



OPINION

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No country for the unaffiliated

Political parties that stayed away from alliances face an existential crisis

The 2014 verdict, which gave the BJP a simple majority in the Lok Sabha, suggested that the country may be leaving behind the coalition era of nearly a quarter century. The Congress and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) it headed were decimated in that election. Five years later, the BJP, riding on the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, won 303 seats, indicating that the polity was heading for a unipolar moment; the Congress had state-level alliances that failed to find traction among voters, except in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. However, regional outfits such as the Trinamool Congress, YSRCP, Bharat Rashtra Samithi, Biju Janata Dal (BJD), Samajwadi Party, and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) survived the Modi blitz and found decent representation in the Lok Sabha. The 2024 general elections have altered the national picture. The BJP is 32 seats short of a simple majority, though the NDA at 293 appears set to form the government. The INDIA bloc led by the Congress, an expanded version of the 2004-14 UPA, has emerged as a strong Opposition with 235 MPs. Clearly, the polity has turned bipolar, with voters backing two strong coalitions. Political parties that chose to stay outside these two alliances have fared poorly; the lone rangers now face an existential crisis. There are just 16 seats in the Lok Sabha that have been won by independents or parties that are not part of either INDIA or NDA.

Take the case of regional heavyweights including the BJD, BRS, AIADMK and BSP that refused to join any alliance. These will have no representatives in the Lok Sabha whereas the YSRCP, another lone ranger, has barely survived the storm (its tally is down to four from 22 in 2019); The Shiromani Akali Dal, one of the oldest allies of the BJP, left the NDA in 2020 and is now down to a single seat (its vote share fell from 26.3% in 2014 to 13.4% in 2024). On the other hand, parties that opted for alliances — the Telugu Desam Party, Janata Dal (United) and Janata Dal (Secular) in NDA, Shiv Sena and Nationalist Congress Party factions in NDA and INDIA, and the Communist parties — have salvaged some ground and will have representation in the lower house of Parliament.

Interestingly, the YSRCP, BJD and BRS, which used to support the BJP's legislative agenda in Parliament but refused to be a part of NDA, have seen their collective tally drop from 43 seats in 2019 to just four this time. All three parties have lost in their respective strongholds — Andhra Pradesh (YSRCP), Odisha (BJD), and Telangana (BRS) — and two have even lost the state (the third did in December itself). Clearly, the electorate prefers clarity about where the parties stand in a time of great ideological polarisation.

Listen to rumblings in the Punjab results

The general elections results were declared two days before the 40th anniversary of Operation Blue Star, which had left Punjab traumatised. The scars of militancy are hidden by the return of normalcy in public affairs. However, two poll outcomes should serve as a warning and, hopefully, make the political mainstream reflect on the restive state of Punjabi society, especially its youth.

Among the 13 winners from Punjab are two independents, Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa, who represent a radical stream in the polity. Amritpal Singh, a detenu charged under the National Security Act, has been trying to claim the legacy of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, the preacher who became the face of militancy in Punjab. He won a five-cornered contest in Khadoor Sahib with a margin close to 200,000 votes. Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa, son of Beant Singh, one of the assassins of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, defeated candidates from six parties to win the Faridkot seat with a margin of over 70,000 votes. It is evident that the electorate was spoilt for choices but preferred Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa.

It is welcome that the radical fringe wants to join the electoral mainstream. However, the big daddies of Punjab politics — the Congress, AAP, SAD and BJP — should probe the reasons behind the backing for the radical politicians. Clearly, there seems to be disquiet among sections of the population that the political mainstream is unable to address the state's concerns. The AAP promised change, but its government is struggling to fulfil its promises. The discontent is not to be dismissed as signs of separatism or militancy, but it needs to be engaged with by the political mainstream and the root causes addressed by the State.

The Naidu vs Jagan potboiler in Andhra

The revenge politics and governance gaffes of Jagan Mohan Reddy cost the YSRCP dearly in the elections. It has given a new life to the TDP in the southern state

In September 2022, YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, leader of the Yuwajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) and then chief minister (CM) of Andhra Pradesh, addressed a massive gathering following the party's victory in the Kuppam assembly constituency, held by Telugu Desam Party (TDP) chief Chandrababu Naidu since 1989. He enthused party members with the rallying cry of "Why not 175", envisioning a sweep of all 175 assembly constituencies in the upcoming elections. As the 2024 assembly and Lok Sabha elections approached, Reddy launched his party's campaign with the same slogan, confident that his government's flagship welfare schemes, described as *navaratnalu* (nine gems), would secure the necessary seats for re-election.

