

Managing the United Progressive Alliance The Challenges Ahead

The United Progressive Alliance has completed one year. Although all the UPA's constituents share political responsibility for its performance the Congress' balance of power within the coalition justifies its greater burden. However, over the past one year, its attempts to turn the terms of power to its advantage have produced many damaging results. This article is an analytical review of the UPA's electoral strategies and economic policies of the past 12 months which reveals the risks that lie ahead if the Congress and its allies do not change course.

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It has been one year since the formation of the 14-party United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Stitched together by the Congress after the stunning political verdict of the 14th general election, the UPA represented a significant moment in contemporary Indian politics, and generated many expectations. The appointment of Manmohan Singh as India's 14th prime minister received strong endorsement within the coalition. The relatively smooth induction of the UPA's council of ministers with many experienced policy hands, inspired political confidence. The National Common Minimum Programme (NCMP) pledged, amongst other things, to repair the fabric of secularism, continue bilateral negotiations with Pakistan and achieve 'growth with a human face'. Although a minority coalition government, the Congress' disproportionate weight within the UPA provided an anchor that eluded previous non-BJP coalitions at the centre. Perhaps most importantly, the Left Front's decision to extend outside support to the government over a full parliamentary term furnished the stability that would be necessary to meet these historic imperatives.

Nevertheless, most commentators agreed that it faced steep political challenges. The first was the enormity and complexity of the NCMP's agenda: reaching a settlement with Pakistan, and expanding the gains of liberalisation to many disadvantaged sections, would depend on many factors beyond the intentions and control of ministers in New Delhi. The second challenge was that conflicts of interest within the newly formed coalition, cutting across many issues and multiple cleavages, threatened to undermine or derail its plans. Both factors were clearly important. Precisely for these reasons, however, it was striking that relatively few observers asked the question: could the Congress run an effective multiparty government?¹ For the capacity of the UPA to maintain political unity and further its agenda depended, from the start, on how well its leaders managed the coalition amidst the various conflicting interests that could jeopardise its functioning – a crucial factor highlighted by the history of India's coalition politics yet underestimated in media commentary one year ago.

Coalition Politics

To be fair, the omission extends more widely. Indeed, the existing scholarly literature on coalition politics evades such questions.² In general, its leading exponents give primary importance to the constellation of interests within a coalition and the formal political structures in which they seek to realise their respective goals. Standard coalition theories define the main political actors as disciplined party organisations. Parties enter coalitions to satisfy three principle interests: to win office for their members, influence policy agendas that serve their constituencies or secure votes in order to achieve the preceding two objectives.³ Most conventional accounts cast these purposes in mutually exclusive terms, and see them as the clearly defined, fixed and exogenous goals of fully rational agents.⁴ In other words, parties are completely aware of what they want to achieve before entering coalition negotiations. What determine the actions of parties beyond these interests and their relative strength in the legislature are formal political institutions, which generate particular incentives. To attract considerable scholarly attention: the rules of the electoral regime, which affect the degree of polarisation and number of parties in this system, and constitutional provisions regulating the investiture and termination of governments.⁵ The rules, procedures and structures that comprise these institutions set the terms for what kinds of coalitions are likely to form, how much difficulty they are expected to meet and whether they can last. Two findings emerge: parties that share convergent policy goals are most likely to form coalitions;⁶ and large diverse coalitions that fail to devise explicit pacts to accommodate their differences are most vulnerable to the impact of sudden critical events that trigger their demise.⁷ Hence, the greater the number of parties within a coalition or in parliament, and the wider the degree of polarisation between their interests, the greater the probability that parties encounter difficulties in forming and sustaining coalitions.

These conventional accounts suggest interesting perspectives and raise important concerns. The desire for office, control over policy and search for votes capture the interests of most parties

and comprise significant incentives in actual coalition bargaining. In addition, particular institutional arrangements shape collective outcomes and influence political agents' strategies in critical ways. Standard coalition theories primarily analyse western coalition experience. Yet they reflect many concerns that inform the debate in India. For these reasons, considerable recent scholarship on India's coalition politics critically engages with the existing scholarly genre.⁸

