

NEEDLESS FRACAS: ON GOVERNORS VS KERALA AND WEST BENGAL GOVERNMENTS

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Functions & Responsibilities of the States, the Governor, the Chief Minister and State COM

The endless squabbles between the Governors and respective State governments in Kerala and West Bengal are disconcerting. [Arif Mohammad Khan](#) and [Jagdeep Dhankhar](#), Governors of Kerala and West Bengal, respectively, have arrogated to themselves an activist role, which is at the heart of the tensions. Mr. Khan has made repeated public statements on controversial questions such as the [Citizenship \(Amendment\) Act, 2019](#); he has even said that it was his duty to defend the laws made by the Centre. It is a dubious claim to make, and at any rate, there is no discernible precedent as such. His view that his office is not a rubber stamp is true, but he must also be mindful that the Constitution envisages the execution of popular will through an elected government. Mr. Dhankhar has placed himself at the centre of several controversies, and often appears eager for the next spectacular showdown with the State government. Kerala's Left Democratic Front has been more restrained than the combative resistance by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, but parties barring the BJP in both States are agitated over the proactive, and often provocative roles of their respective Governors. The boisterous profiles of these Governors are symptomatic of a larger malaise of degrading relations between the Centre and States ruled by parties opposed to the BJP, aggravated by an insatiable yearning of the former for centralisation of power.

Governance and the Governor

The Constitution seeks to bolster centripetal forces in this vast and diverse country, and the Centre's power to appoint Governors is one such. The Governor's constitutional role has been debated and interpreted through several cases, but ingenious occupants of the office have managed to push the boundaries with unprecedented moves. Sagacious occupants have used the Governor's office to promote national integration. Many others have merely acted as agents of the ruling party at the Centre. Using a pliant Governor to undermine a State government or engineer a legislative majority is an old and secular trick used by all parties at the Centre. State government-Governor conflicts have hence not been rare, but what makes the current situation extraordinary is the political context. No other government in the past has sought to construct a centralising narrative for the nation as the current one at the Centre; and no government in the past has been as intolerant towards its diversity. In this schema, the Governor appears to have a critical, instrumental role. The ignominious role played by the then Governor of Jammu and Kashmir in ending its special constitutional status last year is instructive. The Governor's role as a link between the State and the Centre shall not be an imperial one. The office of the Governor must be a dialogic and consultative one. The combative posturing in Kerala and West Bengal will bring more disarray, no unity. The Centre must treat State governments with the respect that democratically elected governments deserve.

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