

Personality Supreme in Kerala: Is this the New Normal among Political Parties?

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Summary

State election results in May 2021 have thrown up very decisive mandates. The public seems to have vested its trust in parties led by tall local personalities. These leaders seem to enjoy unrivalled authority within their state organisations. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) in Kerala, the Trinamool Congress in Bengal and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam in Tamil Nadu, have thrown up leaders who are capable of holding their own vis-à-vis the party outfit. Does this herald an era where individuals will hold the sway over political parties and where these organisations will have to reinvent their decision making processes? We need to observe how these leaders perform.

Introduction

Democracy in India is taking a very definitive direction. Whether it is the Union/State governments or political parties, the tendency appears to be for them to get into a single authority mode. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in the centre has been at the receiving end of observations that power and authority are increasingly getting vested in the Prime Minister's Office, and that ministers and ministries are rendered devoid of decision-making powers. A similar trend is being seen in states where elections were conducted recently. In West Bengal, despite having lost her own election, Mamata Banerjee emerged as the unquestioned leader. She took oath, and though rules provide for her to get elected within six months, but no one ever raised an eyebrow that she has been appointed chief minister despite not being a member of the legislative assembly. There is no indication of even a remote possibility of any other minister being a number two in her cabinet. In Tamil Nadu, after decades of waiting in the wings, and gaining experience as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, mayor and minister, M K Stalin has emerged as the chief minister and the unquestioned leader of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). His victory is indeed a riposte to all his critics, who had questioned his leadership skills and electoral politics. He has moved beyond the shadow of his father and consolidated his hold over the party. The trend seen in Kerala is also similar. Pinarayi Vijayan has created history of sorts by bucking a 44-year trend in leading an incumbent government back to power. He has unveiled a 'new look' cabinet, which does not have any person from his previous government. The cabinet has his unmistakable stamp of total control on the party apparatus and government.

Unquestioned Leader, Better Governance?

In each of these cited instances, there has emerged a clear and unquestioned leader, whose writ runs unquestioned. The issue that needs to be deliberated: is this the new normal now

viz. power in the hands of one person? And, if the person is reputed to be decisive and has unchallenged political mandate, does it work to better and speedier governance? Vijayan has been sworn in as the chief minister of Kerala. He has stuck to his declared pre-election commitment that those who have been ministers in the earlier government will not be reappointed. While this policy may have been a result of “consensus” in the party committee, it has raised eye brows – nay hackles – as it has left out possibly the best performing minister of the previous cabinet, the widely acclaimed ‘Covid Warrior’ or ‘Rock Star’ as she came to be known for her remarkable stewardship in Kerala’s fight against the first wave of COVID-19 infections. K K Shailaja or Shailaja Teacher, as she was popularly called, was globally acknowledged for this. She had received willing support and cooperation from the Kerala bureaucracy and public. She was omnipresent at all hotspots of crisis or emergency. Her leadership and on-the-spot instructions were immensely helpful in averting major problems and she was looked upon for guidance by one and all. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)] central committee in Delhi appears to have expressed concern at her omission.¹ However, as seems to have become the trend now, the concentration of authority in one ‘supreme leader’ has substantially diminished the authority of the party outfit. This is remarkably so in the case of Vijayan as he has not only created history by returning to power but he is also now the only CPI (M) chief minister in any state in the country. This gives him unrivalled authority to probably ignore, or set aside, the views of the party central committee, the supreme policy making authority in the country. His stamp on the government formulation is so total that despite some murmurs within the organisation, P A Mohammad Riyas, the only Muslim face of the CPI (M) in north Kerala, who happens to be his son-in-law and a first time legislator, finds a berth in the cabinet. This action further establishes the vice-like grip he has over the party.²

Compare this with another party. Mohan Bhagwat, a supreme voice in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and whose mere utterances were considered to be diktats written in stone for the outfit, seems to have expressed his helplessness when he declared in his much publicised address, “We are facing this situation [COVID-19 pandemic] because, whether it was the government, administration or public, everyone dropped their guard after the first wave despite indications from doctors.”³ He was probably, in his own words and style, lending credence to the widely-held belief that the Narendra Modi-led government ignored the advice of experts and the scientific community that a second COVID-19 wave would hit the country and that it may be more lethal than the first wave. In the process, no plan of action was prepared to contain the wave while hitting the campaign trail in Bengal and other states became the priority. In any earlier avatar, the words of the RSS supremo would have caused tremors. Not anymore! RSS and BJP watchers believe that Modi has also established his grip on the Sangh, with the result that the Sangh supremo can at best only express his helplessness at the actions and priorities of the government. This equation is being compared to the situation prevailing during the time of NDA 1 with Atal

¹ Sobhana K Nair, “State panel’s decision to drop Shailaja: CPI(M)”, *The Hindu*, 18 May 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/cpi-central-leadership-chooses-not-to-criticise-cabinet-selection-in-kerala/article34588115.ece>.

² Ibid.

³ Press Trust of India, “Government, administration, public – all dropped guard after first Covid wave: RSS Chief Mohan Bhagwat”, *Mint*, 15 May 2021. <https://www.livemint.com/politics/policy/govt-administration-public-all-dropped-guard-after-first-covid-wave-rss-chief-mohan-bhagwat-11621084598691.html>.

Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister. Even with a tall leader like Vajpayee, the voice of then Sangh chief, K C Sudarshan, did carry a great deal of weight with the government. Such views expressed by the Sangh chief could not have gone unnoticed.

