



Research Article

From Fragmentation to Coalition: The Structural Limits of Opposition Unity in Contemporary India

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Abstract

The development of opposition politics in India has undergone a significant change over the past few decades, especially after the emergence of a leading system of parties in the country after 2014. Although the Indian democracy has been dominated by coalition politics, the modern era has been marked by a growing fringe of opposition parties and the concentration of political power in the hands of the Bharatiya Janata Party. In its turn, a number of opposition parties have strived to build cross-cuts, the most prominent of which is the INDIA Alliance, with a view of opposing electoral hegemony and recovering competitive pluralism. These attempts have, however, been limited by structural problems such as ideological differences, fragmentation of leadership, political imbalances in regions and structural flaws in opposition parties. This paper asserts that the challenge of coherence of opposition in India is not only an interim electoral phenomenon but also a structural one that has culminated out of the changes which have been taking place in the party system, a shift in the electoral incentives and the trends in political leadership. Based on the theory of party system, the literature on coalition politics, and the discourse of political hegemony, the paper examines the birth, functioning and constant failure of opposition union in the Indian political scenario. The paper will show that the unity of opposition in India is still reactive, fragmented, and constrained in terms of strategy, through the qualitative analysis with the assistance of some illustrations presented at the state level. The results add to the wider discussions on the topics of democratic competition, restructuring party systems, and the future direction of opposition politics in big electoral democracies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Opposition politics is core to the democratic system making it accountable providing policy opposition and giving alternative vision of the governance. In parliamentary democracies the opposition is not a mere external group of parties but an institution of balance of executive power and represents a variety of interests of the society. As the so called largest democracy in the world, India has had a long history of a healthy and multi-party system which has been characterized by diversity of ideologies and representative of regions. However, the politics of opposition in India have undergone a significant change in the last ten years.

The rise of Bharatiya Janata Party as a mainstream political party has significantly re-organized the political competition. The party has won successive electoral victories in the country since the 2014 general election, building its influence in the country across various regions and political institutions. This has reduced the comparative power of the opposition parties and it has also elicited arguments about possible undermining of opposition politics in India. Opposition parties as a reaction to this change have been looking more at utilizing their energy through electoral alliances and coalitions. Among the notable ones are the INDIA Alliance that works to bring various political players on a shared platform to hold the reign of parties. In spite of these efforts, the unity of opposition has been weak and uneven.

This poses another question, why has opposition unity been a challenging issue to maintain in modern India? Although some of these interpretations focus on electoral tactic and political struggles between leaders, a less obvious explanation indicates that factors in the political structure determine the chances of coalition-building. These are the fall of central opposition anchor emergence of strong regional parties, ideological fragmentation and personalization of political leadership. The paper will contend that fragmentation of opposition in India is entrenched in historical development of party system and the dynamic character of electoral politics. The paper aims to examine the obstacles facing opposition unity, and to discuss the implications of this issue to democratic governance in India at large.

Theoretical Framework

The discussion of this paper bases on three main theoretical aspects party system theory, coalition politics, and the notion of political hegemony.

The party system theory explains how the political competition has evolved over time. In a disjointed party system various parties are competing to gain power and this often results to a coalition government. The system can then move to domination when there is a prolonged success of one party in the electoral process. The effect of such a shift is the weakening of the organization of opposition, smaller parties are motivated to put the interests of the region before the collaboration of the country. Coalition theory is the theory which predicts what makes a political alliance succeed or fail. Ideological compatibility, coordinated leadership and conflict resolution

institutions are other characteristics of effective coalitions. Without these factors, alliances are just volatile and fragile.

The idea of political hegemony which is based on the work of Antonio Gramsci provides further insight in the contemporary Indian politics. Political control is preserved not only with the help of electoral benefits but also with the ability to determine the discourse and political discourses. Therefore, the long-term effectiveness of the Bharatiya Janata Party can be viewed as a combination of the organizational strength and ideology.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the structural factors behind opposition fragmentation in India.
2. To analyze the challenges of coalition-building among parties like the Indian National Congress and regional actors.
3. To assess the impact of dominant-party rule under the Bharatiya Janata Party on opposition unity.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine opposition politics in India. It relies on secondary data sources, including election results published by the Election Commission of India, parliamentary records, and survey data from institutions such as the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).

