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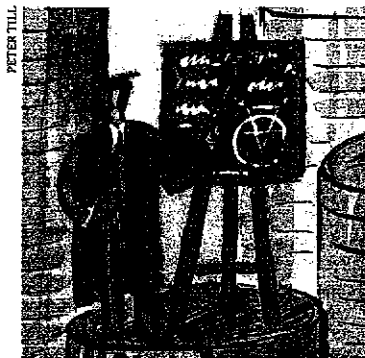
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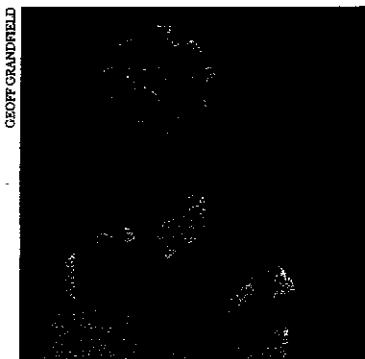
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Cover illustration by James Marsh

World Link welcomes the views of its readers by post, fax or email. All correspondence should be sent to the Letters Department at the London address listed above and should include the writer's name and address

After the election, continuing geographic secession in India's polity means coalition could become the norm

Regional rifts

By Rob Jenkins, lecturer in politics at Birkbeck College, London University, and author of the forthcoming book *Democracy and the Politics of Economic Reform in India*

To many India watchers, the outcome of the 1998 general election looks a lot like the result of the one held in 1996. India has replaced one unwieldy coalition government with another. The balance of power may have shifted from the centre-left to the centre-right, but the implication is the same: continued uncertainty. But possibly of a different type. While similarities between the two elections are striking, the differences are more subtle. Just as important, though, is what they reveal about the shape of India's fast-changing political and economic landscape.

In both 1996 and 1998, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged with the largest number of seats. In 1996, the BJP's history of hostility towards India's large Muslim minority made the party politically untouchable, dooming the efforts of prime minister-designate Atal Behari Vajpayee to cobble together a majority from among India's many small parties. In the 1998 election, the BJP remained below one-third of the seats in the parliament, Lok Sabha. Crucially, though, the party had shed its pariah status. Its leaders had cultivated enough allies before polling to make the post-election horse-trading a success.

There is still great debate surrounding the reasons for the BJP's sudden ability to woo leaders who once shunned it as a fascist organisation and an insult to the nation's secular heritage. At least part of the explanation lies in the party's assiduous efforts to project a moderate image, personified in the eloquent and respected Vajpayee, and to distance itself from the rabid Muslim-baiting of the militant front organisations with which the BJP is affiliated. But, even so, it would be foolish to discount the role played by sheer opportunism on the part of the BJP's new-found allies. India's politicians have not necessarily become any more craven. The social bases of party support, however, have become more fluid, and political events less predictable. For India's entrepre-

neurial political elite there is increased incentive to remain independent and to ally with whichever party is ascending.

This has given rise to a renaissance of so-called regionalism in India. 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 somewhat confusing 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 electoral setbacks to severely reduce the spheres of influence of many nominally national parties. The Janata Dal, which produced India's last two prime ministers - HD Deve Gowda and IK Gujral - 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. Hence, the emergence of the "Biju" Janata Dal in Orissa and Lok Shakti in Karnataka, two break-away factions of the party which have now joined forces with the BJP. Others, such as the renamed Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, lean towards the Congress Party, while keeping their options open.

Disintegration or democracy?

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 expression of the country's inherent diversity,

which in the eternal paradox of *e pluribus unum* would preserve its unity. 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, many political analysts proclaimed regional parties the ultimate antidote to what they considered the spreading cancer of religious fundamentalism. Regional parties were seen as the ideological antithesis of Hindu nationalism and, as such, a bulwark against the BJP's brand of majority-led politics.

And yet here they are, less than two years later, backing the BJP - in spades. The implications of this marriage of convenience are difficult to predict. The conventional wisdom is that regional parties will tame the BJP, further moderating its position on many of the issues on which it once so effectively mobilised political support: demolition of Muslim shrines in Hindu holy places, or the imposition of a uniform civil code to replace the current dispensation, in which Hindus and Muslims are governed by separate laws on such matters as inheritance and divorce. The BJP is, in this view, a caged tiger.

