

Delhi stand-off: Power crisis

One crisis, many causes. The immediate provocation for Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal sitting on a dharna at the residence of the Lt. Governor might have been a run-in with the bureaucracy, but the crisis is rooted in the understanding (or misunderstanding) of the constitutional limits of the powers of the elected government in the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The Aam Aadmi Party government has a history of confrontation with the Centre on the question of who is the administrative head of a region that is less than a State and more than a Union Territory. Since the party came to power in 2015, the demand for Delhi to be given the status of a full-fledged State, allowing it among other things powers over the police, has become strident. Differences extend to the LG's discretionary powers to appoint the Chief Secretary, with the AAP nursing a grouse that the bureaucratic cadre came directly under the Centre. Matters came to a head when Chief Secretary Anshu Prakash was assaulted during a late-night meeting in Mr. Kejriwal's presence. Since then, officials have been in a non-cooperative mode, only attending statutory meetings, skipping what they term are "routine" meetings and not taking phone calls from Ministers. Mr. Kejriwal and his Cabinet colleagues decided on the dharna in protest, but instead of forcing a solution, they may have precipitated a crisis. Members of the BJP responded with a dharna at the Chief Minister's residence, completing the political spectacle.

In adopting the politics of protest as part of its quest to expand the powers of the elected government, the AAP is putting governance at risk. Instead of mounting a legal challenge to the Centre's efforts to further curtail the limited powers of the Delhi government, Mr. Kejriwal chose to respond politically. While he might like to be seen as a constitutional functionary whose hands are tied by an overbearing Centre, he is coming across as someone who is keener on a bigger fight on a bigger stage than as one eager to fulfil his constitutional mandate. The dharnas might end, but the underlying causes of the present crisis will not disappear without the Centre and the Delhi government agreeing on the terms of engagement through the office of the Lt. Governor. The BJP cannot mock Mr. Kejriwal out of politics; the Centre will have to deal with him, and work jointly with the AAP government for the welfare of Delhi's citizens — something it has failed to do. The way to fight the AAP cannot be by placing handcuffs on the Delhi government. As for the AAP, it should learn to make the best of the system before demanding more autonomy. To push the constitutional limits to acquire more meaningful powers is fine, but it cannot be at the cost of failing to do whatever is possible within the current framework.

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