the contest yet the main contest was between the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led alliance that was unnamed before the elections. The main objective of this paper is to review alliance strategies of the BJP and the Congress, elections issues and outcomes of alliances. The words 'coalition' and 'alliance' are being used interchangeably in different studies and in this paper the word alliance is being used.*

Keywords: Coalition, Alliances, Multiparty, Bi-nodal, Federalized

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian polity has been progressively reshaped at the crucial junctures of the history and a paradigm shift in the form of alliance politics which is more accommodative, consensual and federalized. The 1967 was the watershed year when for the first time the Congress supremacy was challenged in the Indian states and after elections various anti-Congress alliance governments were formed in the states. The same experience was repeated at the national level by the Janata Party in 1977 which was a merger of five distinct political parties. The Janata Party emerged as a strong opponent of the Congress and comprehensively defeated the Congress and formed the first anti-Congress government at the national level. The Janata Party experiment failed miserably due to its internal contradictions among the constituent political parties and their leaders. Although the Janata Party was a failure yet it became an inspiration for the first alliance government in 1989 when the Janata Dal formed the National Front alliance government with the outside support of the BJP and the Left Front.

Since then the regional political parties and the BJP made decisive improvements at the national level. Similar to the Janata Party, the Janata Dal government also could not survive for a long time as the BJP withdrew support. The subsequent alliance governments of the United Front in 1996 and the BJP-

led in 1998 also failed to provide stable governments. The BJP was quick to learn from its failures and changed its electoral strategy by diluting its stand on three core issues of Ram Mandir, Abrogation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution and Uniform Civil Code. The BJP forged alliances throughout the India and completed successful tenure of the NDA government from 1999-2004. The Congress followed the same electoral strategy in 2004. The contest of 14th general elections was mainly between the NDA and the Congress-led alliance.

Electoral Contest between two Grand Alliances- NDA vs. Congress-led Alliance (2004)

The 14th general elections ushered a new era in the Indian politics when for the first time there were two established competitive grand alliances-the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led alliance. The main reason for the adoption of new electoral strategy of alliances by the two main political parties was their already shrunken structural and geographical deficits by the end of 1990s and they failed to get required number of seats at their own to form a single party government. Therefore the two political parties were compelled to forge electoral alliances and post-poll coalitions to secure power (Yadav, 2004). The grown clout of the regional political parties since 1989 at the national scene has markedly changed political scene due to their decisive make and mar moves which can change

legislative equations of the governing alliance. The regional political parties have become an indispensable part of the every alliance government and their interests are especially taken care of due to crucial role in the government formation. The regional political parties have made polity more pluralistic and competitive as the regionalism signified importance of periphery and geographical-cultural constituents of nation-a reality that had been recognized and accepted (Mehra & Sharma, 2008). Moreover there seemed to have taken place a disjunction between issues and policies that shape political events in states and those that bear upon concerns of national government (Roy, 2009). The regional political parties transformed the states as the new battle fields of the contest.

The main focus of the Congress and the BJP was to woo other political parties especially the regional political parties. The two main national political parties- the Congress and the BJP forgot their old animosities with other political parties and accepted status of junior allies to the prominent regional political parties like DMK, AIADMK and RJD etc. The basic strategy of the two main national political parties was to contest alone in the states where they have their own strong influence and to forge alliances in states of serious deficits.

2. ALLIANCE STRATEGY OF THE NDA

The neo-liberal policies and communal agenda of the BJP disenchanted many allies of the NDA. The BJP took its win after elections for granted and completely ignored task of nurturing and strengthening alliance and its high and mighty ways alienated important allies (Katyal, 2004). The process of leaving the NDA started even before the elections and it got reduced in size when the key allies like TC, DMK, MDMK, PMK, INLD, JMM, NC and faction of JD(U) led by Ram Vilas Paswan that was later organised as a new political party-the Lok Janshakti Party in Bihar-left the NDA. The NDA lost its charm especially after anti-Muslim Godhra riots of Gujarat in 2002. That tragic incident affected credentials of the proclaimed secular political parties and especially those political parties which had their own Muslim vote bank. The deep internal fissures in the NDA came to open on the occasion of censure motion on the Gujarat riots against the NDA government in the Lok Sabha on April 30, 2002 (Ratnayake, 2002) when TDP, TC, NC and LJP expressed their anguish on the issue and protested against the inaction of the NDA government during the riots.

