

Congress reaches out to the BJP: sign of a new mindset?

Has the Congress experience in running a coalition made it more amenable to wider consultations? Otherwise, it is difficult to explain why Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suddenly reached out to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main opposition party, to seek its view on various issues.

Not long ago, he had summarily rejected a set of proposals on the budget submitted by the BJP and had taunted leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha, BJP's L.K.Advani, on his prime ministerial ambitions.

But Manmohan Singh is now seemingly pursuing a different line. First, he went to former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's house with a bouquet to greet him on his birthday. And then he invited Vajpayee, Advani and a few other senior BJP leaders for a discussion on current affairs.

There is little doubt that such a friendly initiative, described by Advani as a 'good gesture', is quite uncharacteristic of the Congress. Except in P.V. Narasimha Rao's time when Vajpayee led the Indian delegation to the UN General Assembly, the Congress has usually kept the opposition parties at arm's length.

Why the sudden change? Is it possible that the prolonged tussles with the Left on economic and foreign policies have made the Congress appreciate the inevitability of a consensus at a time when its earlier hopes of ruling on its own have all but disappeared? Or is it playing a game in preparing to set off the BJP against the Left since the Congress's views on economic reforms are closer to those of BJP?

Even on foreign policy, the BJP's opposition to the India-US nuclear deal can be seen as the typical knee-jerk response of an opposition party rather than a well-considered stance considering that the BJP has always been regarded as closer to the US (and Israel) than the 'socialist' Congress with its non-alignment baggage of the Cold War days.

There has been a longstanding view, articulated by economist Lord Meghnad Desai among others, of the advantages of the Congress and BJP coming together, at least on economic issues, for the country's rapid progress. As the constant objections of the Left on issues like disinvestment and FDI show, the Congress will need the help of less doctrinaire parties to push through some of its economic programmes.

However, in the immediate future, the purpose of the Congress in building bridges with the BJP may have more to do with questions of the 'neighbourhood', which was said to be one of the subjects discussed.

In the aftermath of Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's proposals on Kashmir like demilitarization, joint control and making the Line of Control (LoC) irrelevant, there is a feeling that some kind of a movement is taking place on the vexed issue.

Except with regard to the suggestion on joint control, there is more than one similarity between what Musharraf has said and what Manmohan Singh had said earlier. For instance, the latter has been in favour of virtually erasing LoC.

It is obvious that before any major step is taken on such a sensitive question, the Congress and the ruling United Progressive Alliance will need BJP's concurrence since the Left is not expected to raise any objections.

However, the recent transition in BJP from the leadership of the Vajpayee-Advani duo to a younger and an apparently more hardline generation makes the task of obtaining the party's approval somewhat more difficult, especially on Kashmir.

As the assumption of the presidency of BJP by Rajnath Singh suggests, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the paterfamilias of the saffron brotherhood, has taken direct charge of the party, apparently because it was displeased with the moderate stance of Vajpayee and Advani.

For the Congress, this change of guard poses a difficulty since it would rather deal with the two veterans with their long experience in politics and diplomacy than with the newcomers who not only represent the second tier of the BJP's leadership but are also evidently less mature, apart from being under the RSS's thumb.

Manmohan Singh may have had to act in a hurry, therefore, to keep Vajpayee and Advani in the loop at a time when things may begin to move relatively quickly in matters relating to Kashmir and the nuclear deal.

As Advani's response shows, the senior BJP leaders are not unhappy about the thaw. They have been under attack from the RSS for a long time and may have felt that the ground was slipping from under their feet. The government's initiative has given them an opportunity to reassert themselves in national life.

In any event, such exchanges will herald a new atmosphere in politics. It has been far too tense in recent years with the frequent disruptions of parliamentary proceedings tending to breed a sense of disrespect for politicians and their profession.

Both Manmohan Singh and Congress president Sonia Gandhi have shown that they do not believe in confrontation. Her refusal to accept the prime minister's post lest the BJP should rev up the 'foreign national' issue showed that she likes to follow a path of least resistance.

A part of their accommodating attitude may be due to temperament and partly due to the exigencies of running a coalition with parties preoccupied with dogma (communists), caste (Lalu Yadav and Ramvilas Paswan) and state (DMK).

Two and a half years with such a motley group seems to have persuaded the Congress to shed some of its rigidities and self-absorption whose worst manifestation was the Emergency of 1975-77 when Indira Gandhi was prime minister. If the Congress learns to work with others on a consistent basis, the opposition parties - as also the more obdurate of the allies - may moderate their stance. The gainer will be the nation.

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