

A SWOT analysis of Oppn prospects

A meeting of Opposition parties in Patna was a good start. But to put up a credible challenge to the BJP, the alliance must study its strengths and weaknesses

A mega meeting of 15 Opposition parties last week in Patna was significant, despite the discordant note struck by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the diminishing possibility of a tie-up between the Arvind Kejriwal-led party and the Congress. It made three things clear. First, with less than a year to go for the 2024 polls, the idea of a Third Front, or a regional grouping without the Congress, seems like a thing of the past. The Congress is likely to be at the centre of any credible Opposition coalition, making 2024 a contest between coalitions led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress. In the next few months, India is likely to see a realignment of political forces across the board.

Second, parties that didn't attend the event cannot be clubbed together. The Janata Dal (Secular), Telugu Desam Party, Akali Dal and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, for example, are tilting towards the BJP. The YSR Congress Party and Biju Janata Dal may not join any group

and prefer issue-based arrangements. And, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi is unlikely to show its cards until the Telangana assembly elections later this year. The Opposition camp, too, needs to make certain decisions about allies. A good example of this is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which has made some noises about joining the coalition despite backing the BJP in Parliament in the past. This is important because the Congress will be keen to get its support in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where the Mayawati-led party won a handful of seats in 2018. And, of course, the AAP question remains open.

Third, the Congress has shown signs of being more accommodative to allies than in the past. Reports indicated that the party did not press to be the "natural leader" of the coalition. But will this resolve remain if some of the regional parties squeeze the Congress in their respective states and don't offer too many Lok Sabha seats to it? The national party's bargaining heft will be determined by its performance in the heartland assembly elections later this year.

The parties will again meet in Shimla in July to discuss a blueprint for taking on the BJP. They might want to conduct a thorough SWOT analysis to maximise their chances.

Strength: Arithmetic. If the coalition formalises, its brute social arithmetic in states such as Maharashtra, Bihar, Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu and

West Bengal will surely dent the BJP, but the quantum of the loss is not yet known. It could be very small like in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2019, where the coming together of the Mandal giants, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the BSP, was undone by grassroots contradictions, the BJP's social coalition, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity. Nonetheless, there is little doubt that the Opposition alliance is better placed to challenge the BJP in several states than in fragmented fights.

Weakness: Chemistry. The Opposition doesn't yet have a credible alternative ideological vision and governance blueprint. The Modi hatrao (remove Modi) rhetoric is unlikely to work, especially as the Opposition's charge of crony capitalism and democratic backsliding has not yielded major electoral benefits. The Opposition does not have any leader who can match Modi in pan-

India appeal. This presents a conundrum: Should they present a face, turning the elections more presidential, which has benefited the BJP in the past? Or should they refrain from naming a challenger, potentially allowing the BJP to paint the alliance as opportunistic? Modi has already attempted to paint the fledgling efforts as a contest between the son-of-the-soil versus dynastic parties, a hardworking 24x7 politician versus those charged with corruption.

Opportunity: Economics. A string of opinion polls and surveys over the



Akhilesh Yadav, Mamata Banerjee, Hemant Soren and Rahul Gandhi during the Opposition meeting in Patna on Friday. HT PHOTO

last 12 months have highlighted that economic distress remains a concern for many Indians, and young voters are less enamoured with the BJP than in 2019 and 2014. The Axis-Mv India exit poll in the 2022 UP elections reported only a one percentage point gap between the BJP and SP in the 18-25 category, but a wider gap among older segments. Similarly, the Mood of the Nation Survey by India Today and CVoter earlier this year found many respondents expressing concern about the job situation, and this was the highest in the 18-34 group.

In several states, the record of BJP governments is mixed, and the party has lost 29 of 57 state polls since 2014, showing that local leadership matters. The Karnataka elections were the latest example of this phenomenon. Thus, the Opposition should make every effort to make the elections more localised and a state-by-state affair.

Threat: Geography. If the Lok Sabha elections become more national than regional, the BJP holds

the edge because it can mobilise around the religious-nationalism axis. Even in the absence of such a platform, the Opposition's prospects rest on the performance of the Congress in central and western India. The BJP's strike rate against the Congress in direct heartland contests was 90% in 2019. If the BJP repeats this performance and retains its base in UP, it will be within striking distance of a majority, notwithstanding its showing elsewhere.

In Patna, the Opposition took its first step before 2024. When it meets in Shimla, it must work urgently to figure out its message, targeted constituency, messenger and organisational mechanics. The states are no longer the principal theatre of Lok Sabha elections. The Opposition must bring itself in sync with the changing vocabulary of India's national politics. Otherwise, the mega meetings will yield little more than photographs.

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