The immediate reason for the over confidence of the BJP before general elections was its emphatic wins in the three Legislative Assemblies of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh in December 2003. The major emphasis during those elections was laid on the economic development and stability provided by the NDA government and wins prompted the BJP to recommend early dissolution of the Lok

Sabha in February 2004 to get renewed mandate in its favour. The PM Vajpayee confided that situation was in the favour of the NDA to win people's confidence on the basis of its performance. L. K. Advani declared that 'Feel Good' factor was visible in all parts and sections of the country (Chakrabarty, 2006). Therefore the exit of important allies didn't bothered the BJP leaders rather they confidently announced that remaining allies might not leave the NDA due to their own regional compulsions and urge for power (Special Correspondent, 2002) rather they brushed off the exit of allies to the local compulsions than frustration with the NDA government (Venkatesan, 2004).

Infact as compare to 1999 the regional political parties were more concerned about their own local agendas and support bases of survival than the national agenda and the national alliance with the BJP. The BJP continued its efforts to consolidate existing alliances and searched for new allies. It maintained its alliance with influential regional political parties like the BJD in Orissa, Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, TDP in Andhra Pradesh, JD (U) in Bihar and Meghalaya, SAD in Punjab and added MNF in Mizoram, the SDF in Sikkim, IFDP in Kerala, the NPF in Nagaland and AIADMK in place of the DMK in Tamilnadu. In Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Delhi, Goa, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, J&K, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Manipur, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal the party decided to contest alone because of its strong presence. In general the BJP had fewer alliances than the Congress.

The NDA's manifesto was released on April 8, 2004 and the PM justified inclusion of Ayodhya and Ram temple as the national issue. The presence of a few allies like JD (U), SAD, BJD, TC and IFDP indicated unpopularity of the NDA. The BJP was not in a situation to claim support of more than ten allies unlike 1999 when it had twenty four allies. The BJP was hopeful still hopeful of securing comfortable majority to repeat the NDA government (Vyas and Parsai, 2004).

3. ALLIANCE STRATEGY OF THE CONGRESS

Till the 13th general elections, the Congress was highly averse to the electoral strategy of alliances at the national level and confined itself to bare necessary electoral adjustments with the other political parties. The Congress' aversion towards alliances was clearly expressed during the Pachmarhi session (1998) of the Congress Working Committee when Sonia Gandhi officially acknowledged that the Indian polity moved through a coalitional phase at the national level which reflected decline of the Congress. She defined that as a transitional phase of the Congress and hoped that the party would definitely make come back with full force. Meanwhile, in the interim-coalitions might well be needed (Thakurta and Raghuraman, 2017). It was the first instance when the

reluctant Congress realized the importance of alliances. The Congress President clearly specified that until the Congress would not be in a position to form single party government it might go for forging alliances with other political parties only when there would be an absolute necessity.

In her Presidential address in Mount Abu Conclave on November 8, 2002 Sonia Gandhi advised the party men to prepare for the next general elections. She emphasized that ideally the Congress would like to assume power on its own but coalitions would not be ruled out as the Congress had no closed mind on working with the like-minded political parties in order to defeat the communal forces (Tripathi, 2002). After that at the time of Shimla *Sankalp* (resolution) on July 9, 2003 (Khare, 2003) the Congress repudiated its earlier Pachmarhi and Mount Abu resolutions which strongly conveyed the electoral policy of the Congress to contest elections alone. The Congress President announced the new electoral policy to forge appropriate electoral coalition arrangements with the secular political parties on the basis of mutual understanding without compromising the basic ideology of the party. Sonia Gandhi added that prevailing situation in the country also made it incumbent on all the secular political parties to evolve a strategy for combating the communalism and religious fundamentalism to ensure defeat of the BJP and its allies (Tripathi, 2003).

The humiliating defeats of the Congress and emphatic wins of the NDA in three Legislative Assemblies elections in early December 2003 were serious blows to the Congress and it was determined to check its further decline by way of coming out of its self-proclaimed grand isolation to form an anti-BJP secular alliance. The Congress President openly expressed her views on alliance formation during 118th founding day of party at Mumbai on December 28, 2003. She categorically stated that the Congress was ready to form the electoral alliances with the like-minded secular parties without allowing the leadership issue to become a hurdle as the party realized indispensability of the alliances. She concluded that the party would revive its lost base by wooing back the strata of society that moved away from it (Sonia for Alliance First, Leadership Later, 2003). The new approach of the party was formally reinforced on February 13, 2004 when Pranab Mukherjee Report on the Congress defeats in December 2003 Legislative Assemblies elections concluded that the Congress could win only with the alliances (Sridharan, 2004). After that Sonia Gandhi herself and through her deputed senior party leaders started to woo potential allies to the Congress fold. Sonia Gandhi completely ignored 1998 Pachmarhi resolution of CWC that was against alliances with the regional political parties (Chawla, 2004). The Congress forged alliances in Tamilnadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra and Bihar with DMK, TRS, Muslim League, NCP and RJD. The Southern and Eastern zones emerged as the new

areas of interest due to the geographical and structural weaknesses of the Congress in the Northern zone.

