

## BRIEFING PAPER

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### INDIA'S ELECTORAL RESULT: AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE BETWEEN NATIONALISM AND REGIONALISM

Rob Jenkins

More than five years after thousands of religious extremists destroyed a centuries-old mosque which they considered the birthplace of Lord Ram, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has finally captured the seat of national power. In the end it was ballot papers, not hammers and pick-axes, which delivered this triumph to the BJP, the political front of an extremely well-organized fundamentalist movement. Many Indians fear the worst, especially those who consider the human and symbolic violence of 6 December 1992 the country's most shameful hour since partition. But most people – even those who find Hindu nationalist politics distasteful – are surprisingly sanguine about the prospect of the BJP coming to power. They expect business as usual. This paper spells out why this sense of complacency is so widespread, and explains why it is so fundamentally misplaced.

The BJP heads a multi-party coalition that many believe will exhibit far more stability than the centre-left United Front government it succeeded, or the Congress-led alliance that appeared the only alternative. The BJP emerged from India's 12th general election as the single largest party, with 176 of the country's 543 parliamentary seats. This was only seventeen more than it won in the 1996 elections, and still a long way off from the 272 required for a majority.

The difference this time around is that the BJP is no longer considered politically untouchable by the many small parties which have come to occupy strategic positions in the Indian political landscape. Undoubtedly, this has much to do with the assiduous efforts of the BJP leadership to

project a moderate image, embodied most vividly in the party's urbane, erudite prime-minister-in-waiting, Atal Behari Vajpayee. The divisive issues of past BJP campaigns – particularly the rants against the 'pampering' of India's large Muslim minority – found scant reference in the party manifesto or the speeches of its national leaders. But the ideological repackaging is just one reason why the BJP's rise to power is considered less threatening than it once was. It is but a part of a larger and even more contentious story, which concerns the nature of the BJP's newly acquired political allies as much as it does the BJP itself.

#### Interpreting regionalism

The parties which have come to the BJP's aid (and many others like them which do *not* support the BJP) are in Indian political parlance subsumed under the term 'regional parties'. This is misleading to those who are not familiar with Indian politics, and even to many who are: a term that once referred to parties demanding political recognition for a region's cultural identity, often articulated as a movement for the preservation of the local language from various threats to its continued existence, has come to denote any political formation which is limited in geographic scope. This group has grown in size largely because of the recent tendency for many nominally 'national' parties to have their spheres of influence severely reduced by electoral setbacks. The Janata Dal, which produced the last two prime ministers, is the classic example: not only has the party's geographical base of operations been drastically reduced, but in the process many of its state-level leaders have jumped ship to form 'regional' parties. The extreme version of regionalism summons up images of secessionism and the disintegration of India. This is a bogeyman, and few serious observers would consider India's political unity threatened by such forces. In fact, in recent years the emergence of India's regional parties has been

hailed as a reflowering of democracy, an accommodation of the inherent diversity of the country, which in the eternal paradox of *e pluribus unum* would preserve its unity.

Some analysts have gone even further. Many among India's left-leaning intelligentsia have proclaimed regional parties the ultimate antidote to what they consider the spreading cancer of religious fundamentalism. Among the most vocal proponents of this view has been Javeed Alam, a political scientist at Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. In the wake of the 1996 election, when the regional parties made their debut on the national stage as part of the United Front coalition government, Alam took the rest of the intelligentsia to task for failing to grasp the role that political regionalism had begun to play as a bulwark against the BJP's brand of majoritarian politics. The BJP's objective, he argued, was 'simply to annul' this surge of regional identity. With its efforts 'to foist another but more pernicious monolithic definition of a nation' on India, the BJP was the antithesis of all that regionalism stood for. It was the old centralism in a new guise. Thus it was no surprise, to Alam at least, that the BJP's thirteen-day search for allies following the 1996 election ended in defeat, its pariah status confirmed. For members of India's opportunistic political class to resist the lure of office was an act of renunciation which sent Alam (and many like him) into ill-advised raptures. The regional parties, expressing a democratic urge too strong to be suppressed, would provide the 'base to wage a long battle against Hindu nationalism and the fascist force that hides behind it'.<sup>1</sup>