Reviewing the Kerala Model

Reverting to the Kerala scenario, it would be recalled that a major plank of the election campaign of the CPI (M) was its government's handling of the Nipah and COVID-19 outbreaks with very effective use of the health infrastructure. Then health minister, Shailaja, was credited with providing stewardship to the creation of health infrastructure at the *panchayat* (village council) level which functioned very effectively in providing succour to people in distress during the pandemic and flood relief. Her efforts and achievements had gained wide acclaim across party lines and in global media. It is reported that during pre-cabinet formation discussions, it was never indicated that a legislator of the standing of Shailaja, who incidentally had won her Mattanur constituency election with a record margin of 61,000 votes (the highest in the state indicating to her popularity), would not be considered for a ministerial berth. It was believed that just the manner in which an exemption to the 'no previous minister' norm would not apply to the chief minister, a similar exception would be made for Shailaja. Thus, excluding her on the professed parameter of not providing a second term to any minister from the previous Left Democratic Front (LDF) ministry, has not carried any credence with the public and media at large. Her exclusion seems to be with the intent of the CPI (M) sending a signal that the repeat mandate for the LDF was not merely on the singular achievements of particular individuals, but the government as a whole and that the party policies are cast without any individual in mind. Any individual's victory at the hustings or their personal popularity is not a relevant factor and that it is the collective popularity of the party which counts. It also signals scant regard for public sentiments or expectations about party personnel. The underlying factor in all these decisions is the iron hand of the chief minister, whether be it in state administration or party matters.

A new cabinet has been sworn in. Veena George, a journalist till 2016, has been entrusted the health portfolio. She has the daunting task of firstly, stepping into Shailaja's shoes; and secondly, tackling the second wave of the pandemic which is raging in the state with rare virulence.⁴ This selection also casts a very major challenge to the chief minister to ensure that the gamble of choosing a new health minister will not cost the party dearly. Kerala has the tradition of a very pro-active bureaucracy. Its local self-bodies have a track record of supplementing district administration efforts with great sincerity. A combination of these two factors will ensure that there is no setback in the health department's efforts towards combating the pandemic. Local self governing bodies, which had excelled during the devastating floods of 2019, have once again mobilised the local youth to supply food, oximeters, folding cots and vehicular support. They have created 'war rooms' and call centres which provide updated and active guidance to persons regarding availability of beds and oxygen. However, the glare will certainly be on the new minister.

⁴ "Former journalist Veena George replaces K K Shailaja as Kerala Health Minister in Covid era", *India Today*, 21 May 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/kerala/story/journalist-veena-george-shailaja-kerala-health-minister-covid-profile-1805161-2021-05-21>.

The Kerala polity is very discerning. It is demanding of the administration and keeps itself abreast of all actions taken by its government. The media has a very important part to play in this. The public's decision to return an incumbent government would have been after conscious deliberation of its performance in the last tenure. Vijayan was instrumental in enlisting the people's support, whether to combat the floods, Nipah or the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby permitting the local populace to be active collaborators in a participative governance set-up. This has gone down very well with them. Hence, unlike the Union government's model of a centralised decision-making syndrome, Vijayan has succeeded in enlisting support from local bodies, local communities and state bureaucracy. This has been his unique selling proposition (USP) for popularity and success. The extent of decentralisation is such that district centres have set up dashboards which provide complete details for any requirement, *panchayat* bodies have set up domiciliary care centres, which provide isolation facilities for those who do not have separate toilet facilities to isolate themselves and, 'people's hotels' which provide a plate of rice and curry for ₹20 (36 cents). Kerala's most successful non-government organisation (NGO) for poverty alleviation, Kudumbashree, has been supplying supplies of free food to COVID-19 infected persons. It goes to the credit of the chief minister that he has motivated the youth, local bodies and NGOs to set aside caste, religion and political barriers in ensuring service to the affected community. In a meeting on 8 May 2021, convened after his party was returned to power, he requested representatives of local bodies to take an active role in assisting the district administration in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. The faith of the people in the chief minister has ensured large scale mobilisation of voluntary efforts.

It is possibly this grip on the populace which has emboldened Vijayan to have his way with the party and administration and to that extent take decisions which may not have found favour with the central committee of the party sitting in far off Delhi and not having been of any utility to the party in the run up to the polls in the state. This heralds the arrival of a new era of regional leaders who can hold their own in their area of governance. So, what has been the USP of Vijayan in ensuring that not only does he buck a 44-year trend but also carve out political space for a party which has been driven out of power in other strongholds such as Tripura and West Bengal? I think the first is to be responsive to the needs of the people by listening to all and taking action after weighing expert opinions. A responsive and participative governance structure has helped him deliver a remarkably agile development-oriented administration which has helped create much needed physical infrastructure. He has succeeded in mainstreaming the CPI (M) across caste religion or regional factors and ensured that welfare policies of the government are implemented regardless of caste considerations. Such objective and egalitarian considerations have provided renewed assurance to Muslim and Christian minorities in the state, adding to the stature of the chief minister.

Conclusion

The emergence of a leader who is head and shoulders above the rest of his team is not a negative factor by any standards. India and the states require decisive and dynamic leadership, especially during these testing times. The leader needs to consult with experts in various fields depending on the need of the hour, provide space and freedom to his team to elicit the best from every member and most importantly, give credit where it is due. As is his

lot, since 'the buck stops' at his table, he has to take the blame for failings of his government. It goes without saying that fame and glory will automatically visit his doorstep for sincerely ensuring the welfare of the people who elected him. The recent elections have vested people's faith in certain policies and personalities and it is incumbent on these leaders to deliver as per expectations. That is the need of the hour.

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