The nature of alliances forged in the states was directly interrelated with prevalent party systems and the position of the national political parties in those states. The national political parties had to adjust their ideologies and principles accordingly.

4. ELECTION ISSUES

There was absence of subtle election issues. The main emphasis of the incumbent NDA was to propagate achievements of the NDA government at large scale. For that the NDA made exaggerated claims of 'India shining' and feel good slogans and created virtual hype for the NDA. It especially targeted the Congress leadership and foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi. In its 'Vision Document' released on March 30, 2004, the NDA emphasized development, good governance and peace, as the main issues (Manifesto-2004).

The Congress was initially confused about its political agenda and had no road map to offer to electorate except criticising the BJP for feel good hype (Tripathi, 2004). The Congress started with strategy of aggressively exposing the NDA government's failures and projected strong image of Sonia Gandhi through her road shows. The Congress released a 55-page charge sheet against the NDA government named 'Vajpayee Government: A Saga of Sins, Scams and Shame' (Katyal, 2004) that included a detailed list of allegations against the NDA and mostly included socio-economic issues related to common man (Tripathi, 2004). In India the political parties which make liberal promises to initiate welfare schemes for poor, farmers and marginalized groups by way of offsetting reform hardships always have a fair chance to win elections (Suri, 2004). The Congress followed exactly the same strategy. Sonia Gandhi tirelessly campaigned for the Congress while facing twin challenges of proving her own political credibility and revival of the Congress (Sharma, 2004). The focus of the Congress was to check the NDA from forming the repeated government and communalism preached by it.

It seemed that focus of the whole election campaign was on the mechanics of electoral management, strategies of alliance making, psychological warfare and on media manipulation (Yadav, 2004) on the part of different alliances, political fronts and political parties. In brief the NDA efforts were to form its consecutive government and for that it tried to use emotive issues for the campaign. The Congress propagated disjunction of various policies of the NDA government from the common man rather those policies benefited a specific strata of the country. Moreover, the Congress committed various pro-people policies and social stability

against the inclusive and communal policies of the NDA government.

5. POST-ELECTIONS SCENARIO

The results expectedly threw fractured mandate. The Congress emerged as the single largest party and along with its allies secured two hundred twenty two seats but still short of fifty seats for the government formation. The results were a huge set back to the BJP and a pleasant surprise for the Congress. In absence of a clear majority for any single political alliance or political party there was 'a coalition of coalitions' [24] due to very impressive wins of the Congress' allies.

Table 3.1: General Elections 2004

NDA	Seats	Vote Share (%)	UPA	Seats	Vote Share (%)	Left Front	Seats	Vote Share (%)	Party	Seats	Vote Share (%)
BJP	138	22.16	Congress	145	26.5	CPI	10	1.41	SP	36	4.31
SHS	12	1.77	RJD	24	2.39	CPI(M)	43	5.66	RLD	03	0.35
BJD	11	1.30	DMK	16	1.81	RSP	03	0.44	BSP	19	5.33
SAD	08	0.90	NCP	09	1.80	AIIB	03	0.35	Others	13	9.32
JD(U)	08	1.95	PMK	06	0.55	KEC	01	0.09			
TDP	05	3.04	TRS	05	0.62						
TC	02	2.60	JMM	05	0.46						
NPF	01	0.18	MDMK	04	0.43						
MNF	01	0.05	LJP	04	0.51						
IND	01	0.18	PDP	01	0.07						
IFDP	01	0.07	RPI(A)	01	0.09						
SDF	01	0.05	MUL	01	0.01						
			AIMIM	01	0.07						
Total	189	35.9	Total	222	36.5	Total	60	8.03	Total	71	19.31

Source: ECI- General Elections 2004

The Congress added thirty one seats more to the tally of seats in 1999 i.e. from 114 to 145 and its vote share rose to 26.5 percent which was higher than the BJP's 22.1 percent (ECI- General Elections, 2004). The BJP won 109 seats i.e. 79 per cent of its 138 seats in head-to-head contests against the Congress and by contrast-the Congress won 76 seats i.e. 52 per cent of its 145 seats in head-to-head contests against the BJP (Ramachandran, 2004). That clearly reflected difference made by allies of the Congress. The allies of the Congress added seventy seven seats to the UPA total and the huge contributions were from the Southern and Eastern zones. The NDA was behind the Congress-led alliance by a mere 0.6 per cent of the over all popular votes and the Congress-led alliance got the advantage of 33 seats (Varshney, 2007). The NDA suffered loss of ninety three seats and the allies could contribute only fifty seats. Infact the difference of the seats won by the Congress and the BJP was nominal rather there was difference made by the impressive performances of the allies.