And yet here they are, less than two years later, backing the BJP – in spades. The 'long battle', it seems, turned out to be

<sup>1</sup> Javeed Alam, 'Behind the Verdict: What Kind of a Nation Are We?', *Economic and Political Weekly* (Bombay), 22 June 1996, p. 1613.

considerably shorter than Alam predicted, and the regional parties less resolute in their commitment to preserving the nation's plural nature and secular fabric. Moreover, the final blow came from the leader of one of India's quintessential regional parties, the Telugu Desam, headed by Chandrababu Naidu, chief minister of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The Telugu Desam's origins can be found in a powerful effort to resist the centralizing tendencies of Indira Gandhi's second stint in power during the early 1980s. Its driving force until recently was the late N.T. Rama Rao, popularly known as NTR, a former cinema hero who turned to politics ostensibly to defend the pride of the Telugu-speaking people from the cultural imperialism of north Indians in general, and the constitutional encroachments of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party in particular. In a political tale no less dramatic than the often mythologically inspired films he starred in, NTR was dethroned in 1995 by his ambitious son-in-law, Naidu, who drew on sentiment within the party that the old man had come too much under the influence of his new (and much younger) wife, Lakshmi Parvati. When NTR died prior to the 1996 election, his widow set up a rival Telugu Desam, but was roundly defeated at the polls. Her party suffered a similar fate in this year's election, despite an alliance with the BJP.

The question is: Why would Chandrababu Naidu, who projects an image of forward-looking dynamism, allow the BJP into power by refusing to back the only realistic alternative, a Congress-led coalition? The most compelling explanation is that the BJP's weakness in Andhra Pradesh, from his perspective, is its most attractive feature. The BJP, despite its best-ever electoral performance in the state, is a relatively minor force in Andhra Pradesh politics, winning just four of the state's 42 seats, compared with 15 for the Telugu Desam and its communist allies. All but one of the state's remaining 22 seats belong to the Congress Party, the other main contestant for national power. In a bid to form a secular alliance, the Congress had hoped to receive support from the now almost laughably named United Front, of which the Telugu Desam was a key component. But with state assembly elections due next year, Naidu's hope of remaining chief minister – an extremely powerful post which few are willing to vacate, even to assume senior positions in the national cabinet – rests with

checking the Congress Party, not lending it support. For the Telugu Desam to have backed the Congress at the national level, even in the larger interest of secularism, would not have gone down well with the party's rank and file, to say the least. Congress is the enemy they know, and contrary to the old saw, this makes it far more dangerous than the BJP taking power in far-off Delhi.

Resistance within the United Front to the idea of supporting a Congress-led coalition was not limited to its affiliate in Andhra Pradesh. A similar logic was in force even in states where parties of national stature hold power. The leadership of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) in Kerala strongly opposed backing the Congress bid. While the ostensible rationale for this hardline stance was the Congress' pro-liberalization credentials, at least as important was the fact that the coalition government the CPI-M heads in Kerala is locked in mortal combat with a rival Congress-led alliance. Like other parties – regional or national – the Kerala CPI-M's first priority is protecting its home turf.

### No panacea

So, contrary to the historical role in which it has been cast by political analysts seeking an antidote to politicized religion, regionalism in Indian politics – or what passes for it – is not primarily concerned with halting the rise of centralizing orthodoxies or projecting a new vision of the nation, except occasionally by default. Appeals to regional sentiment are usually motivated by opportunism of a very contingent sort. Indeed, we can turn Javed Alam's logic on its head and argue (with some justification) that it is he who should have recognized all along that the logic of regionalism, in which all politics is local, would result in regional parties proving susceptible to the BJP's charms.