Many of the inferences drawn by these formal theoretical models are mundane, however. Claiming that large diverse coalitions are harder to govern than small coherent alliances, and saying that the former are prone to collapse, does not require much theoretical reflection. Indeed, these 'findings' have a tautological quality. Moreover, by overdetermining outcomes, standard theoretical models fail to explain why apparently unwieldy coalitions survive. The second term of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA: 1999-2004), which saw the BJP-led coalition survive in office after the anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat, despite the presence of secular regional parties in the coalition, is a case in point.⁹ The reason for these commissions and omissions is relatively straightforward. Guided by the belief that valid political explanations are general in principle, the majority of scholars in the existing political theories employ concepts, theories and methods that are applicable to, and account for, the largest possible number of cases. But their desire for conceptual parsimony, theoretical consistency and empirical range is not without significant intellectual cost. It tends to produce wooden analytical tools that fail to illuminate the puzzle that stands in need of explanation.¹⁰ Consequently, it is unsurprising that these scholars admit that what goes on inside coalition governments remains a mystery in standard theoretical accounts.¹¹ They either fail to tackle the question or address it in an exceedingly abstract way.

In fact, these conventional accounts belie our practical everyday intuitions. In reality, parties consist of factions within and between their parliamentary and organisational wings. These political divisions, not to mention party leaders, deserve analytical primacy in our enquiries.¹² Furthermore, making heroic assumptions about human rationality impedes political understanding. Human agents' interests are frequently indeterminate, fluid and shaped by the struggles, negotiations and exigencies of politics itself. These general considerations are exceptionally significant in any domain, such as politics, where intersubjective human goals are not always known in advance.¹³ The goals of parties, factions and their respective leaders may switch between office, policy and votes over time – during coalition formation, after government inauguration and between elections.¹⁴ By overstating the polarity between these goals, formal theories disregard real-world politics. Lastly, formal political institutions certainly shape collective outcomes. They also constitute the domain in which political agents define, articulate and pursue their interests, and provide incentives for action. Yet it is important not to endow these structures with deterministic properties. Pre-existing institutional configurations do not formulate, negotiate and enforce formal coalition pacts or run coalition governments – political agents do. Put more generally, how political agents' react to incentives generated by formal political institutions is frequently underdetermined.

Consequently, the impact of conflicts of interest within any coalition partly depends on how they unfold over time. In addition to analysing possible shifts in the constellation of interests and the effects of particular institutional arrangements at different junctures, we need to examine several other factors to determine the dynamics of particular coalition governments: whether sufficient

political trust exists or can be created amongst key coalition partners to share power genuinely; whether mechanisms are designed and utilised to facilitate collective decision-making; and whether its leaders possess or can develop the necessary political judgment to broker practical compromises amongst divergent interests. In short, we must examine how political leaders exercise power, the purposes of such power serves and the coherence of their decisions.

How well has the Congress, the fulcrum of the UPA, fared on these counts? Has the party, whose conduct vis-à-vis previous coalition experiments at the centre attracted much criticism and which resisted the necessity of federal coalition politics until very recently, changed its outlook? Does its first year at the helm provide insights into possible futures? Although all the UPA's constituents share political responsibility for its performance, the Congress' balance of power within the coalition justifies its greater burden. Moreover, over the last year its attempts to turn the terms of power to its advantage have produced many damaging results. An analytical review of the UPA's electoral strategies and economic policies of the past 12 months reveals the risks that lie ahead if the Congress and its allies do not change course.

Legacies of Distrust and Future Political Ambitions

As is now widely known, national electoral verdicts in recent years have reflected an aggregation of state-based outcomes in which the two main parties or blocs contesting for power vary across different regions. The amalgamation of these multiple state-level bipolarities results in what party system analysts call 'parliamentary fragmentation'.¹⁵ The presumed negative consequences of this state of affairs, in which the proliferation of smaller regional parties with narrow sectional interests damages wider political ends, predominates metropolitan discourse. Yet these criticisms, while sometimes true, neglect the historic failure of parties acting in the ostensible national good to represent the interests of various subaltern classes. They also obscure transformative democratic processes – such as the greater electoral participation and increasingly direct self-representation of historically subordinate groups – that underlie 'fragmentation'.¹⁶

However, we assess the latter, the unpredictability and intensity of competition witnessed in India's party system since 1989 has compelled parties to broker pre- and post-electoral alliances with their erstwhile political adversaries. Apart from their partisan differences, the disproportionate swings caused by India's plurality rule – or first-past-the-post (FPTP) – electoral regime, combined with the sequestering logic of federalism, which makes it difficult for parties facing disparate rivals in different regions to build durable national fronts, means few governing coalitions remain intact.¹⁷ Short-term advantages trump long-term perspectives. As a result, the level of trust between parties in federal coalition governments is often tenuous.