Consolidated Zone-wise Results of 2004 and Change From 1999

State	Total Seats	Congress	UPA Allies	Total	Change Since 1999	BJP	NDA Allies	Total	Change Since 1999	Remarks
Southern	130	47	33	80	+21	18	06	24	-37	Puducherry also
Eastern	117	17	32	49	+33	13	18	31	-29	
Western & Central	141	35	10	45	+2	84	12	96	+1	
Northern	125	32	02	34	+16	19	09	28	-33	Delhi also
North-Eastern	25	11	-	11	-3	04	04	08	+5	
UTs	05	03	-	03	-	00	01	01	-	
Total	543	145	77	222	+69	138	50	188	-93	

Source: ECI- General Elections 1999 and 2004.

L.K. Advani explained that the mandate should not be considered for any particular alliance, single political party and certainly not for any individual (Muralidharan, 2004) and added that by going through the totality of results the BJP and the Congress were almost equal. (Venkatesan).

The electoral verdicts varied in the different regions and such variation could not be generalized by one or two factors especially when the actual margin of win and loss between two main national political parties was extremely narrow. Contrary to the propaganda the BJP and the NDA were electorally far more vulnerable than they appeared. The myth of India shining that benefited only enclave India (Manohar Reddy, 2004) got busted by the electorate and left a very clear political message for politicians to make reforms relevant to common people. (Varshney, 2007). The NDA's neo-liberal policies marginalized the masses from the actual development as they were not able to co-relate their actual position with claims of positive changes in their own lives rather their struggle widened gap between rich and poor. The BJP suffered dismal losses in Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu, West Bengal, Kerala and J&K. The combined number of Lok Sabha seats in those states was one hundred forty seven. The BJP won limited or reduced number of seats than 1999 in Himachal Pradesh (1), Haryana (1), Punjab (3), Delhi (1), Jharkhand (1), Uttarakhand (3), Bihar (5), Orissa (7), Uttar Pradesh (10), Maharashtra (13) and Gujarat (14) i.e. 59 seats out of 268 seats i.e. 22 percent seats. The results of those states proved the BJP dismal popularity against the hyper claims among the electorate. The losses were not confined to those regions where the BJP was in alliance rather extended to regions where it contested without any alliance. There factors responsible for the BJP defeat varied among the states. The major allies of the BJP like the TDP, AIADMK JD (U) and TC faced serious defeats in their own regions and they lost substantial number of seats. The NDA emerged victorious in the states of Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Orissa but with reduced number of seats in Orissa and Maharashtra. The BJP registered impressive victories in states of its dominance Rajasthan (21 out of 25 seats), Madhya Pradesh (25 out of 29 seats), Chattisgarh (10 out of 11 seats) and a comparative gain in Gujarat (14 out of 26 seats). The BJP won sixty three seats out of one hundred nineteen seats in above four states i.e.52.94 percent. The only positive gain for the BJP in the South was its performance in Karnataka where it registered an impressive increase of seats from seven to eighteen and reciprocally the Congress' seats came down from eighteen to eight.

The strong alliances of the Congress proved immensely beneficial in Tamilnadu, Puducherry, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Maharashtra. It is pertinent to mention that the BJP and the

Congress failed to create an impressive political space in the important states of UP and Kerala.

The historical success of the Left Front helped it to emerge as the major political force which in the post-poll period supported the Congress-led alliance. Although in the Left citadels of Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura- the Left and Congress had to contest as staunch opponents as the Leftists and the Rightists because of their regional political compulsions. The Congress-led alliance was formally named the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) before the government formation and the Congress-led government could become reality only because of the pre-poll allies and the post-poll crucial support of the Left Front and some other political parties. The elections proved that the national parties have to forge alliances irrespective of the ideological and spatial differences among the allies to form alliance government with the help of other political parties especially with the regional political parties. The institutionalization of the alliance politics acknowledged the grown clout of the regional political parties and transformation of the national governments to more federalized and democratic.

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