

What Happens in 2014?

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

At the National Executive Committee of BJP held in Mumbai recently Shri L.K. Advani made a statement and asked a question, the true depth of which has not been appreciated. He said that people are unhappy with UPA but BJP should ask itself whether if UPA goes does it have the capacity to form and lead the government? Will it have the numbers and, if so, does it have the capacity to govern, a programme whereby political stability is restored and a clearly enunciated agenda for tackling the problems of the country? It is about time that all the political parties in India did introspection about where the country is going and what happens to it because of fragmented politics.

The experience of this country ever since we moved from a government of a single party enjoying a majority to an era of coalitions has not been altogether happy. Atalji had diplomatic skills which helped him to hold a heterogeneous coalition together and whereas under pressure many unacceptable compromises had to be made, there was still a skein of order running through the coalition. The UPA coalition led by Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2004 had the disadvantage of real political power resting with Sonia Gandhi, a fact which did not go unnoticed by the alliance partners. Fortunately for Dr. Manmohan Singh the Left had a substantial presence in Parliament and by and large it behaved responsibly and put national interest and public welfare above narrow party considerations. Even after it withdrew direct support over the Indo-U.S Nuclear Agreement it still continued to act responsibly in Parliament and this helped government to function.

The 2009 scenario was very different. BJP was reduced to 114 seats in the Lok Sabha and even with its partners its total strength did not exceed 149, say 150. The Congress, on the other hand, had 207 seats and the two largest non-Congress parties, BSP and SP had 21 seats each. However, the two most troublesome coalition partners, Trinamool Congress and DMK, with 19 and 18 seats respectively virtually called the shots and on every issue of policy, with the support of Biju Janata Dal and AIADMK, these parties have made life a living hell for the coalition. Corruption is tolerated till it exceeds all limits in the name of the compulsion of coalition. Policies remained undecided because of internal bickering. The economy is reduced to shambles because government has to compromise on key issues, educational policy is at a halt because Bills are not passed in Parliament, counter-terrorism measures are put on hold, land acquisition does not take place and externally India is projected as a corrupt country in which investors lose confidence. In other words, the present untenable situation has made governance extremely difficult in India.

What India needs is a government which has self-confidence and has adequate strength in Parliament to be able to push through sane policies. Ideally it would mean an absolute majority for one party, but this majority should be marginal so that the opposition cannot be ignored. Conversely either BJP or Congress should get at least 225 seats in the Lok Sabha in 2014 so that either party needs just fifty more M.Ps. to form a government. This government is likely to be stable because of the strength of the lead party. For this we need coalescing of major parties and virtual elimination from Parliament of minor parties whose entire outlook is only regional and, therefore, extremely self-centered.

Supposing in 2014 nobody gets a majority or even that number of seats in Parliament that can make a coalition work. Let us say that both BJP and Congress are arrested at 150 or less seats in Parliament, neither can really form a coalition and if either does, myriad coalition partners would be like a school of piranhas and would feed on the body of the largest single party in the coalition. Neither BJP nor Congress can survive such a coalition. Damn the parties, would India survive? If the major parties are evenly balanced but unable to form a coalition which would work, what should the President do? Supposing leaders of both parties say that they cannot form a government. The Constitution does not permit President's rule at the Centre and, therefore, the President would have to invite someone to become Prime Minister and form a government. If the man agrees the likelihood is that he would fail to survive a vote of no confidence as soon as Parliament convenes. That would be the fate of the leader of the other party who might then be invited to form the government. Ultimately it would be a caretaker Prime Minister who would take over and fresh elections would have to be ordered. A caretaker can take no initiatives, administrative, legislative or diplomatic. Supposing the story repeats itself after the mid-term election and then the action repeats itself because there is no working government. How often in a five-year period can we afford to have caretaker governments and frequent elections? Such a government cannot offer leadership or run a meaningful government.

It is in this context that Advani's remarks become all the more important. 2014 cannot be an excuse for creating a situation where India is not governed because there is no government. Therefore, the parties have to come together with a view to constituting a strong middle of the road party which may include the Congress and the Socialists, a left of centre party in which the Left extreme finds no place and a right of centre party in which the BJP is forced to accept a genuinely secular agenda. Now we could either have a single party government or a coalition which may be left of centre or right of centre, but whose room for manoeuvre is within narrow confines so that there is continuity in policy and in government. Unless the parties shed their own selfish interests and begin to think nationally 2014 may be the annus horribilis in which the political system collapses.