Quantitatively, the study analyzes vote share and seat share data from the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections to assess patterns of electoral fragmentation and disproportionality. The study is guided by party system theory and coalition theory, enabling a structured analysis of how institutional, ideological, and leadership factors shape the limits of opposition unity in contemporary India.

Historical Evolution of Opposition Politics in India:

During the early post-independence years, the Indian National Congress had dominated the political outfit of India and was an overall umbrella institution that comprised of various ideological blocs and social constituencies. The opposition parties were still in a minuscule state during this period and had a low profile at the national level. In 1952 and 1957 the Congress was re-elected by 364/489 and 361/489 seats respectively, and this established a then-entrenched congress system that was to be known as the Congress system. There was a weak and disjointed opposition to this era, which was not to change much until the watershed elections of 1967, when the Congress lost some of the state legislatures. This loss helped the rise of regional parties and anti-Congress coalitions to be formed. The 1977 election was a turning point, and the Janata Party rose into a non-Congress central government, which institutionalized the opposition in the national politics.

The period between 1989 and 2014 is the epitome of the period of coalition politics when no party was in an absolute majority, and the governance required multi-party coalitions. Such coalitional arrangements were the backbone to such exemplary governments as the National Front, United Front, National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and United Progressive Alliance

(UPA). An example of this is the UPA or the Congress led party which won 206 seats in 2009 and used coalition support as an executive power. This epoch required the integration of the opposition forces even peripheral regional actors were blessed with the increased bargaining power in the policymaking and administration due to the coalition mechanisms.

The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party since 2014 has been a sign of a change towards the dominant-party system. In 2014, BJP secured 282 seats and in 2019, it secured 303 seats, whereas the India National congress reduced to 44 seats in 2014, and 52 seats in 2019. Such a structural change has lost the unity of opposition: divided vote shares and heightened rivalry among regional parties under the first-past-the-post electoral system have made coalition-building more difficult, and has hence changed the party system in India into one of competitive hegemony.

Structural Constraints on Opposition Unity in India:

Stagnation of the fragmentation of opposition in India is most effectively explained in a set of structural limitations inbuilt in the party system, electoral institutions, and political leadership patterns. Such restrictions are not contingent or passing but are systematic and restrictive of the possibilities of effective and sustained opposition unity.

Ideological Diversity and Programmatic Incoherence: One of the most significant barriers to opposition consolidation is the ideological spectrum in which the opposition parties are represented. These include secular-liberal groupings to location based identity-based parties and caste-based mobilizations. On the one hand, this diversity can be regarded as the pluralistic nature of the Indian society on the other hand, it takes away the chances to build a unified programmatic platform. In turn, resistance coalitions tend to be more instrumental, including electoral, than ideological. Lack of a common policy framework creates internal contradiction, especially around such issues as federalism, economic policy and identity politics weakening long-term viability of the coalition.

Leadership Deficit and Intra-Opposition Competition: Good coalition politics involves having an established leadership system that is capable of mobilizing a variety of actors. Nevertheless, with the weakening of the Indian National Congress as a hegemonic opposition party, there has been a vacuum of leadership in the country. Without a central coordinating structure, there is growing competition among regional leaders with regard to the national prominence. This type of intra-opposition also creates coordination issues and destabilizes trust between the partners of the alliance. This has led to the fact that leadership is not institutionalized but one that is contested hence weakening the power of collective politics.

Political Asymmetry in the Region: The political system of India is a federal system which has helped to rise powerful regional parties that have territorial based support. Other parties

like the All India Trinamool Congress or the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam are banked on their strength of state-level dominance which in most cases comes first ahead of national coalition. This imbalance of political interests produces conflicts in opposition coalitions, since regional forces do not want to give political space to the national parties. This leads to unequal and geographically disparate coalition-building.

The Electoral Incentives and Strategic Competition: The first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system of India makes the unity of opposition even more complicated by the institutional logic of the first-past-the-post. Although the system encourages pre-electoral alliances to prevent vote splitting, opposition parties often have mutual electoral competition, especially at the state level. Such two-level dynamics competition in the state level and cooperation in the national level create inconsistencies in strategy and diminish credibility. The negotiations on seat sharing, which is an important aspect of forming a coalition, is a highly disputed issue since parties focus on achieving their personal electoral interests. The result of this is unstable alliances, which could break even prior to electoral contests.