However, the YSR Congress suffered a staggering defeat, securing only 11 seats. In sharp contrast, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), consisting of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Jana Sena Party (JSP), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), clinched a landslide victory, securing 164 seats. The sharp drop in the YSRCP's electoral performance — its seats plummeted from 151 in the 2019 assembly

elections to just 11 in 2024 — calls for scrutiny. Similarly, the NDA's overwhelming triumph deserves an examination of the key factors that fuelled its success.

During his 2019 electoral campaign, Reddy made grand promises to the people of Andhra Pradesh, such as completing the construction of the capital city in Amaravati, securing Special Category status for the state, releasing an annual job calendar on January 1 each year, and the completion of the Polavaram project. However, in office, rather than focussing on fulfilling these promises, he engaged in a politics of vengeance. He used the office to settle scores with his arch-rival, former CM and TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu. For instance, all projects initiated and contracts awarded by Naidu in Amaravati were abruptly cancelled by Jagan's government. His animosity against Naidu ran so deep that, instead of distributing the ready-to-occupy flats to the promised beneficiaries from the poor segment of the population in Amaravati, he allowed those flats to fall into disrepair. Reddy mooted three capitals for the state instead of completing Amaravati. However, people wondered if the CM could construct three capitals when he couldn't complete even one!

The YSRCP government's volunteer system had a debilitating effect on state institutions, especially local governing bodies. Under this system, a volunteer was assigned to every 50 families, acting as a facilitator for transactions between the state and

these families. Although this seemed like a form of pastoral care by the state, it gradually undermined institutions like the *panchayats*, leaving their employees paid but without work. Moreover, the volunteer system strained the state's finances, as the honorarium for volunteers came from the state exchequer. Many people lamented that volunteers acted as informants for the ruling party, reporting on supporters and opponents, leading to bias in governance.

Throughout Reddy's term, law and order deteriorated. In several instances of violence, YSRCP leaders and workers were given free rein against TDP leaders and workers. The police, who were supposed to maintain neutrality, were accused of acting as a private force of the ruling regime. Reddy's politics of vengeance peaked when his government arrested Naidu and held him in remand for an extended period. The scenes of the elderly Naidu — he is 74 — being dragged by the police created public sympathy in his favour.

An important aspect that significantly damaged the YSRCP's reputation was the AP Land Titling Act of 2023. The government claimed the Act was passed to streamline land records, resolve disputes, and provide permanent titles. However, Opposition leaders, particularly Naidu, labelled it a "land grabbing Act" and warned people against it. He argued that it was another tactic by Reddy to seize people's lands, emphasising that the Act required only a photocopy of the transaction, leaving the original



Pawan Kalyan's emergence as a political force influenced the outcome ANI

documents with the government. Naidu also highlighted how the YSRCP government printed Reddy's image on land passbooks instead of the official state emblem. This move alarmed land and property owners.

It is this mismanagement in government that has allowed the TDP to re-emerge as a strong alternative to the YSRCP ahead of the 2024 elections. Naidu, who had previously lost office and faced significant challenges, including arrest, was wary of taking unnecessary risks. He successfully negotiated an alliance with the BJP. Surprisingly, the electoral partnership between the BJP and TDP disproportionately benefited the former over the latter. In the 2019 assembly elections, the BJP had failed to secure even a single seat in the state. However, in the recent elections, it managed to win eight of 10 seats allocated to the party. While the long-term implications of this coalition on Andhra Pradesh's political landscape remain uncertain, for now, it has yielded more seats to the alliance partners than initially anticipated.

Actor Pawan Kalyan's emergence as a political force further influenced the outcome. His relentless criticism of the YSRCP government's undemocratic practices and campaigns against its alleged corruption resonated across the state, particularly the Kapu caste and youth from backward

communities. His party's sweeping victory, securing all 21 allocated seats, underscores his growing influence.

Additionally, the TDP's "Super Six" welfare promises significantly bolstered its electoral prospects. Recognising the YSRCP's success with welfare schemes, the TDP offered ambitious initiatives, such as creating two million jobs for young people, providing financial assistance to schoolchildren and women, and ensuring essential resources such as gas cylinders and free transportation. Despite the fiscal challenges these pledges pose, they garnered substantial support from women and lower-income groups, contributing to the landslide victory.

