



POLICY POLITICS & PEOPLE

By Dr. R. Balasubramaniam

The Mathematics of Cabinet Formation in Karnataka

Recently, one saw a mockery of the statement *'first amongst equals'* in the State of Karnataka. Constitutionally, the head of Government is the Chief Minister at the State-level while the Prime Minister at the National-level. Convention demands that legislators of the party with a majority, meet and elect their leader who then takes over as the head of the Government. What we see happening across different States in India is the phenomenon that is today popularly called the **'high command culture.'** Leaders of national parties sitting in Delhi decide on the leader of their State Legislature Party. Democracy, decency, dignity of the individual, people's choice and decorum of office seem to be fashion statements used more often to justify actions rather than demonstrate conviction in them.

The last several months saw this dance off a weakening democratic setup play out in Karnataka. Engineering a ruling majority meant satisfying the people responsible for creating the majority in the first place. This meant, promises were made that were neither fair, ethical or in alignment with Constitutional appreciation of Government formation or expectations of electoral outcomes. Newspaper headlines kept predicting a Cabinet reshuffle from the day B.S. Yediyurappa took over as the Chief Minister of Karnataka. Here was a man known for his uncontested leadership within his party, succumbing to the demands of political opportunism. His oft declared position was that he was waiting to discuss the Cabinet reshuffle with senior leaders of his party at Delhi and he would do it when appointments for the same were secured.

While this dragged on for several months, he was possibly aware of the Damocles' sword hanging around his neck. Finally, when the much-awaited reshuffle did happen, little could he have known that he would be reshuffling portfolios four times within five consecutive days. While he may have desired to choose Ministers of his liking, one felt that he was helplessly responding to the evolving situation by the day. The notion of the

Chief Minister being the first amongst equals was reduced to just playing the second fiddle to 'diktats' from above, below and beside.

Appointing Ministers is to be driven by considerations of technical competence, ability to govern, the leadership that one can provide and the intent to play as a member of the team. One is expected to operate with a reasonable degree of autonomy keeping in mind the larger party ideology, party manifesto and the people's requirements. Over time other factors like party loyalty, seniority, number of times that one has become an MLA, the caste and region that one belongs to and the mass support that one can visibly mobilise have all become critical. The last decade of coalition Governments has also brought in the budget size of the Ministry concerned, the visible power that a Minister feels content with, the 'opportunity' that a Ministry can generate, the favours that one can distribute in one's Constituency, the physical office that one can get and other such petty considerations a matter of importance to negotiate. Governance and an opportunity to serve the public are mere incidental mentions to honey coat one's personal and selfish demands.

With Article 164 (1A) of the Constitution limiting the number of Ministers in the State Cabinets, the Chief Minister is now under enormous pressure to choose his Council of Ministers keeping in mind all the factors described above. Added to this, for Chief Minister Yediyurappa was the factual reality of ensuring the survival of the Government or his own Chief Ministership if too many disgruntled MLAs jumped ship.

While each Minister is entitled to the perks and privileges of the office that they hold, one must keep in mind that the primacy of being a **'public-servant'** is to **'serve the public.'** The responsibilities that go with the office of being a Minister is to provide executive and political leadership in ensuring the mandate of the Ministry that one heads. The Minister is to take the final responsibility in ensuring the planned outcomes of his/her Ministry is attained, the budget is efficient-

ly spent and themselves and their personnel are accountable to the people who have elected their Government.

Considering the current reality of COVID, the state of the economy, the need to ensure investments in the social sector, the falling revenues of the State and the overall sense of despondency, one would expect the Chief Minister and his cabinet to lose sleep over the problems of the people and not get entangled in their own problems of 'power' and 'position'. This will require competence, commitment, a great degree of selflessness and the desire to work in tandem with each other rather than spend time bickering amongst themselves and failing to deliver as a team. The Chief Minister should bear the cross and either discipline his colleagues or find others who are willing to be the kind of Ministers the situation currently demands.

While it is the prerogative of the head of Government to appoint his Council of Ministers provided the Constitutional obligations are met, the people must understand that tolerating mediocrity is as much a contributing factor as being indifferent to what is happening around us. One must bear in mind the popular adage that the people will get the Government they deserve. This will mean a more responsible and mature engagement of the citizenry when it comes to voting, when it comes to engaging with the political powers that be and in resisting the temptation of asking for personal favours of the people that one elects.

Demanding responsible, responsive and corruption-free governance can only happen when the 'public' hold themselves responsible in playing their part as 'citizens'. And till that happens, all that one can do is to be a silent by-stander waiting for the 'mythical' strong leader to appear and clean up the system for us.

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