

45. Few alliances that congress is stitching will also be undone by mahagathbandhan cracks

By Gopal Krishna Agarwal,

Glued together by their visceral hate for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and constrained to fight for their own political survival, various opposition parties with no shared policy or ideology are trying to unite against the National Democratic Alliance by calling themselves ‘mahagathbandhan’ – a grand alliance. But the fragmented and leaderless alliance is a non-starter.

The Congress party is supposed to be the nucleus of this grand alliance but other political parties are refusing to accept its leadership. Moreover, not all political parties with significant presence at the state level have joined the mahagathbandhan. The net result is that the possibility of putting up one opposition candidate against the NDA is proving to be more elusive than before.

Let’s start with some of the biggest states — in terms of electorate — to look at where the Congress, and the mahagathbandhan, stand just days before the elections.

In Uttar Pradesh, where the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) have joined hands to contest the Lok Sabha elections, the Congress is nowhere in the scene. Despite some initial talks in West Bengal, the alliance between Mamata Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress and Rahul Gandhi’s Congress seems unlikely with war of words between the leaders of the two parties continuing unabated. In Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) will most likely not accept the Congress’ leadership, which makes any kind of alliance between them seem improbable.

In Kerala, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) is pitted against the Left Democratic Front (LDF). The fight between the Left Front and the Congress has taken an ugly turn since the announcement that Rahul Gandhi will also be contesting from Wayanad constituency (besides his traditional Amethi seat in Uttar Pradesh), with the

Left accusing the Congress of weakening the opposition's resolve to defeat Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Similar is the case in Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The Congress has also failed to enter into an alliance with the parliamentarian Badruddin Ajmal's All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in Assam.

These eight states, which account for 226 seats in the Lok Sabha, will see a triangular or multi-cornered contest making the mahagathbandhan irrelevant.

The Congress' national party status has suffered a jolt in Bihar where it has got only nine out of 40 seats to contest from while the alliance's principal partner, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), will contest 20 seats with the remaining divided among smaller partners like Upendra Kushwaha's Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (five), Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha (three) and Mukesh Sahni's Vikasshil Insan Party (three).

Out of 39 Lok Sabha seats in Tamil Nadu, the Congress has got only nine seats, while it will contest from the single seat in Puducherry. The National Conference (NC) and the Congress sealed an alliance for three Lok Sabha seats in Jammu and Kashmir and are talking of 'friendly contests' on three other seats. In Karnataka, the Janata Dal (Secular), whose HD Kumaraswamy is the state's chief minister, has bargained hard to get eight seats and the Congress would be contesting on 20 seats.

The few alliances that the Congress has managed to cobble up will be undone by the cracks that have already appeared in mahagathbandhan. In Jharkhand, for instance, the Congress was allotted seven of the 14 parliamentary constituencies to contest from, with Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) getting four, Jharkhand Vikas Morcha (JVM) two and Lalu Prasad-led RJD one. But the RJD later objected to the seat-sharing and declared its candidate from Chatra, which was allotted to the Congress. State RJD president Annapurna Devi joined the BJP the day after the seat-sharing agreement was finalised in Jharkhand.

In Maharashtra, the Congress is contesting 26 seats while the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) has managed to get 22 for itself. There is internal bickering in the Congress with the party's state president Ashok Chavan sulking due to the alliance with the NCP.

While there is a complete uncertainty about the so called mahagathbandhan, the NDA already has the support of 39 political parties. The NDA unity was reflected from the fact that it declared its Bihar Lok Sabha candidates together. There was complete show of strength at BJP president Amit Shah's nomination filing at Gandhinagar in Gujarat. The BJP is contesting in Punjab with Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and in Maharashtra with the Shiv Sena. These two are decade-old allies of the BJP.

The grand alliance also does not have a pan-India presence in comparison to the NDA, with all its alliance partners rallying behind one leader — Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Constituents of mahagathbandhan are likely to contest separately in many states, and would be engaged in 'friendly fights', which is nothing but a euphemism for failure to arrive at any seat-sharing agreement, in states like Jammu and Kashmir and Jharkhand. The pompous mahagathbandhan is a farce and its bogey of anti-Modism is not going to last beyond this Lok Sabha elections.