In this regard, the UPA confronted a legacy of distrust bequeathed by the failure of previous multiparty administrations at the centre – the Janata Party (1977-79), National Front (NF: 1989-91) and United Front (UF: 1996-98). All three coalitions encompassed a range of parties, some of whose successors are in the UPA, that suffered from conflicts of interest, personality clashes and political inexperience. In particular, rival personal ambitions within the core Janata alignment over high political office, and struggles between distinct social interests, destabilised the first two experiments. The clashes between Moraji Desai and Charan Singh in the Janata Party, and V P Singh, Devi Lal and Chandrasekhar in the then Janata Dal, are well known.

However, the Congress also played a role in deposing the minority breakaway factions that temporarily assumed office during both interludes. Indira Gandhi unseated Charan Singh after helping to engineer the Janata's downfall. Rajiv Gandhi undermined the brief prime ministership of Chandrasekhar following the BJP's withdrawal of support to the NF after the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations. The Congress brought down the UF too, on the pretext of the interim Jain Commission Report, whose dubious findings implicated the Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (DMK) in the assassination of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi. Some might contend that Congress had no option in these instances. The antagonism between the party and its rivals was genuine and mutual; it was unrealistic to expect any party in such circumstances to remain passive. There is some truth to this claim. Yet the decision to topple these three administrations also exposed the Congress' desire to reclaim union power for its own sake. Perhaps as importantly, it demonstrated the party's belief that it should govern India alone.

Signs of change eventually occurred. The BJP's success in forging ruling coalitions after 1998 forced the Congress to emulate its main electoral competitor at the centre. This was partly due to India's FPTP electoral regime. By disproportionately magnifying and reducing vote-seat ratios, a FPTP electoral system create strong incentives for parties in a fragmented party system to strike coalition pacts.¹⁸ The dramatic political transformations in India's democracy in the 1990s, which saw the rise of regional, Communist and lower caste-based parties in relation to national political formations, created a new strategic configuration at the centre. The BJP responded to these incentives in the run-up to the twelfth general election in March 1998, following its 13-day fiasco in May 1996, by moderating its official political agenda to lure necessary regional allies. The Congress Party declined to adopt a similar course of action. But its eight years in opposition finally convinced the party to change tack in the run-up to the 2004 general election. Its willingness to enter varying political alliances – deferring to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Jammu and Kashmir, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar and DMK in Tamil Nadu, while leading the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra and Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) in Andhra Pradesh – indicated political learning.¹⁹

Moreover, the party deftly refused to name Sonia Gandhi as its prime ministerial candidate during the campaign and suggested – whilst retaining final political authority over the decision – that it was willing to discuss the issues with its allies after the verdict. The subsequent appointment of Manmohan Singh, following Sonia Gandhi's decision to use the post in the face of the BJP's xenophobic attacks against her, not only robbed the latter of its immediate rallying cry. It also allowed the NCP, and to a lesser extent the DMK, to join the government – both handsomely rewarded in terms of cabinet posts – without losing political face over past imbroglios. Sonia Gandhi's decision made it easier for the NCP to overlook its earlier opposition to her prime ministerial candidacy. The NCP's poor showing in the 1999 general election, acquisition of the agricultural portfolio in the new UPA ministry and anxiety over the upcoming October 2004 state assembly polls in Maharashtra no doubt helped, too. Promising the DMK that it would repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) and grant Tamil the status of a classical language, and awarding the party seven cabinet berths, helped mend inter-party relations after the debacle over the Jain Commission Report in 1998. These decisions improved political confidence.

Has the Congress developed further trust amongst its allies since then, however? Has it viewed the UPA as a durable coalition strategy to challenge a BJP-led alliance into the future? Or does it appear to be a makeshift electoral arrangement subject to expediency? The Congress' manoeuvres over the last year indicate the latter and demonstrate its aspirations of regaining political ascendancy. These manoeuvres began in June 2004 after it charged the Samajwadi Party (SP) for allowing disorder to spread in Uttar Pradesh. Granted, the hostility between the two parties was mutual. Mulayam Singh Yadav, who scuttled Sonia Gandhi's bid for power in April 1999 following the collapse of the first NDA administration, expressed his ire at being neglected during the formation of the UPA and the drafting of the NCMP. Neither party sought to cooperate during the 2004 campaign or after the verdict was declared. Yet seeking to dislodge the SP from its bastion, by trying to cut a deal with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and luring away the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), was an ill-conceived mission. The Congress' own lack of strength in the state made it daunting political task. Moreover, it created friction within the UPA by antagonising the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). In the event, the SP's decisive victory in October 13, 2004 by-elections spoiled the plot.²⁰ The Congress was unable to break the SP-RLD pact, which Mulayam Yadav skilfully consolidated. Moreover, its overtures to the BSP generated a backlash in Maharashtra, where the NCP's tie-up with the Republican Party of India (RPI) against the BSP militated against an alliance with the latter in UP. In short, the Congress was unable to devise a wider coalition strategy that encompassed both states.

