

Governor's rule

The ruling CPM in Kerala has criticised the state governor, P. Sathasivam, for editing out some references critical of the Centre and the BJP from the text of his Budget address in the Assembly — and the office of governor is the centre of yet another unseemly controversy. By convention, the governor reads out the speech, vetted by the Cabinet, in its entirety. The CPM has alleged that Sathasivam, a former chief justice of India appointed as governor by the [Narendra Modi](#) government, has sought to “appease” the Centre, while the state BJP has cited the governor’s “discretionary powers”. It is true that in the constitutional scheme, the governor can use his high office and the space for judgement and discretion that comes with it, to guard the letter and spirit of the constitution. But that is not what appears to have informed the Kerala governor’s selective reading of the Budget speech on Monday.

Of course, Sathasivam is not the first governor to invite accusations of partisan conduct favouring the ruling dispensation at the Centre. Indeed, it was in Kerala that the office of the governor first came under a cloud when, in 1959, then governor, B. Ramakrishna Rao, following a mass agitation led by the Congress, recommended that the CPI government, which enjoyed a majority in the assembly, be dismissed. Successive Congress governments at the Centre damaged the dignity and credibility of the office in the 1960s and '70s by appointing pliant party functionaries as governors to unsettle or topple opposition-ruled governments. The Sarkaria Commission, appointed in 1983 to study Centre-State relations, severely criticised the functioning of the governor and proposed a set of guidelines to restore the office’s reputation. The National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution appointed by the Vajpayee government in 2000 and the Punchhi Commission set up by the UPA in 2007 echoed Justice Sarkaria’s suggestions. However, all political parties in power have wilfully ignored the recommendations.

The BJP has long been an advocate of federalism and, as a party of the Opposition, it has spoken fervently of the independence of the governor’s office. But its record in government has been scarcely different from that of the Congress. Since 2014, the Narendra Modi government has replaced 26 governors and seven lieutenant governors with its own candidates, many of them directly affiliated to it — former Gujarat Chief Minister Anandiben Patel, sworn in as MP governor, has just joined a lengthening list. Governors in Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Meghalaya have acted in ways that have been seen to be unbecoming of their office, with governments being formed and chief ministers removed under dubious circumstances. At a time when a perception of institutional decline is gaining ground, the Sathasivam controversy is a warning and a reminder that the integrity of this constitutional office will be damaged at the system’s peril.

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