Despite this resounding success, navigating Andhra Pradesh's precarious financial situation presents a daunting challenge for the TDP and its allies, although being part of the NDA and having a voice in Delhi will help. Naidu's political acumen will be crucial in overcoming these hurdles. Nonetheless, for now, it's a moment of celebration for the Naidu-Kalyan partnership, marking the beginning of a new political era in the state.

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Delhi hospital fire calls for more than mourning

On May 25, seven newborn babies were killed in a major fire at a private hospital in Delhi. The usual elements of a post-tragedy set-up in India were played out: Condemnation by politicians, promises of strict action by the regime, a few hasty arrests and a sudden knee-jerk reaction by public health regulators. All of this will play out over a couple of weeks and then all will be fine — till the next hospital fire. We, as a nation, fail our people in the introspection of such heartbreaking tragedies.

India is one of the few liberal democracies where health care has nearly completely passed into private hands. From dingy clinics in bylanes to posh corporate hospitals, private players now provide more than 80% of health care in this country. In other words, the government of a country with 1.4 billion people is responsible for the health of only 280 million of its citizens. This is what should worry us more than anything else. The May 25 fire is thus not just any accident. It is the outcome of a poorly managed and operated health care delivery apparatus by private practitioners, allowed to go free by an irresponsible public health care regulator. It was thus an accident manufactured with the consent and connivance of multiple players, both private and public.

Fires at hospitals are not uncommon in this part of the world. The AMRI hospital fire in Kolkata killed 90 people in 2011. In April 2021, at the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic, 13 patients were killed in a fire at the Vijay Lalbh Hospital near Mumbai. In the same year, 11 patients were killed at the Sunrise Hospital fire, again in Mumbai. In 2022, eight patients perished in a fire at the New Life Multispecialty hospital in Jabalpur and 50 patients were killed in a fire at the Murshidabad Medical College in West Bengal in 2016. A 2023 study (Shravishtha Juyal, Tabassum-Abbasi, Tasneem Abbasi and SA Abbasi), which compiled all the major fires in Indian hospitals from 2010 to 2023 found the incidence of fires was equal between private and public hospitals but the number of deaths in private hospital fires far outweighed those in government hospitals.

Private health care in India is poorly regulated. In a welfare state promising to provide free health care to its people, health remains a state subject which may be explained by the fact that each state has its own health priorities. Having said this, health regulations, particularly for private health set-ups at the state level are not only poorly implemented, but are liable to the pressures of money and power. The implementation is patchy in most places and private practitioners go scot-free even after blatant violations. Hospitals and nursing

THE MAY 25 FIRE IS THE OUTCOME OF POORLY MANAGED HEALTH CARE DELIVERY APPARATUS BY PRIVATE PRACTITIONERS, ALLOWED TO GO FREE BY AN IRRESPONSIBLE PUBLIC HEALTH CARE REGULATOR

homes in the Capital city are regulated by the Delhi Nursing Homes Registration Act, 1953, which stands amended by the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act, 2010. But even after all approvals, the act remains to be implemented, thanks to the tug of war involving the Centre and the Delhi state government. Political ambitions remain the single most important determinant of health in the world's largest democracy!

It is an open secret that most private hospitals in Delhi fail to provide free treatment and beds to poor patients, despite this being a legal requirement in lieu of the land given at the time of their construction. If this can happen in the country's Capital, we can only imagine the situation in smaller towns and cities. Having said this, it is important to realise that private health care is here to stay. Mere condemnation of private health care providers is not a solution in a system where private health care delivery is so tightly entrenched that the system now depends on it for its own viability and survival. Failures such as the killer fire can only be minimised through the proper implementation of regulatory mechanisms. The common causes of fires in hospitals are usually poor building structure with no escape routes, presence and improper storage of inflammable liquids and gases in the vicinity and, most importantly, lack of fire safety standard operating protocols.

As a nation enamoured by the West, we need to learn what happened after the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017 that killed 72 people. The synthetic cladding used in the exterior of the tower, which was the main cause of the fire, was banned in the country. Criminal charges have been brought up against the company which manufactured those claddings. A total of 180 investigators, in collaboration with international experts, prepared an extensive report that set off a broad reckoning of British regulations and fire safety. All in all, accountability was set and regulations enforced.

For the new government that will soon assume charge at the Centre, the Delhi hospital fire should provide a moment for reflection: It must take steps on priority to enhance public investment in health care besides regulating the private facilities that have mushroomed all over the country. It is the shortage of affordable health care facilities, which only the State can provide, that has facilitated the emergence of a market for establishments with poor facilities and untrained personnel.