Even in the 1996 elections, such long-established regional parties as the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena and Punjab's Shiromani Akali Dal had electoral understandings with the BJP, each agreeing – in a pact known as a 'seat adjustment' – not to run candidates against the BJP in certain constituencies, in exchange for the BJP returning the favour in others. In 1996, the BJP also had seat adjustments with what were, to all intents and purposes, regional parties, such as the Samata Party in the state of Bihar, the Haryana Vikas Party in

Haryana, and the party led by NTR's widow Lakshmi Parvati in Andhra Pradesh. Was it not odd that such alliances should have been ignored in the rush to anoint regionalism the saviour of secularism?

Regional parties are no more a panacea for political movements which incite religious intolerance than are the democratic-secular nostrums of the urban upper-caste elite, now that 'the democratization of Indian democracy'<sup>2</sup> has sidelined them in favour of newly politicized groups from the lower strata of society. Nor did the protagonists of the major trend of the early 1990s – parties built around the assertion of lower-caste identity – live up to the expectations raised for them by those who see in every new political force the answer to the fundamentalist 'problem'. Now that regionalism too has proved short-lived as a solution, it would seem that all the secularists have to rely on is the well-intentioned sentimentality of Sonia Gandhi, whose electoral roadshow, stage-managed by people whose only hope for power is slavish loyalty to the Gandhi name, was about as unedifying a spectacle as democracy can offer.

And yet the dominant mood following the election, even among India's secular intelligentsia, is one of world-weary complacency about the implications of a BJP-led government. The conventional wisdom holds that the BJP will be 'tamed' by the size of its coalition – above all, by the sizeable presence of regional parties. It is not hard to discern in this view a clear line of continuity from the idea that regional parties represent the political antithesis of the Hindu nationalist agenda, and thus hold the means for halting its realization. The argument is that they have, in fact, halted the BJP juggernaut, just through different means: they restrain from within, rather than oppose from without. The presence of such parties in the BJP-led coalition will moderate its position on any number of issues, but particularly those which threaten India's minority communities. There are strong *prima facie* grounds for this. But we might reach very different conclusions were we to examine more closely the basis of regional politics, the political dynamics which are likely to shape relations between

<sup>2</sup> See Rob Jenkins, 'The Continued Democratization of Indian Democracy: Regionalization, Social Change, and the 1996 General Election', *Democratization*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1996), pp. 57–72.

the BJP and its new-found allies, and the pattern by which the BJP has over the past decade spread its influence to regions and social groups in which its presence was once marginal. Viewed from this perspective, the BJP-led coalition is potentially far more worrying.

### Adaptable political forms

Perhaps the most problematic assumption regarding the optimistic view of the coming together of Hindu nationalism and regional parties is its benign, and essentially static, portrayal of regional parties. While there is an implicit belief that the BJP can change its stripes – or that the compulsions of coalition politics will *force* it to – little attention is paid to the prospect for regional parties themselves to be transformed by this marriage of convenience. This is less far-fetched than it might seem.

The Shiv Sena, for instance, began life in the 1960s as a genuinely regionalist party, one which voiced the resentment among much of Bombay's Marathi-speaking majority that they were losing out both to 'outsider' business elites and to low-paid immigrants from other parts of India. Having reached a political plateau, the Shiv Sena leader, Bal Thackeray, eventually blended his sons-of-the-soil sloganeering ('Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians') with a brand of anti-Muslim rhetoric that was to become the most rabid in India: until recently praise for Hitler featured prominently in his repertoire of calculated shockers. Of inestimable value to Thackeray in this political reinvention was the symbolic figure of Shivaji, the region's seventeenth-century warrior-prince, who fought not just imperial rule (and therefore Delhi), but Muslim rule, in the form of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. The Shiv Sena is evidence that regionalism, like nationalism, is plastic, which is one reason why the BJP's ability to garner support from across the political spectrum is less remarkable than it might seem – and potentially more worrying. Interestingly, the Shiv Sena is often referred to as an 'ideological', rather than a regional party, as if the two were incompatible.

