

# Of democracy in danger

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*BJP's demand for the sacking of what it calls "tainted" ministers violates political morality. In the name of saving democracy, it seeks to deny the people their political mandate. It is an attempt to win a political game by violating the ground rules agreed upon*

WHO SAYS THAT THE FASCISTS OF India always say the opposite of what they mean? True, when they raise the Hinduism-in-danger cry, it is generally the country's minorities that are in danger. It is different, however, when the Bharatiya Janata Party and its *parivar* shrill their democracy-in-danger slogan. Indian democracy is then indeed in danger. They pose the danger.

There can be no better illustration of this than the latest in their long series of save-democracy campaigns. They have picked the campaign issues carefully. These are addressed to their special constituency, and that of classical fascism. It is the constituency of classes (as well as castes, in this case) that seek to protect democracy from the people.

The first thing they did, immediately after losing the general election in May, was to flaunt their disdain for democracy. With a virulent intensification of their voter-rejected 'anti-foreigner' campaign, they showed their contempt for the people's mandate as well as for conventions of India's parliamentary polity. By denying the prime minister's office to the elected leader of the party heading the coalition having a clear majority in the new Lok Sabha, the defeated party dictated post-election terms. They, however, talked then, not of saving democracy, but only of saving the country from "dynastic" rule.

Lal Kishen Advani, former Deputy Prime Minister, chosen by the BJP to lead it back to power, has listed three major issues for its campaign over the coming period. One of these — the post-election dismissal of four State Governors appointed by the previous government, all of them from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the patriarch of the 'parivar' — is not related to democracy, really. The Governors, who are unelected political appointees, cannot protest their replacement, even in a democracy of the BJP's definition.

The issue is being agitated only because it gives the party yet another opportunity to return to its "roots" by reasserting its loyalty to the RSS. The BJP's post-election decision to try the back-to-the-roots tactics is an open secret by now.

It is the other two issues that illustrate the ironical character of the campaign. The first of these targets ministers of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's government whom the party calls "tainted". The "taint", which a morally indignant BJP cannot tolerate, is the result of "criminal charges" against these ministers that the police are investigating and courts at different levels considering. The party's demand for the sacking of these ministers is, in fact, what violates all political morality.

It is political immorality, above all, because, in the name of saving democracy, it seeks to deny the people their political mandate. It is an attempt to win a political game by violating the ground rules agreed upon. The Prime Minister, who has the privilege of choosing his council of ministers, is being ordered, in effect, to consult the opposition on this count.

He is being asked, in particular, to deny representation to the second party in the coalition, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) of Bihar's Lalu Prasad Yadav. The leader of the backward State and a backward caste might have won hearts in Pakistan, but he has only earned the hatred of articulate sections ever since he as a chief minister arrested Advani and his Ayodhya march in 1990. A *bete noir* of the media and the middle class since then, he was their darling before that, as newspaper archives will attest. Of that, some other time.

The point is not that the RJD and its Bihar government are paragons of pro-people virtues. Far from that. The point is that political meanness, and no morality, is what motivates the campaign. And it is a meanness that poses a major threat to democracy. The other immorality of the campaign makes this amply clear.

The campaign is immoral also because the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime had more than its share of more truly tainted ministers and the former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had determinedly resisted all demands for their dropping. The most prominent of these NDA ministers — ironies will never cease — was Advani himself. The others included the No. 3 in the Vajpayee Cabinet Murli Manohar Joshi.

The BJP's apologists are indignant at any such comparison. How dare anyone, they demand to know, equate the "political offences" of Advani and, by implication, Gujarat's Narendra Modi, with the "criminal; offences" like murders and rapes, with which the "tainted" ministers of today are charged?

The media sees much force in the argument. Are they all really unaware that the riots following Advani's Ayodhya 'rath yatra' (chariot ride) and the Gujarat carnage carried out under Modi's auspices included murders, mutilations and rapes of the most savage kind?

The second issue that the Advani army is going to raise is about the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), put on the statute book by his government. Abolition of the Act was part of the election manifestos of the Congress and its allies, and they have promised action on the pledge. The BJP sees in the move to scrap the draconian law a sinister threat to democracy.

Two clear conclusions can be drawn from the country's experience with POTA over the last two years. The first is that the Centre has striven to use the law as a weapon against only what the 'parivar' sees as minority 'extremism'. The way bit has been wielded in Gujarat and Assam leaves little doubt on this score. The second conclusion, which even the BJP cannot contest, is that the law has been misused by rulers in major States like Tamilnadu and Uttar Pradesh against political adversaries.

The BJP's choice of POTA is an issue of democracy is yet another challenge to all Indians who are proud of the polity of the country's adoption and have a diametrically opposite perception of it.

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