

REFORMING POWER TO SERVE PEOPLE

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

“In Madhya Pradesh, the ruling Congress is battling defections.” Jyotiraditya Scindia, who moved from the Congress to the BJP, in Bhopal with BJP leaders.>PT

Recent events yet again highlight the need for [electoral reforms](#). The campaign for the [Delhi Assembly elections](#) was filled with hate speeches. In Madhya Pradesh, the ruling Congress is battling defections. Last year, in November, in Maharashtra, Devendra Fadnavis took oath as Chief Minister early morning one day only to be replaced within days by Uddhav Thackeray from the Opposition alliance, which consists of parties that are ideologically mismatched. And before that, in Karnataka, defections from the Janata Dal (Secular)-Congress coalition to the BJP brought the government down.

First we need to understand why this is happening. The answer is simple: the primary goal of political parties is to capture power, and they use all the means at their disposal to obtain power. Power brings money, privileges, and control of the treasury. The total budgeted expenditure of the Central government for 2019-20 is 27.86 lakh crore. So, the stakes are high.

Political parties in power are supposed to deliver good governance and serve the public, but usually power becomes an end in itself. The fact that more and more freebies are being provided nowadays clearly shows that public funds are being used by those in power to lure voters, and are not necessarily being used for public service.

Let us look at a few important ways in which the power game is played out in India. In Delhi, hate speeches delivered by a few members of a political party did not help that party come to power. But that is not the issue — in another State, in another election, this tactic may work.

There are two factors that strengthen the growing deterioration in the quality of campaigns. One is the rapidly increasing criminalisation of politics. In 2019, the Lok Sabha had 43% MPs with a criminal record, up from about 23% in 2004. Political parties that give tickets to such candidates are directly responsible for this. The other factor is the widespread use of social media to spread fake news during an election campaign. Most of what is online consists of abuse of rivals and vilification of Opposition parties.

Money also fuels much of what we see today. It was money that was responsible for the defections in Karnataka in 2019, and in Madhya Pradesh recently. The practice of whisking away MLAs to distant resorts to prevent them from being lured away by the Opposition is unique to India. Who is elected or which party wins does not seem to matter any longer. In this game, those with money and the ability to engineer defections can always come to power.

Two factors contribute to this open use of money to topple governments. One is the total lack of transparency in the funding of political parties. Electoral bonds have made it even more difficult to trace the source of funds of political parties. The second is that political parties in power have complete hold over law and order. A corporate scamster is arrested when the money trail is discovered, but no effort is taken to trace the money trail during massive defections.

Good governance needs democracy. But today, hardly any political party in India is internally democratic. They are fully controlled by a small ruling clique. Finances are raised and used in a completely opaque way. The situation is ripe for a small group of enterprising persons to raise

funds and capture power and then exercise it without accountability. The use of muscle and money power makes re-elections possible. Parties that try to win power based on a track record of good governance show mixed results.

So, we have the root cause of the problem: the goal of political power without adequate transparency and accountability. Before we come to the remedies, we need to understand the consequences of the system we have today. All governments, whether Central or State, are in financial difficulty. More than 25% of the Central Budget is spent on paying interest on money borrowed by the government. Then there is deficit financing. The Central government has made efforts to bring it down, but has not been able to meet its targets. India's fiscal deficit is among the highest in the developing world, with the IMF estimating it to be 7.5% of the GDP in 2019. State government finances are worse: a substantial amount is spent on salaries and pensions. Then we have the huge problem in the financial sector with banks, non-banking financial companies and ILFS going almost into liquidation. That means that a lot of the public's money is either gone or is under great risk. Is there a link between the use of election funds and non-performing assets in banks? Other manifestations of these problems are an increasing number of government scams; corruption; growing fear and insecurity; average or poor governance, including public services provided by the government; and rising unemployment. How can we really expect good services for the taxes we pay if 43% of MPs have criminal cases against them?

India needs a system that throws up parties and politicians whose primary goal is public service, not power. Mahatma Gandhi suggested a way: "Democracy is an impossible thing until power is shared by all... Even ... a labourer, who makes it possible for you to earn your living, will have his share in self-government."

That goal of having enlightened politicians who feel answerable to the people is perhaps distant. For now, we need democratic, accountable and transparent political parties. We need to check the use of muscle and money power. Politicians in the ruling party are rarely, if ever, arrested, and old cases against them are even withdrawn. Sometimes no action is taken against those making hate speeches. Only rival politicians are targeted. This shows that the police follows the orders of their political masters. Therefore, police reforms are required. As a quick fix for misuse of money power and engineered defections, a forensic audit by an independent agency should be mandatory when MLAs defect to other parties. As the famous Watergate dictum goes, we need to "follow the money". That alone can restore public confidence in democracy.

Above all, we need political party reforms that make parties transparent, accountable and democratic. But we are in a logjam: those who can reform the system do not want to. Voters are no doubt getting educated rapidly, but they are not in a position to bring about inner change in the electoral and political system merely through voting. Some kind of citizen action to raise awareness may be required. Otherwise things will have to get worse before they get better.

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