To some extent, the Congress' actions in the Maharashtra assembly polls in October 2004 asserted its interests while accommodating others.²¹ Its claim on the chief ministership, despite capturing fewer seats than the NCP, betrayed its ambitions. Appointing Vilasrao Deshmukh as chief minister, whose rivalry with Sharad Pawar would counter the latter's authority in the state, further confirmed them. True, the Congress placated Pawar by granting the NCP various ministerial posts, including the deputy chief ministership. The NCP leader was also keen on this occasion to avoid factional tussles within his party over the chief minister's post. Thus the Congress handled these rival political claims rather well. The negotiations in Maharashtra also signalled, however, that its new power-sharing disposition was dictated by immediate political exigencies rather than longer-term commitments.

The Congress' stratagems in the subsequent assembly elections in Bihar and Jharkhand illustrated this dramatically. The party eventually supported Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) in Bihar against Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD after negotiations with the latter broke down. Yet the decision also found support amongst state-level Congress functionaries keen to overturn the Rabri Devi administration.²² The plan backfired. The Congress' ability to wean away upper caste votes from the BJP required a direct political attack on Lalu Yadav – a stance that was impossible to take given his presence in the union cabinet and effective parliamentary veto over the UPA. The party high command, which issued an appeal before the last electoral round for a mid-course tactical adjustment, so as not to split the vote in the remaining assembly seats, realised its mistake too late. The imposition of president's rule in Bihar in March 2005 suited the interests of Ram Vilas Paswan, whose LJP successfully attracted a segment of disillusioned Muslim voters from the RJD, denting its traditional yadav-Muslim vote base. Yet the outcome also allowed the Janata Dal (United)-BJP alliance to make political gains, fomented greater discord in the UPA and damaged the credibility of

the Congress leadership. Whether the latter can now craft a wider coalition strategy for the UPA, in the wake of the government's recent decision to hold new assembly polls within the next six months, and Lalu Yadav's readiness to cooperate, remains to be seen.

The outcome in Jharkhand was worse. The Congress' unilateral decision to enter an electoral alliance with the JMM, without consulting the RJD or LF, was a political blunder foretold. Even here, the Congress was reluctant to contest fewer seats than the JMM and only later acquiesced after intervention from the party high command. The ensuing 'friendly contests' between the UPA's constituent parties, in approximately 90 per cent of the state, split their votes and allowed a deeply unpopular and factionally divided BJP administration to remain competitive.²³ Whether the Congress high command pressured the controversial political decision by governor Syed Sibtey Rizvi to invite the JMM to form the government, even though its command of a legislative majority was questionable, still generates debate. Yet the manner in which the BJP outflanked the UPA in securing the support – albeit through suggestions of bribery and coercion – of various independent MLAs in the crucial intervening period, enabling it to form the government, revealed the UPA's flat-footedness.

In sum, the Congress' strategy in these assembly elections – in contrast to Haryana where it swept to office in February 2004 – illustrated its traditional reflexes and poor strategic judgment. As one senior party functionary reportedly said, "It should be made known to these regional parties that they need us more than we need them".²⁴ Yet the opposite proved to be true. The Congress' appetite for reclaiming a foothold in important northern states where it is weak is understandable. Yet it is one thing for the Congress to secure greater representation in various states and another to assume its right to dominate. Moreover, seeking to recover its position by playing off its formal allies has proven disastrous. State-based parties increasingly wish to exercise power at the centre as well as in the regions. The old formula of 'you can run the centre, let us control the state' is no longer possible in an era of ascendant regional power.²⁵ Yet a new principle still needs to be found. Hence, the imperative that faces the UPA – to devise a durable coalition strategy based on genuine power-sharing between the Congress and its state-based partners, and amongst them in turn. Without such a plan, relations between the main constituent parties will remain precarious, with self-destructive consequences.

