

52. Petty politics over Institution

By Gopal Krishna Agarwal,

In a democratic polity, the Opposition has an important role in keeping in check the ruling dispensation. Its vibrancy is a barometer for the democratic development of a political society. These objectives are achieved through myriad institutions like Parliament, judiciary and Election Commission. Democracies thrive on strong, independent and creditable institutions. Those who believe in democracy have to nurture these institutions, which develop over several generations and carry the footprints of great leaders and the collective wisdom of our founding fathers. The party in power and the Opposition are collectively responsible to protect them.

But recently, the Opposition, in its dislike of the democratically-elected Narendra Modi government, has tried to undermine these very institutions. The Congress, which has held office for the largest period since Independence, has placed certain leftist and ultra-leftist ideologues, in many institutions. Senior minister Arun Jaitley rightly says that they follow the Marxian philosophy of “wrecking the system from within”. The election process changes legislators but not these individuals. Recently we are witnessing the consolidation of these “institution destabilisers”.

Historically, India has always had a very strong and vocal Opposition. This was even true during the heydays of the Congress. The Opposition, for example, played a sterling role to protect democracy when the Emergency was imposed.

In its indiscriminate attack on the government since 2014, the Opposition has failed to distinguish between the political executive and independent institutions. Further, the attacks were not only limited to the institutions but degenerated into attacks on those in charge of them as well.

The Opposition's attack on the Supreme Court has been the most scandalous. The opposition parties, directly and through their proxies, have approached the Supreme Court in a number of matters in the last five years. Whenever orders were in their favour, they sung paeans to the Court. But whenever their prayers were rejected they came together to attack the Supreme Court. Blatant attempts were made to browbeat the judges. The then Chief Justice of India (CJI) was accused of giving orders in favour of the government. Even the joint press conference by the SC's four senior-most judges on January 12, 2018, which pertained to the inner workings of the Court, was used by the Opposition to paint a picture of these judges revolting against the BJP government. The Opposition also used the threat of impeachment motion against the CJI to pressure him.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) too has come under the Opposition's attack. When it was becoming apparent that Raghuram Rajan's term as the governor would not be extended, the opposition parties claimed that foreign investors will pull out money from the Indian financial market and the rupee would collapse. It was also claimed that the sovereign credit rating of India would suffer. A man was sought to be made greater than the institution only because he was seen to be against the Centre on certain issues and was speaking out of turn on public platforms. This period was very demotivating for RBI employees. When demonetisation was announced, it was alleged that the government had undermined the authority of the RBI. Allegations were made against Urjit Patel, the then RBI governor.

Even the armed forces, which are known for their professionalism, have not been spared by the Opposition. When the Indian army announced that it had carried out surgical strikes across the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir in response to the terror attack in Uri, the Opposition demanded proof — all to ensure that the government does not get credit for the strikes. Similar reactions followed the Balakot air strikes on terrorist camps after the Pulwama attack.

The biggest and the most sinister attack has been the attempt to delegitimise governments by blaming the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the electronic voting machines (EVMs). The ECI has won accolades throughout the world for its impartial conduct of the elections. When the opposition parties lost elections, instead of accepting the verdict of the people gracefully, they started blaming the ECI and claimed that the EVMs

were hacked. The ECI's attempts to answer questions — including an open challenge to hack EVMs — could not satisfy them. These parties have nothing to offer as explanation when asked how did the BJP get voted in at the Centre in the first place when the preceding government was a Congress-led one or the fact that BJP lost in the state elections in Delhi and Bihar in 2015, and more recently in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

Imagine the impact of a hostile foreign government and its media declaring that the election was widely believed to be rigged on the prestige of Indian government in international fora. The Opposition must understand that it cannot deliver on its role by undermining the independent institutions of the country. Some things must be left out of everyday petty politics. Undermining the vital institutions of the country might give them short-term political returns but would be disastrous in the long run for each one of us.