The Tamil Nadu-based All-India Dravida Munetra Kazaghham (AIADMK), which despite its name is confined to one state, is another regional party whose political complexion has in recent years acquired more than a hint of saffron. Its leader, Ms Jayalalitha, is not the venom-spewing dem-

agogue that Thackeray is, but during her five years as Tamil Nadu's chief minister from 1991 to 1996 she is widely believed to have pushed the party in a less secular direction. Because her larger-than-life political profile dominates the AIADMK – relegating ideology far into the background – Jayalalitha's efforts to steer state funds to temple endowments, and to ally herself politically with prominent Hindu priests, went largely unnoticed outside the state. But the communal violence that rocked the area of Coimbatore in late 1997 pushed these simmering issues into the headlines, at the same time damaging the state's image as a place where minorities could live without fear of persecution.

The creeping politicization of religion in Tamil Nadu cannot be blamed on Jayalalitha or the AIADMK alone. But it is difficult to ignore the fact that her brand of Tamil regionalism has shifted at least some of the emphasis from caste to religion. 'Anti-Brahminism' has been a mainstay of Tamil politics for many decades, with the political centre – symbolized by Delhi – largely equated with a form of Brahminical Hinduism which the Dravidian movement has cast as alien and oppressive. Because Jayalalitha herself is a Brahmin, it is perhaps not so surprising that she has sought ways of breaking the link between Tamil identity and non-Brahminism through a subtle form of communal politics, which is perhaps only now finding its electoral expression. It is also not so surprising that Jayalalitha, just two months before the general election, struck a 'seat adjustment' alliance with the BJP. What did come as a surprise,<sup>3</sup> however, was that the electoral alliance she headed won 27 of the state's 39 seats, after having been completely decimated in the 1996 election.

The significance of these political vignettes is that the basis of a political party's existence, or the base of its electoral support, can change – and change in ways that may not be to the liking of those who place such great faith in the capacity of regional politics to prevent the realization of the Hindu nationalist agenda. But that is not all: there is a flip side to this logic as well. Not only can regional parties politicize religion in ways which would warm

the heart of many a Hindutva<sup>4</sup> stalwart, but in some parts of India Hindu nationalism is capable of taking forms which resonate powerfully with regional culture. While it has often been noted that Hindutva ideology denies the essential plurality of Hinduism – ignoring the many local traditions of which it is composed – the reverse of this logic has seldom been acknowledged: if religious practice can vary so enormously from region to region, this can provide convenient points of entry for those who would use religious identity as a tool for political mobilization.

Among the most salient political attributes to vary from region to region is the caste structure. The *dramatis personae* of caste politics change when one moves between – and often within – India's major linguistic zones, which tend to be separated by state borders. Like recognizable *commedia dell'arte* archetypes, a few characters – usually Brahmins and Dalits<sup>5</sup> – remain somewhat constant. Rajputs, for instance, are found in many parts of north India, and yet they are associated in the popular imagination with one region in particular: the area which now forms the state of Rajasthan. The British and others before them knew it as Rajputana, or the land of the Rajputs. Rajputs are traditionally a princely/warrior caste, second only in the Hindu status hierarchy to Brahmins, though in real life things are not so clear cut. What some political anthropologists have pointed out is that what has been termed the 'Rajput ethic' – a creed best summarized as 'valour without regard to consequences'<sup>6</sup> – operates as a status yardstick which transcends caste boundaries, and thus occupies a central place in Rajasthani culture – that is, in the notion of regional identity.

Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, Rajasthan's BJP chief minister for the last eight years (as well as for two years in the late 1970s), has masterfully manipulated both people and symbols to forge a public connection

<sup>4</sup> 'Hindutva', or 'Hindu-ness', is at the core of Hindu nationalist doctrine. As espoused by V.D. Savarkar in the 1920s, it involved the assertion of a strong correlation between nation and religion, in which an Indian was defined as anyone who considered the land known as Bharat Varsha both his fatherland and his holy-land.

<sup>5</sup> 'The oppressed' or 'scheduled castes' – the groups formerly known as 'untouchables'.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Essays on Rajputana: Reflections on History, Culture, and Administration* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 1984), p. 4.