What has happened to us as a civil society is that our sense of outrage has been blunted by deaths and mishaps about which we feel we can't do much except mourn. Whether it's a bridge crash, a hoarding collapse, a train accident, a tunnel caving in on workers or a hospital fire killing the ill, we have learnt the art of looking the other way. Accountability is no longer ingrained in the apparatus of civility. We shall continue this way if the offenders, and equally the lawmakers and the law enforcers, continue to go unnoticed, unaccounted and most importantly unpunished.

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{ KRISTALINA GEORGIEVA } MANAGING DIRECTOR, IMF

Pessimists say humanity faces a disastrous reckoning. But I see a different picture. If we act decisively in this decade, we can help ensure a livable planet



How Trinamool played out BJP's spin in Bengal

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has successfully shepherded her party to a convincing win in the just-concluded general elections. Before we start parsing the results, a word on the prognostications of the pollsters would not be out of place.

The exit polls almost unanimously had the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pulling ahead of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) both in terms of seats and vote share. A "poll of polls", for instance, gave the BJP 23 seats and the TMC 18. One exit poll predicted 26-31 seats for the BJP against 11-14 for the TMC, while also placing the respective vote shares at 46% and 40%.

The TMC won 29 seats against the BJP's 12. The TMC's vote share has risen from 43.3% to around 46%, while the BJP's vote share has fallen from 40.7% to around 39%. The point of beginning with the exit poll projections is to highlight their failure to look at the situation on the ground.

A number of observers who have been keeping their ears to the ground foresaw a diminution of the BJP's vote share and consequently their seat strength because of several developments leading up to the declaration of the elections on March 16 and subsequently during the nomination process and campaigning.

In the run-up to the announcement, it appeared that the BJP had decided to fashion its campaigning around February's Sandeshkhali agitation, mostly led by women, against land grab, intimidation, physical assault, corruption and, crucially, the sexual oppression of large numbers of women, orchestrated by Sheikh Shahjahan, a local TMC functionary.

There was no real Plan B. Thus, when the state government moved, albeit a little dilatorily, to arrest the culprits and begin the process of resituating plots of land converted from agricultural fields to water bodies for pisciculture, some of the force of the campaign was blunted.

Then, when a series of sting videos emerged suggesting that the movement against sexual exploitation was orchestrated by state BJP leaders by offering inducements, alongside retractions of allegations of sexual abuse by several women, the TMC got a chance to draw the sting from the agitation. In fact, Banerjee sought, it now appears successfully, to paint the inducements as an attempt to dishonour Bengal and its women. Sandeshkhali is in the Basirhat constituency, which the TMC's Haji

Nurul Islam won by a landslide despite being pitted against the BJP's Rekha Patra, one of the leaders of the movement, whose candidature was endorsed by Prime Minister Modi.

It was debatable from the outset whether the Sandeshkhali issue would have a statewide resonance, given that Banerjee has created a redoubtable constituency among women by rolling out several welfare schemes specific to them.

The other string in the BJP's bow was the education scam. But the TMC managed to neutralise that as well when the Supreme Court (SC) passed a verdict favourable to the government. On April 22, the Calcutta high court (HC) passed an order cancelling over 25,000 school jobs on account of irregularities in the hiring process though only a fraction of them had been contested in the first place. This gave the Opposition ammunition. The BJP tore into the TMC, without expressing sympathy for those who had lost their jobs.

On May 7, the SC stayed the order, citing precisely the fact that not all the jobs cancelled had been affected by the recruitment "scam". This enabled the TMC to turn the issue into one of livelihood. After the HC order, Banerjee had said she would fight it and not allow people to lose their livelihood. After the SC order, she claimed vindication, painting the Opposition as unfeeling and alleging a nexus between the BJP and some HC judges. Her position gained credibility because Abhijit Gangopadhyay, the judge who had originally been trying some of the recruitment cases, quit, joined the BJP and was fielded by the party from the Tamluk constituency, the backyard of Suwendu Adhikari, the BJP's leader of the Opposition. Gangopadhyay won with a margin of over 77,000 votes.

The BJP scored a few self-goals in the process of managing the elections in West Bengal. Their nomination process was slow, which gave the TMC an early-mover advantage. The nominations were quixotic in some cases as well, especially when winning candidates were shuffled around.

The strategy of bringing in star campaigners from outside and sidelining state leaders helped the TMC characterise the BJP as a "party of outsiders", just as it did during the 2021 assembly elections.



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