

# The Politics of Antagonism Will Murder Our Democracy



The survival of democracy depends on dialogue and debate. Sadly, the Indian democratic system is being

subverted by the very individuals who are expected to hold healthy discussions to resolve contentious issues. The picture of a chief minister seeking justice from the president of India against the atrocities unleashed by a nominee of the Rashtrapati Bhawan defines the impending collapse of India's institutional framework. Last week, Karnataka Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa accompanied by 121 of his MLAs walked up Raisina Hill in New Delhi to meet Pratibha Patil because back home, Governor Hans Raj Bhardwaj had refused to engage the chief minister in sane dialogue. For Bhardwaj, the language of threats and dismissal was the best means to settle political disputes. As the BJP leaders were meeting the president, the governor issued yet another veiled threat to a democratically elected government which has been repeatedly winning the people's mandate during the past few months.

The crisis in Karnataka symbolises the sickness that plagues Indian politics. Consensus has been replaced with confrontation, effusiveness with ego and accommodation with arrogance. As five new chief ministers took over in states which went to the polls last week, the mood at nearly every swearing venue was the jubilation of a bloody war won. It didn't look anything like the celebration of an electoral victory. Those who were defeated by the voter were conspicuous by their absence; those who won were least concerned about their missing rivals who had earlier ruled the state for five years. It was a change without the continuity of democratic tradition. In both Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, no political party that vied for power had ever opened a dialogue with each other. Mamata Banerjee had been leading a relentless campaign against Marxist misrule for the past 15 years but not one photograph of her with former chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya has appeared anywhere. When did anyone last see J Jayalalithaa and M Karunanidhi sitting across the table to discuss issues concerning their state? In fact, the leaders of the opposition (read whichever party that lost the elections) have made it a point not to attend Assembly sessions for five years in the wilderness.

No wonder, former chief minister Karunanidhi and his clan were

missing in Chennai when Amma was sworn in. So were all prominent Left leaders in Kolkata and Thiruvanthapuram when the new chief ministers took charge. In Assam, there was no opposition worth the name left to represent those who lost to the Congress. This trend looks ominous for the survival of a pluralistic political system in which the majority must

Karunanidhi to invite the leader of the opposition for a brainstorming session. In the north, have we ever heard of the Chautalas of Haryana breaking bread with Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda in the past seven years?

Perhaps, our state leaders are taking the cue from their bosses in New Delhi. For the past few years, all opposition parties have been locked in the foulest slanging match ever with UPA leaders. The most recent example is the total demolition of the Public Accounts Committee—an institution whose credibility had survived until now amid political scandal for decades. Confronted with the 2G impasse, its members resorted to the use of offensive language against each other rather than civilised and mature discussion. The political air has been fouled by mistrust so much that neither the Government nor the Opposition has met even once so far to take stock of the security situation arising out of the threat posed by the ISI chief's outburst against India. It seems even the UPA's coalition partners have forgotten to hold the usual meetings of the coordination committee. The fact is they are involved in an internecine secret war.

Their only agenda has been to dislodge, besiege and besmirch the reputations of one another through means both fair and foul. In the process, even daily political discourse has acquired venomous overtones with most leaders using acerbic, sometimes even abusive, language against each other. Perhaps, the current crop of political leaders have forgotten how Titans—who are part of their own political lineage—like Jawahar Lal Nehru, Ram Manohar Lohia, Atal Bihari Vajpayee conducted their political lives; each one of them was capable of going for the jugular within the legislature but would be seen dining together and sharing the same venue later in the evening. Lal Bahadur Shastri invited the RSS to work for civil defence and Vajpayee called up Indira Gandhi after India won the 1971 war against Pakistan. For them, the nation came first and not their names on the front pages or their faces on prime-time news. Now politicians use newspapers and the small screen to convey anger through abuse. Their discourses are not about solutions but slandering one another. Gen-Next is certainly a master of words but severely lacks wisdom.

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have its way while the minority is allowed to have its say. For the past few years, both the opposition and the ruling parties—at the Centre and in the states—have abandoned the democratic tradition of consulting each other on problems facing the people. In almost every state, the ruling party has hardly ever made an attempt to even invite the leader of the opposition for an informal meeting to discuss issues. For example, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has never met a single opposition leader in the past so many years. In Bihar, even the normally affable Nitish Kumar has kept the opposition at a distance, as if he doesn't need their suggestions on tackling the state's thorny problems. In Jammu and Kashmir, Mehbooba Mufti has spurned every offer of Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to participate in all-party meetings. Kashmir faces daily threats of terror and is still one of the least developed states despite liberal grants from Delhi. But never have the ruling party and the opposition confabulated even once to get rid of poverty and ensure security.

Even when helpless Tamilians were being mowed down by the Sri Lankan army, it didn't occur to