Mechanisms of Collective Decision-Making

Running a coalition requires party leaders to adjudicate competing demands and make binding decisions. It presumes mechanisms that channel decision-making and delineate where power and accountability lie. In theory, the council of ministers is the formal political locus of these functions in a parliamentary democracy. Its decisions represent collective responsibility. Effective cabinet functioning also requires the full participation of its constituents, the building of consensus over difficult policy issues and self-imposed discipline to stand by collective decisions. Disciplined single-party cabinets, capable of exercising the party whip to enforce norms of loyalty, are more likely to demonstrate such unity. Forging political agreement in large multiparty governments is more difficult – the problems of enforcement are multiplied while the loyalties of ministers are diverse.²⁶ What ameliorates these difficulties is that multiparty cabinet governments also induce power-sharing by compelling the largest party to distribute cabinet posts amongst its allies, and to formulate official policy

consensus, in order to retain their confidence in parliament.²⁷ What complicates them, as the Indian experience illustrates, is the presence of external power centres: either individuals that wield political authority in a party or parties that provide critical outside support to the government yet refuse to join the cabinet.

How has the UPA functioned in this regard? Several issues arise. The first concerns Manmohan Singh's authority as prime minister and his relationship with Sonia Gandhi as Congress Party leader. The earlier concern that prime minister Singh would lack sufficient political autonomy looks misplaced. A respected economist with unsurpassed technocratic experience and a reputation for probity, he enjoys growing respect in his party and amongst most allies. True, his lack of an independent power base makes him acceptable to the regional party bosses and other Congress aspirants. Yet the prime minister's control over the array of powers at his disposal has bolstered his standing as many expected.²⁸ More importantly, his political relationship with Sonia Gandhi, who retains ultimate authority over the Congress, resembles a division of labour. Her appointment as chairperson of the National Advisory Council (NAC) and UPA Coordination Committee, the bodies in charge of overseeing the NCMP and relations between allies, granted her official cabinet status but formalised a subsidiary role. Indeed, the advisory function of the NAC, whose recommendations influence but do not determine official government policy, causes dismay to its proponents and attests to this political reality. The separation of her sphere of influence to directly party-related matters has allowed the government to contain the BJP's line of attack against her influence. Rumours of strains between the prime minister and Congress Party leader, instigated by courtiers of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, reveal the aspirations of the latter more than anything else. But as long as Sonia Gandhi maintains good relations with Manmohan Singh, and continues to host party-government meetings of the 'Friday core group',²⁹ such intrigues will be immaterial.

In contrast, the far more important site of political communication and collective decision-making for the UPA has always concerned Congress-LF relations. Afraid that it would be unable to exercise sufficient control over economic policy, the CPM central committee voted against government participation; other Left allies followed suit. In the beginning their external parliamentary support to the government appeared to be solid. The party had supported the Congress through indirect electoral alliances in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, despite contesting them directly in West Bengal and Kerala, in order to vanquish the NDA in the 2004 general campaign. The CPM furthered its commitment to the UPA by allowing Somnath Chatterjee to assume the post of speaker in parliament. In return for this support, the Congress agreed to protect existing labour regulations, review the 2003 Electricity Act, which separated the generation and transmission functions of state electricity boards, and generally to desist from privatising profit-making public sector enterprises (PSEs) by enshrining these commitments in the NCMP. The willingness of both sides to compromise on these issues augured well in May 2004.

Nonetheless, difficulties were foreseeable even one year ago. It was telling that the first basic principle of the NCMP was a "strong and stable government dedicated to promoting social harmony and peace".³⁰ The NCMP announced grand pledges of rapid pro-poor development: higher public investment in education, health and infrastructure, and employment for the urban and rural poor. Yet, agreement on the ends of policy does not eliminate disagreements over the means – the hard choices over fiscal policy and the details of policy implementation. If the

NCMP's silence on these questions allowed room for flexibility, it also foreshadowed a potential backlash by the LF against the strategies and tactics formulated by the Congress-dominated economic ministries in pursuing their respective concerns.