Individualization of Politics and Single Point Leadership:

Lastly, the growing individualization of political contesting has shifted the meaning of the electoral mobilization in India. The politics of today are becoming more about the personal leaders as opposed to party associations or ideological agendas. This has been to the advantage of centralized parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party who portray unified leadership at the national front. Opposition alliances on the other hand find it difficult to have a single leadership face. The proliferation of leaders in opposition groups reinforces internal tensions and hinders the ability to make decisions collectively hence limiting the institutionalization of long-term coalitions.

Case Illustrations: It is the structural limitations that hinder the unity of opposition that is most noticeable when one looks at state-based political party where the competition to elect is the most intense and most fractured.

Over the last ten years there has been a radical change in opposition politics, with the departure of a multi-cornered struggle in West Bengal towards a more two-polar struggle with the All India trinamool Congress (AITC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The 2021 Assembly elections further showed that the AITC took 213 seats out of 294 seats against the BJP that came out as the main opposition and secured 77 seats. In comparison, the Indian National Congress and the left-wing parties were almost marginalised as they did not get any seats on account of their alliance. This result explains the power of opposition disunity and underdeveloped vote transfer systems that may cause electoral marginalisation even within alliances.

The same trend is evident in the largest electoral state, Uttar Pradesh in India. The Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party (SP- BSP) alliance made an effort to unite the opposition votes against the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The

alliance received 15 seats out of the 80, and BJP received 62 seats. The poor performance of this coalition highlights the problems of poor transferability of votes, lack of organisational links, and lack of a common political narrative.

The examples of these cases demonstrate a larger structural trend: the opposition coalitions in India are often short-term, reactionary electoral unions but not institutionally anchored. Instead of basing their formation on long-term programmatic congruence, they are guided by short-term election motives, compromising their viability and success.

Implications for Democratic Governance

The collapse of the opposition politics has far-reaching consequences on the dynamics of functioning of the democratic governance in India. In parliamentary systems, a common opposition is essential to achieving executive accountability, stringent legislative examination and transcription of opposing policy systems. On the other hand, the performance of the opposition parties is significantly reduced when they are divided. There is empirical evidence of this phenomenon in the decline of opposition numerical strength in Parliament. As an illustration, the Indian National Congress obtained no fewer than 52 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha, which is below the 100 percent thresholds (55 seats) to be recognized as an opposition party. This institutional weakness limits the participation of the opposition in the important parliamentary processes of committee control and agenda-setting roles.

Moreover, the disintegration of opposition politics is also a factor towards the decline of quality of democratic deliberation. Parliamentary arguments can be less argumentative, and policy options can be given watered down consideration. Even though the institutional framework of the electoral democracy has not been altered, its asymmetry between the ruling and the opposition forces, makes the issue of the depth and strength of the accountability framework a valid concern. At the same time, as long as there are several political parties in the regional settings, it means that political pluralism does persist. The major issue to be considered is not, however, the very presence of an opposition but its failure to convert numerical diversity into a coherent political action.

Prospects of Opposition Politics in India.

Even within the conditions of structural limitations, the opposition politics in India is not inert. The changing electoral competition is still undergoing political realignment, change in voter preferences, economic changes, and social mobilisations. Opposition parties need to improve their performance by implementing a number of structural changes. The first one is that it should develop a consistent ideological line or common minimum programme in order to achieve programmatic unity beyond electoral expediency. Second, institutional structures of managing the coalitions, such as clear seat-sharing arrangements and conflict-resolution systems need to be reinforced. Three, a consensual leadership system might also be a solution to intra-alliance rivalry and better strategic alignment. The establishment of coalitions as in the INDIA

Alliance is a significant, though dynamic, effort to institutionalise cooperation on opposition at the national level. But the viability of this in the long term will be determined by how well constituent parties can overcome regional and ideological divides in favors of long-term collective action.

Overall, although the current trend is an indication of the continuation of fragmentation, the future of the opposition politics in India will ultimately be determined by the ability of the political actors to reshape episodic alliances to become permanent and institutionalised coalitions to reinstate the balance of competition within the democratic system.

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