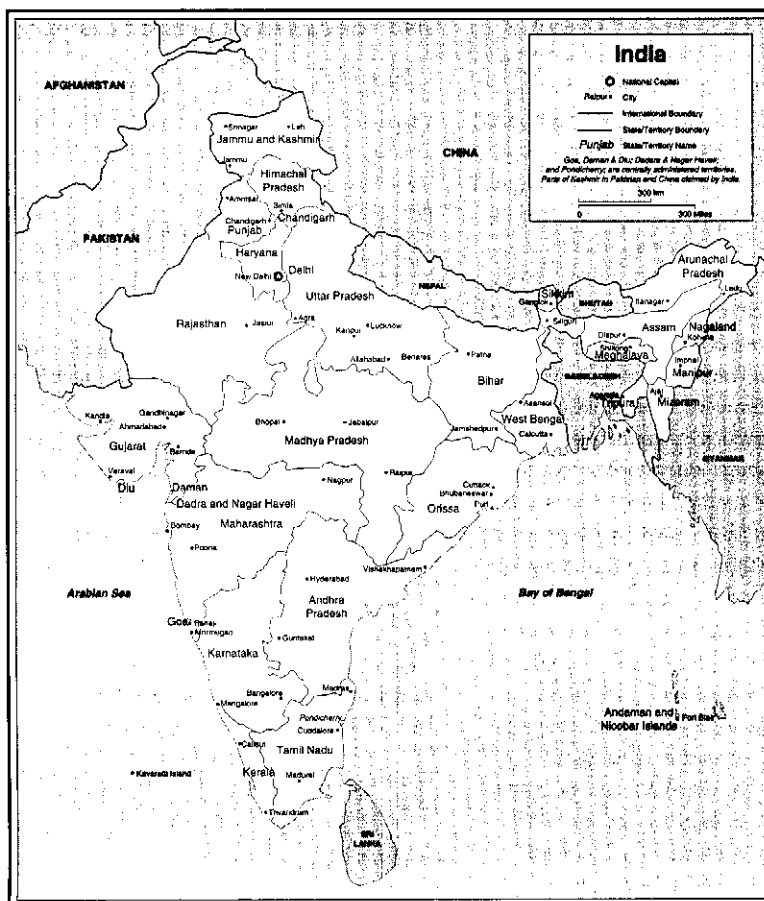
<sup>3</sup> No one was as surprised as the pollsters themselves. Even most *exit* polls reported that Jayalalitha's AIADMK would win, at most, six seats. See *Frontline*, 21 March–3 April 1998.

between this ethic and the martial, assertive face of Hinduism which the cadre-based organizations to which the BJP is affiliated have attempted to promote throughout India. BJP politics in Rajasthan has thus been constructed around a correspondence between caste, region and nation, but not one that should be considered in any way naturally occurring. It was not discovered, but invented, and has required considerable nurturing to become politically potent. Ironically, by playing the sort of pragmatic politics which enrages hardline Hindutva cadres in the state, Shekhawat has usurped the space which one otherwise would have expected a regional party to occupy.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, Rajasthan may be a special case, but in a country as diverse as India, so are most other regions as well. To claim that the BJP is so wholly incapable of tailoring its ideology to local circumstances – of drawing out latent connections between region and nation – is to essentialize the BJP in a way that is quite unwarranted, and indeed quite extraordinary in an age when the notion of imagined communities is so widely accepted. And what of the capacity of regional parties to perform a similar function? When they have forged alliances with the BJP – even if these are opportunistic and designed for the short term – is it so terribly difficult to imagine at least some of these parties, worried about encroachment on their local turf by the BJP, deciding to steal a few pages from its playbook? Rather than cast themselves as the BJP's secular opposites, some regional parties may feel compelled to position themselves more subtly. Appropriating some of the BJP's divisive and exclusionary rhetoric might serve nicely to advance such a strategy.

Whether this sort of outcome seems plausible is largely a matter of how one reads Hindu nationalism as a political project. If one equates Hindutva only with its most highly elaborated ideological construct – that of a monolithic nation built upon principles of governance derived from a slanted reading of Hindu religious texts – then of course the notion of regional parties

<sup>7</sup> I have spelled out this argument in greater detail in a paper entitled, 'Rajput Hindutva: Caste Politics, Regional Identity, and Hindu Nationalism in Contemporary Rajasthan', forthcoming in Christophe Jaffrelot and Thomas Blom Hansen (eds), *The Compulsions of Politics: The BJP and Competitive Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).