The government's introduction of various economic measures has created mounting dissatisfaction in the Left.³¹ The Planning Commission chairman's decision to invite World Bank representatives to participate in consultative review committees of the Tenth Plan earned the ire of various Left economists and forced their dissolution. The interest rate cut to the Employees Provident Fund, rather than the requested increase, generated Left protest. The decision to raise the foreign direct investment (FDI) cap in the insurance, telecommunications and civil aviation sectors rankled its leaders as well. What is common to all these decisions, notwithstanding the particularities of each, is the lack of consultation between the government and the LF. To be sure, finance minister Chidambaram increased social development outlays in the 2005 union budget. Yet the overconfident fiscal estimates it relies upon does not bode well.³² Added to this has been the dilution to programmes dear to the Left – such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Bill and the Right to Information Bill – which has exacerbated their frustration. According to a senior LF leader, the Congress

believe[s] that this is not a coalition government but a government run by the Congress Party alone. They will have to come out of this mindset and internalise the coalition dharma, otherwise they will invite trouble for themselves.³³

Nobody believes the Left will topple the UPA. The first imperative is to keep the BJP out of power. The LF's own pursuit of liberalisation in the states, compelled by the logic of economic competition in a federal political system, also makes its declarations at the centre more problematic.³⁴ In fact, its current predicament forces a re-examination of whether its consistent long-standing policy to support from outside enhances its interests or leaves it stranded between government and opposition. Arguably, the Congress' steady advance of its preferred economic reforms has altered the terms of power vis-à-vis the Left and shown the importance of formal ministerial participation. The coherence of the LF's strategy, and the conception of politics underlying it, requires serious re-evaluation.³⁵

Yet the LF's present quandary should not blind the Congress to larger political realities. Although many still dispute the meaning and causes of the May 2004 verdict, the view that it represented a protest against rising social inequalities – amongst groups, between city and countryside, across regions – reflects the evidence.³⁶ Failure to address these concerns will allow the Left to protest and undermine the credibility of the government. And even if the Congress wins these battles, its own electoral fortunes depend on redressing the inequities of liberalisation, which oriented the party's general electoral platform in 2004. For these reasons, the Constitution, status and functioning of the Coordination Committee is of paramount importance. How often does it meet? Who can convene its meetings? What is its standing vis-à-vis the council of ministers in terms of policy formulation and decision-making? These matters are not insurmountable but they require pressing attention. Specifying the rules of engagement cannot dissolve ultimate differences. Yet, it can soften non-fundamental positions and supply various accommodations. Hence, the need to institutionalise procedures and mechanisms of consultation and decision-making as opposed to making public appeals to the NCMP and engaging in ad hoc discussions when circumstances demand.³⁷ Otherwise, we can expect a replay of

the UF, where damaging public debates over the locus of authority slowed policy decisions, depleted political trust and sapped the energies of government.

Skilled Political Judgment

As Manmohan Singh declared upon taking office, "life is never free of contradictions...we will have to find a practical way".³⁸ By definition, politics is a field of strategic, normative and practical action framed by conditions of uncertainty in which different agents seek to realise various ends.³⁹ It requires skilled political judgment to traverse such difficult terrain. In general, good political judgment entails foresight, a synthetic causal understanding of how things work, and imagination. It refers to the capacity to get things done: to realise the foreseeable political consequences of actions; to grasp the unique texture of elements that constitute particular situations in order to know what one can do, and what one cannot; and to improvise when courses of action do not go according to plan.⁴⁰ As with all practical skills, the best way to acquire good political judgment is through politics itself.

Governing a diverse multiparty government involves numerous challenges. The Congress' inexperience has been a liability. But it is not insurmountable – these are still early days. What is far less apparent is whether it can fashion a larger political bargain to manage or transform the array of interests within the UPA. Its capacity to do so presumes a willingness to share power better and govern more collectively. For this reason, the Congress must extend its political time horizon: a considerable amount rides on how the party imagines its future. A crucial imperative is renewing the party's organisational strength on the ground.⁴¹ Yet party building – the recruitment of party workers, reform of internal organisational procedures and development of links with state officials and social organisations over specific geographical domains – typically entails conflict. There are risks of the Congress strengthening its base in regions where its allies seek to do the same. Developing a powerful counter-bloc against the BJP requires the Congress to develop with its allies common political strategies that can mobilise the poor and distribute the gains of development more widely over the long-term.⁴²

The danger of complacency is all too real. The fortunes of the BJP, still in disarray after its stunning electoral defeat, appear diminished for the moment. A return to militant Hindu nationalism, which many in the Sangh parivar currently advocate, would hasten its decline at the national level. Barring such self-inflicted wounds, however, it would be a mistake to underestimate the party's capacity to regroup; the allure of Hindutva to sections of the electorate should not be ignored, either. The national vote share for the BJP in 2004, at approximately 22 per cent, provides a base for recovery. History demonstrates the party's capacity to oscillate between mobilising for power along militant ethno-religious lines and striking moderate coalitions based on populist appeals.⁴³ Failure to deliver on its promises, the appearance of drift, dissension from within: all of these constitute real political threats to the UPA.