On the other hand, the BJP is also hemmed in by the demands of its other allies, the family of organisations known as the Sangh Parivar. These are the foot soldiers of the Hindu nationalist ideology of Hindutva - roughly, Hinduness - which asserts a strong correlation between an individual's religious identity and national loyalty. They provide the BJP with its organisational muscle. Neither the leadership nor the rank-and-file members of such BJP-affiliated groups as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (National Service Society) or the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) will be patient forever. They have waited many years to see their party taste power, and have watched nervously as BJP leaders have made seemingly endless compromises with the type of opportunistic and undisciplined politi-



ILLUSTRATION BY SATOSH LAMRAISHI

cal leaders for whom their contempt is renowned. Even the defections by Congress politicians to the BJP, in which the party's leaders take such delight, are greeted with suspicion by the RSS. A BJP government which mouths slogans without taking action on the questions which its organisations have fought for, will not go down well with the rank and file. Hence the widespread fear in western capitals that the BJP will take a strong stand on at least one issue of national pride, such as a defiant projection of India's status as a nuclear power.

A balancing act

An equally difficult balancing act faces the BJP on economic issues. The economic nationalists in the party – headed by those most closely associated with the RSS – are pressing for a hard line against foreign investment. Some of the regional parties in the BJP-led coalition support them in this emphasis on *Swadeshi*, or national self reliance. The Samata Party, the BJP's ally in the state of Bihar, is led by George Fernandes, who as a cabinet minister in the late 1970s achieved fame by having Coca-Cola and IBM thrown out of India. The financial support lent by many prominent industrialists to the BJP will

strengthen the demand that the government create a "level playing field" between domestic and foreign capital. The spurt on the Bombay Stock Exchange which greeted the news of the formation of a BJP government is interpreted by some analysts as an indicator that Indian business will gain government protection. Others read it as evidence that the markets merely equate BJP rule with stability. The size and diversity of the governing coalition – which roped in a number of unlikely parties in the run-up to the vote of confidence – makes such thinking suspect.

The early signs are that the BJP may be able to resist pressures for any dramatic rolling back of market-oriented reform. The key economic portfolios have gone to known moderates. Newly inducted finance minister Yashwant Sinha, a compromise choice, is a level-headed pragmatist, and his initial statements upon taking office point to continuity in economic policy, rather than any great break. The commerce ministry is now headed by one of India's most sophisticated political leaders, Ramakrishna Hegde, who as a former chief minister of Karnataka in the mid-'80s presided over a period of inventive governance. The main sop to industry is

a commitment to greater public spending on infrastructure, which is expected to kick-start India's flagging industrial growth rate. There is also some noise about raising certain tariff levels, especially in the capital goods sector. But even this is being justified in the name of prudent economic policy – in particular, the need to increase government revenues, which have been sagging.

The biggest question mark is whether the high profile of regional parties in the ruling coalition will be a force for backward-looking parochialism, or a catalyst to further economic reform. On the one hand, these are parties with very local concerns, and they will bargain hard for positive treatment from the Vajpayee government in exchange for their support: this could wreak havoc with any plans for reigning in India's public-sector deficit, which this year will exceed 6% of GDP. On the other hand, by pressing for the continued unshackling of state-level governments from New Delhi's system of bureaucratic controls, regional parties may be able to step up the pace of economic restructuring. These are questions which transcend the immediate political scenario. Indeed, they are oddly familiar to those which faced the assumption to power of the United Front government in mid-1996. But this time, a different sort of party heads the coalition, and it is in alliance with a different set of regional parties.

The fragmenting of India's polity into parties based upon ever-smaller social bases is a trend which seems set to continue. It is intimately bound up with the increasing assertiveness of low status groups claiming their rightful place on the democratic map. Many of the so-called regional parties are caste parties in disguise. Their key to political stability and policy continuity will rest upon the ability of these free-floating groups to forge consensus on matters of substance. Coalition governance is likely to remain the norm in India for the foreseeable future. ■