**Table 1: Statewise breakdown of seats won by major alliances**

State/UT	Seats	BJP+Allies	Congress+Allies	United Front	Others
Andhra Pradesh	42	4	22	15	1
Arunachal Pradesh	2	-	-	-	2
Assam	14	1	10	-	3
Bihar	53	29	22	1	1
Goa	2	-	2	-	-
Gujarat	26	19	7	-	-
Haryana	10	2	3	-	5
Himachal Pradesh	3	2	1	-	-
Jammu and Kashmir	-	-	-	-	-
Karnataka	28	16	9	3	-
Kerala	20	-	11	9	-
Madhya Pradesh	40	30	10	-	-
Maharashtra	48	10	37	-	1
Manipur	2	-	-	1	1
Meghalaya	2	-	2	-	-
Mizoram	1	-	-	-	1
Nagaland	1	-	1	-	-
Orissa	21	16	5	-	-
Punjab	13	11	-	1	1
Rajasthan	25	5	18	-	2
Sikkim	1	-	-	-	1
Tamil Nadu	39	28	-	9	2
Tripura	2	-	-	2	-
Uttar Pradesh	85	58	1	20	6
West Bengal	42	8	1	33	-
Andaman & Nicobar	1	-	1	-	-
Chandigarh	1	1	-	-	-
Dadra And Nagar H.	1	1	-	-	-
Daman & Diu	1	1	-	-	-
Delhi	7	6	1	-	-
Lakshadweep	1	-	1	-	-
Pondicherry	1	-	-	1	-

adopting its principles is absurd. But if Hindutva is not a fixed, or even coherent, set of ideas, but rather something as plastic as nationalism itself, at times even a repertoire of political tactics, then its ability to seep into local politics, through whatever political agency, is not to be underestimated.

### Unholy compensation

Even the post-election posturing by both the BJP and its regional allies provided a hint of what may lie in store. Those of the BJP's regional partners who do not hold power in their respective states are quite open about using their leverage with the BJP to obtain it – one way or another. Jayalalitha wants the BJP, once it assumes office, to exercise (that is, abuse) the central government's constitutional authority to supersede state governments that fail to maintain law and order by ejecting Tamil Nadu's ruling party from power. This demand is of course couched in the language of democracy: having emerged victorious in these parliamentary elections, the AIADMK claims that only fresh state assembly elections will allow the 'people's verdict' to be heard.

Another of the BJP's south Indian allies, the Lok Shakti party, wants the newly formed BJP government in New Delhi to do the same in its home state of Karnataka. Two years ago, Lok Shakti leader Ramakrishna Hegde was thrown out of the party which rules in Karnataka, the Janata Dal. By floating a regional party, and forging an electoral alliance with the BJP, he helped to reduce drastically the Janata Dal's delegation to the national parliament. Hegde wants to settle scores with his erstwhile colleagues, and thinks he has found the means to do so, even though his party won only three parliamentary seats. In the state of Bihar, the BJP's ally in both the 1996 and 1998 elections was the Samata Party (18 MPs). The leadership of this party broke away from the Bihar unit of the Janata Dal in 1995, and would like nothing better than to see the Janata Dal state government dismissed. It expects the BJP to find a pretext to do so. The BJP's regional ally in neighbouring Orissa has similar plans for the Congress government which rules in that state. The same goes for the BJP's new allies in Haryana, and to a lesser extent in West Bengal as well.