The unexpected electoral verdict of May 14, 2004, bestowed an historic opportunity to restore the fabric of secularism, extend the benefits of development and secure a just peace in Kashmir and between India and Pakistan. Realising these imperatives will not be easy. But to have a chance the Congress must improve how it governs the UPA and extend its vision of the future. ■

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Notes

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- 1 For a recent analysis, see Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Congress in Coalition', *Seminar* 545 (January 2005).
- 2 A classic exception, which preceded the literature discussed below, is Arend Lijphart, *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands* (University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1968). For a game-theoretic analysis of how governments function, see Ian Budge and Hans Keman, *Parties and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990). For an analysis that focuses on political leaders' abilities in India's coalition politics, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, *Strategy, Risk and Personality in Coalition Politics: The Case of India* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1975). Most coalition analyses, however, discount the role of individual political skills in explaining why coalitions endure. A widely cited example is Gregory M Luebbert, *Comparative Democracy: Policy-making and Governing Coalitions in Europe and Israel* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1986).
- 3 Seminal works of power-maximisation theories include William H Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1962); William Gamson, 'A Theory of Coalition Formation', *American Sociological Review*, (26) 1961; and Lawrence C Dodd, *Coalitions in Parliamentary Government* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1976). Seminal works of policy-realisation theories include Robert Axelrod, *Conflict of Interest: A Theory of Divergent Goals with Applications to Politics* (Markham Publishing Company, Chicago, 1970); and Abram de Swann, *Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations: A Study of Formal Theories of Coalition Formation Applied to Nine European Parliaments after 1918* (Elsevier Scientific Publishing Company, New York, 1973). The seminal work of vote-seeking theory is Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (Harper, New York, 1957).
- 4 See Wolfgang C Müller and Kaare Strom (eds), *Policy, Office or Votes? How Political Parties in Western Europe Make Hard Decisions* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999).
- 5 The following draws on Michael Laver and Normal Schofield, *Multiparty Government: The Politics of Coalition in Europe* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990), pp 200-14.
- 6 See Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracies* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999), p 97.
- 7 See Gary King, James Alt, Nancy Burns and Michael Laver, 'A Unified Model of Cabinet Dissolution in Parliamentary Democracies', *American Journal of Political Science*, 34 (3) August 1990: pp 846-71.
- 8 See for instance, E Sridharan, 'Principles, Power and Coalition Politics in India: Lessons from Theory, Comparison and Recent History' in D D Khanna and Gert Keuck (eds), *Principles, Power and Politics* (Macmillan, Delhi, 1999); Akhtar Majeed (ed), *Coalition Politics and Power Sharing* (Manak Publications, New Delhi, 2000); and Balveer Arora, 'Negotiating Differences' in Francine R Frankel, Zoya Hasan, Rajeev Bhargava and Balveer Arora (eds), *Transforming India* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000), pp 176-207. In contrast, investigations of India's coalition politics in the 1960s and 1970s comprised inductive case-study analyses of state-level coalitions. Scholars framed these analyses within the literature on Indian politics that followed the critical elections of 1967. Examples include Manju Verma, *The Coalition Ministries in Punjab* (Shivalik Printing House, Patiala, 1978); Sachchidanand Sinha, *Coalition in Politics: The New Challenge* (Surendra Kumar M/s Marat Prakashan, Mazaffarpur, 1987); and E J Thomas, *Coalition Game Politics in Kerala* (Intellectual Publishing House, New Delhi, 1985).
- 9 I explain why in a forthcoming article, 'Rethinking Institutional Theories of Political Moderation: the Case of Hindu Nationalism, 1996-2004', *Comparative Politics*.
- 10 See Ian Shapiro, 'Problems, Methods and Theories in the Study of Politics, or: What's Wrong with Political Science and What to Do About It', *Political Theory*, 30 (4) August 2002: pp 596-620.
- 11 Laver and Schofield, *Multiparty Government*, p 215.
- 12 Exceptions in the existing scholarly literature include Moshe Maor, *Parties, Conflicts and Coalitions in Western Europe* (London: Routledge/LSE, 1998), who argues that decentralised party structures, which possess mechanisms to neutralise internal dissent, are more likely to produce stable coalitions; Michael Laver and Kenneth A Shepsle (eds), *Cabinet Ministers and Parliamentary Government* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), which examines the role of cabinet ministers; and Wolfgang C Müller and Kaare Strom (eds), *Policy, Office or Votes?* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), which analyses party leaders' decisions.
