

Friends with benefits: on AP's 'special category' status

In politics, there is nothing such as friendship without benefits. Ever since it became clear that the [Centre was unable to grant Andhra Pradesh "special category" status](#), the Telugu Desam Party was under pressure to break off ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party and make a public show of its protest. With the main opposition in the State, the YSR Congress Party, taking a belligerent stance on the issue, the TDP could not afford to give the impression that it continued to be a part of the government at the Centre without being able to wrest benefits for A.P. But even as he [withdrew his ministers from the Central government](#), Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu [stopped short](#) of leading his party out of the National Democratic Alliance headed by the BJP. The exit, when it happens, will be after another display of disaffection with the Centre's attitude towards A.P. Clearly, the TDP is keen to demonstrate that it did everything possible in the interest of this fledgling State before walking out of the NDA. Although Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley clarified that it was no longer possible to confer "special category" status on States after the Centre accepted the recommendation of the 14th Finance Commission, Mr. Naidu appears to blame the Centre's reluctance on its majority in the Lok Sabha and the resulting lack of dependence on allied parties. In short, in the eyes of the TDP, the denial of special status is a political decision, deserving of a political response. However, it is debatable whether A.P. qualifies for special status, which was earmarked for States on the basis of laid-down criteria such as difficult terrain, low population, strategic location, economic backwardness and non-viable finances.

While Mr. Jaitley promised to give A.P. the [monetary equivalent of the special status](#), this was not good enough for the TDP, which wanted it institutionally recognised. Besides procedural hurdles, the Centre feared this would lead to other States such as Bihar making similar demands. But the TDP and Mr. Naidu apparently felt that the assurance of granting the monetary equivalent was not an enduring or long-term solution. The signs of strain had started becoming apparent soon after the Union Budget, which failed to meet A.P.'s expectations, and which led Mr. Naidu to start signalling that he was distancing himself from the BJP. There are political compulsions for making such a move as well, with simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the State Assembly only a year away. Flagging a strong commitment to the State may be just the right signal to neutralise the TDP's main rival, the YSR Congress. It may be enough for Mr. Naidu to retain Andhra Pradesh and win enough Lok Sabha seats to be an influential player in the new political order at the Centre, whatever the shape it takes.

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