

ILLUSTRATION BY BINAY SINHA



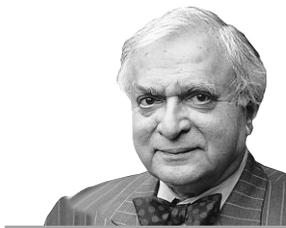
Democracy in distress – II

The long, uneasy route from representative to constitutional democracy

In my last column, I had outlined the evolution of Western representative democracy from its initial constitutional form to preserve liberty (government for the people), which, with the extension of the franchise, was conjoined with mass electoral representation (government by the people). This period of mass democracy following the Industrial Revolution led to the creation of mass political parties based on a political agenda of the conflict between capital and labour. But, with globalisation limiting the state's autonomy to pursue the redistributive games on which the domestic politics of these mass parties was based, the political agenda has narrowed to largely technocratic issues. Parties, thus, end up with similar programmes, becoming "competing teams of leaders" emphasising their governing rather than representative roles. Instead of the "government by the people", what we get is a government by a governing class, where parties have become primarily office-seeking organisations. The contest even in parliamentary democracies, then, becomes "presidential" between the leaders of the teams seeking office. One of the key functions they continue to perform is to dispense political patronage.

However, even if the political system is no longer as representative as it was in the golden age of mass democracy, it preserves the essential feature of a liberal democracy: the constitutional order first charted by the United States to preserve liberty. By contrast, as Fareed Zakaria and others have argued, the most common form of democracy to be found particularly in the Third World is "illiberal democracy", which fulfils the representational aspect of democracy through peri-

odic elections but encroaches on personal liberties and the rule of law. Russia and increasingly Turkey today are recent examples. But, India, despite some backsliding, remains a constitutional liberal democracy where the judiciary has by and large preserved liberty. But, as in the West, has the representative element of democracy declined — and if so, is this desirable? Contributions to *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India* (2009), which summarises the political science findings about various aspects of Indian democracy, provide some answers.



DEEPAK LAL

The representative function is fulfilled through political parties. The Congress' single-party dominance has gradually fragmented; no single party at the national level has achieved a parliamentary majority since the 1984 election. This national fragmentation is matched by consolidation at the state level towards bipolarity. These divergent trends are convincingly explained by E Sridharan's application of Duverger's law to a federal polity where elections are based on the first-

past-the-post system. This law states that under the first-past-the-post mechanism, voters will increasingly coalesce into two rival parties — third parties and alliances are squeezed out, since they do not have a realistic chance of winning. In a federal system, Duverger's law can apply at the state level, but, as in the different states the two-party system does not consist of the same parties, that leads to a multi-party system nationally. This requires interstate alliances of parties that do not compete on each other's turf, and which, *faute de mieux*, have to modulate any ideological differences with their coalition partners. This happened with the

Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition under Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It is now happening under Narendra Modi, who, as Ashutosh Varshney has noted, has departed in his election speeches from the core Hindutva tenets in order to gain power as the head of a moderate NDA coalition.

As Zoya Hussain notes, the evolution of Indian political parties "through a politics of accommodation and consensus" has led to democratic consolidation, which "binds the political class together despite their different party affiliations". It has given historically excluded groups access to the political system. Though voters see parties as essential to democracy, they do not trust them as vehicles of representation and governance. "The absence of internal democracy, dynastic rule, elite capture, and the inability of parties to offer real choices to the people are among the major issues confronting India's parties".

The seeming governance failure of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in its second term has also accentuated a trend among the middle class for a more technocratic form of governance. As Christophe Jaffrelot recently reported, in answer to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies' State of Democracy in South Asia project: "all major decisions about the country should be taken by experts rather than politicians". In 2008, 51 per cent of the respondents from the "elite" "strongly agreed" and 29 per cent "agreed"; and among the "mass", 29 per cent "strongly agreed" and 22 per cent "agreed". Thus, as in Western democracies, there seems to be a shift in popular attitudes towards technocratic, rather than populist, political modes of governance.

Yogendra Yadav, too, notes that "the issue of political representation itself is declining in salience due to a shift in the locus of decision making from the legislature and executive to independent bodies and the judiciary". Thus, as in Western democracies, the representational aspect is declining, while the constitutional aspect endures.

These emerging trends will be strengthened by the attitudes of the growing urban middle class. As Minna Saavala (*Middle-Class Moralities*) argues, the traditional urban middle class is being replenished by a "neo-middle class" of other backward classes migrating from the villages. They are an aspiring class, whose caste identity has been eroded. They demand growth that offers them a brighter economic future. They are also intensely religious; they adhere to Hindu rituals in a form of Sanskritisation. But, like their upper-caste compatriots, they want a meritocracy and are against reservations. They are part of the Modi wave. Going by its recent manifesto, the UPA seems to be stuck in its "rights-based" welfarist mode. As in the West, unsustainable political entitlements to income streams are being undermined by globalisation, which leaves the sustainable income entitlements generated by economic growth as the only viable model for continuing economic progress.

Clearly, Indian democracy is veering towards the Western model; elections have become a verdict on the suitability of different teams from the political class, and voters are increasingly uncommitted to parties but are exercising their democratic right to "throw the rascals out". Against this backdrop, good governance while maintaining liberty is likely to be the future of Indian democracy. This is no bad thing; as long as liberty is preserved, in Alexander Pope's words, "For forms of government let fools contest; whatever is best administered is best" (*An Essay on Man*).