- 13 Raymond Guess, *History and Illusion in Politics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), pp 22-26.
- 14 In-depth case studies, in contrast to deductive theoretic models, are more likely to recognise this fact. See the essays in Geoffrey Pridham (ed), *Coalition Behaviour in Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986).
- 15 See Peter Mair, *Party System Change: Approaches and Interpretations*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997).
- 16 Yogendra Yadav, 'The Third Electoral System', *Seminar* 480, (August 1999): pp 14-20.
- 17 For an analysis of the FPTP electoral regime's various consequences for Indian coalition politics, see Sridharan, 'Principles, Power and Coalition Politics in India', op cit, ff 278.
- 18 Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracies*, pp 165-57.
- 19 Few coalition theorists pay attention to the importance of learning. See Pridham, 'An Inductive Theoretical Framework for Coalitional Behaviour' in his edited volume, *Coalition Behaviour in Theory and Practice*, op cit, p 5.
- 20 See Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, 'The Race for Bronze', *Frontline* (October 23, 2004).
- 21 See Lyla Bavadam, 'A Tussle in the Alliance', *Frontline* (November 6, 2004).
- 22 Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, 'Friends as Foes', *Frontline* (January 29, 2005).
- 23 Purnima S Tripathi, 'Advantage Opposition', *Frontline* (January 29, 2005).
- 24 Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, 'The Wages of Disunity', *Frontline* (March 12, 2005).
- 25 K K Katyal, 'The Making of Coalitions', *The Hindu* (May 3, 2004).
- 26 For a critical earlier appraisal, see Lloyd I and Susanne Hoebler Rudolph, *In Pursuit of Lakshmi* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987), pp 95-98. Despite their criticisms, however, the authors clearly defend parliamentary government. They also examine its suitability for federal coalition politics in India today in their essay, 'Redoing the Constitutional Design: From an Interventionist to a Regulatory State' in Atul Kohli (ed), *The Success of India's Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001), pp 127-63.
- 27 See Juan J Linz, 'The Perils of Presidentialism' and 'The Virtues of Parliamentarism' in Larry Diamond and Marc F Plattner (eds), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy*, Second Edition (The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996), pp 124-43 and 154-62, respectively; Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracies*, pp 117-18.
- 28 Rajni Kothari, 'The Idea of Congress', *The Indian Express* (May 14, 2004).
- 29 Harish Khare, 'After the Jharkhand Mess', *The Hindu* (March 17, 2005).
- 30 The Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance.
- 31 Purnima S Tripathi, 'A Performance Deficit', *Frontline* (September 11-24, 2004).
- 32 See various articles in *Frontline* (March 12, 2005).
- 33 Purnima S Tripathi, 'A Performance Deficit', *Frontline* (September 25, 2004).
- 34 See Lloyd I and Susanne Hoebler Rudolph, 'Iconisation of Chandrababu: Sharing Sovereignty in India's Federal Market Economy', *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 5, 2001); and Aseema Sinha, 'The Changing Political Economy of Federalism in India: A Historical Institutional Approach', *India Review* 3 (1), January 2004.
- 35 See for instance Aditya Nigam, 'Logic of Failed Revolution', *Economic and Political Weekly* (February 4, 2000) and Sumanta Banerjee, 'Hobson's Choice for Indian Communists', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (May 7, 2005).
- 36 For instance, see Angus Deaton and Jean Dreze, 'Poverty and Inequality in India: a Reexamination', *Economic and Political Weekly*, (September 7, 2002), pp 3729-48.
- 37 See also Khare, 'After the Jharkhand Mess', op cit.
- 38 K V Prasad, 'UPA, Left Parties Release CMP', *The Hindu* (May 28, 2004).
- 39 See Geoffrey Hawthorn, *Plausible Worlds: Possibility and Understanding in History and the Social Sciences*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), and John Dunn, *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics*, (HarperCollins, London, 2001).
- 40 Isaiah Berlin, 'Political Judgment' in his *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and Their History* (Pimlico, London, 1997), pp 40-54.
- 41 Harish Khare, 'Opportunities before Sonia Gandhi', *The Hindu* (May 25, 2005). For an overview of the Congress' organisational prospects, see the essays by James Manor, Harish Khare and Edward Luce in *Seminar* 526: A Party in Waiting (June 2003).
- 42 Yogendra Yadav, 'The New Congress Voter', *Seminar* 526: 'A Party in Waiting' (June 2003).
- 43 See Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s* (Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1999).