With a wafer-thin majority in parliament, the BJP will be in no position to deny its allies' wishes forever. It will, of course, have at its disposal spoils other than the plea-

**Table 2: Seats won by constituent parties of major alliances**

Alliance/Party	Total
<b>BJP Front</b>	
Bharatiya Janata Party	178
Samata Party	12
Shiv Sena	6
All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	18
Shiromani Akali Dal	8
Haryana Vikas Party	1
NTR Telugu Desam Party (Lakshmi Parvathi)	-
Lok Shakti	3
Biju Janata Dal	9
Trinamool Congress	7
Pattali Makkal Katchi	4
Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>249</b>
<b>Congress Front</b>	
Indian National Congress	141
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	-
Muslim League	2
Bhartiya Kisan Kamgar Party	-
Kerala Congress (M)	1
Samajwadi Party in Maharashtra	-
Republican Party Of India	4
Indian Union Muslim League	-
Rashtriya Janata Dal	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>
<b>United Front</b>	
Janata Dal	6
Telugu Desam Party	12
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	6
Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar)	3
Communist Party Of India	9
Communist Party Of India (Marxist)	32
Asom Gana Parishad	-
Samajwadi Party	21
All India Forward Bloc	2
Revolutionary Socialist Party	5
Maharashtrawadi Gomantak	-
National Conference	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>Others</b>	
Rashtriya Janata Party	-
Bahujan Samaj Party	5
United Goans Democratic Party	-
Haryana Lok Dal	3
Sikkim Democratic Front	1
Independent	6
Others	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>

sure of ejecting inconvenient state governments, such as ministerial office and other plum posts in India's vast realm of officialdom. In the case of Jayalalitha, promises to protect her from the law-enforcement agencies currently pursuing corruption charges against her may be enough to keep her placated. A relatively hardline stance against foreign investment might help to satisfy the economic nationalists in the Samata party, such as firebrand socialist George

Fernandes, famous for throwing Coca-Cola and IBM out of India during his short stint as a cabinet minister in the late 1970s. But whatever form compensation takes, it is likely to be sufficient inducement for regional parties to keep their benefactors in power in New Delhi. Fresh elections, after all, might see them worse off, either in terms of numbers or in terms of their strategic value as majority makers.

India's regional parties will thus be

inclined to grant the BJP at least some of the latitude it needs to satisfy the demands of its other allies, the 'family' of organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. These are the foot soldiers of Hindutva. They provide the BJP its organizational muscle. Neither the leadership nor the rank-and-file members of such BJP-affiliated groups as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Service Society) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) will be patient forever. They have waited long years to see 'their' party taste power, and have watched nervously as BJP leaders have made seemingly endless compromises with the type of political leaders for whom they have the most contempt. Even the defection of Congress politicians to the BJP, in which BJP leaders take such great delight, is greeted with suspicion by the RSS. They fear a dilution of the movement's 'purity', a concept dear to the hearts of those who have devoted their lives to ridding the Indian polity of 'polluting' elements which threaten its destiny.

India's next parliament may be short-lived. Former prime minister V.P. Singh called the recently concluded elections a 'semi-final', with the shape of Indian politics still to be determined. India is in the process of coming to terms with coalition government. This is not as difficult a transition as it might at first glance seem. India has been engaged in 'coalition politics', which involves bridging differences among groups (often representing particular social categories) within parties, rather than between different parties.<sup>8</sup> But the content of coalitions is as important as the form

<sup>8</sup> This formulation is drawn from E. Sridharan, 'Coalition Politics in India: Lessons from Theory, Comparison and Recent History', Centre for Policy Research Working Paper (New Delhi, May 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj, 'Religion, Politics and Modernity', in Upendra Baxi and Bhikhu Parekh (eds), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage, 1996). See especially pp. 307-10.

itself. The uneasy alliance between nationalism and regionalism which characterizes India's incoming government has the potential to legitimize ideas which have until now been beyond the political pale. Regional parties who ally with the BJP for pragmatic reasons may unwittingly serve as so many Trojan horses for the continued spread of such ideas. Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that religious fundamentalisms, by distilling only the most basic elements from what are enormously complex traditions, tend to result in 'thin' forms of religious doctrine, which (paradoxically) serves to hasten the pace of secularization.<sup>9</sup> But the same logic can work in reverse. To the extent that the alliance between the BJP and India's regional parties creates a dynamic in which localized appeals to majoritarian sentiment thrive, it may contribute to a form of politicized religion that is less immediately visible, and thus both more dangerous and durable, than those which seek a single national expression.

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