

ISAS Brief

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Surprise Nominee for India's Presidential Poll Seems a Sure Winner

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has surprised many by choosing a Dalit leader, Ram Nath Kovind, as its nominee for the election of the country's fourteenth president. The Dalits, consisting of former 'untouchables' are often seen as the country's most-disadvantaged social group. A seasoned lawyer, a two-term Member of Parliament and Governor of the Indian State of Bihar at the time he was chosen as the BJP's presidential nominee, Kovind has the potential of being a winning candidate in the election due to take place on 17 July 2017. The entire political discourse now seems to centre on the fact that he is a Dalit leader. Indeed, the BJP's announcement seems to have won general acclaim, and the arithmetic of the Electoral College also appears to weigh in his favour. The last date for filing nominations is 28 June 2017. The Lok Sabha Secretary General will be the Electoral Officer. Nominations have begun to be filed.

Vinod Rai¹

For Ram Nath Kovind, it has been a quick passage from being the Governor of the Indian state of Bihar to becoming the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) nominee for the country's highest constitutional office of President. Irrespective of the claims made by persons in

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positions to decide such matters, it has not escaped anyone's attention that Kovind, though a lawyer by training, is, and is seen as, a Dalit candidate propped up by the ruling party. He has been a two-term Member of Parliament (MP) in its upper house (Rajya Sabha), and he was heading the BJP's Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) cell some time back. The Dalits belong to the SC category under the constitutional schedules of castes and tribes.

Kovind is known to be a very sober low-profile person who gained his spurs as a personal secretary to Morarji Desai (a former Prime Minister of India in the Janata Party-led government in the late 1970s). The BJP's announcement certainly came as a surprise. However, it may be recalled that speculation was rife earlier that Draupadi Murmu, a lady Dalit leader, might be chosen as a presidential nomination by the BJP. Whilst there was no degree of certainty about her being a likely choice, the indications were that a candidate from the backward communities was in the zone of consideration. It was commonly believed that the BJP, in an attempt to reach out to that community, was looking for a suitable person from that strata of society.

This has now been borne out by the statement made by the BJP President, Amit Shah, at the post-announcement press conference, where he noted that, "Ram Nath Kovind has always fought for the betterment of the Dalits and other backward classes." Shah went on to add that the "the BJP hopes that a person born in a poor family of low caste Dalit community will be a consensus candidate for the President's post."

The nomination is largely seen as a very prudent move on behalf of the BJP, which was indeed seeking a consensus candidate through consultation with the opposition, without, of course, indicating its own preferred nominee. It will be difficult now for the opposition to be seen to be opposing a Dalit candidate, and equally difficult for them to identify another Dalit candidate as their nominee, with equally robust credentials as those of Kovind. In the two terms for which he was nominated to the upper house of parliament, in 1994 and 2006, Kovind served as a fairly active parliamentarian, asking questions and participating in debates over a wide spectrum of subjects.

Before the BJP's announcement, there was widespread speculation that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader, Mohan Bhagwat, might be the BJP's nominee for President. However, the possibility of that choice was, in fact, discounted on the ground that the RSS leaders do not contest elections. The RSS, widely seen as a right-wing nationalist

outfit, is also generally regarded as the BJP's ideological springboard. At the same time, it was learnt that the RSS, without indicating any particular person, had really wanted the BJP's nominee to conform to the qualifications of being a Dalit or a tribal, well-read and a politician from the 'saffron' community. This colour is associated with the political credo of the RSS.

The BJP's announcement has brought forth mixed reactions. However, the likelihood of the nominee having a smooth sailing for election as President, is indicated from two responses. Firstly, Bihar's Chief Minister and Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] leader, Nitish Kumar, has commented that he personally feels that Kovind is a good choice but will spell out his party's preference after consultations. He made this comment after calling on Kovind, still the Governor of Bihar before his scheduled departure for New Delhi to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders. On the other hand, Mayawati, a strident Dalit leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party from the state of Uttar Pradesh, has made it known that she cannot take a negative stand on a Dalit candidate. She said that her stand would be positive towards Kovind, unless the opposition could nominate another Dalit leader as a consensus non-BJP candidate for the top post.

In the state of Tamil Nadu, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), while not immediately reacting to the BJP's announcement, is expected to support the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) nominee. An activist leader, Kancha Ilaiah, has stated that, even if it be a token gesture, having a Dalit President at this time of frictions in the state, is good for the nation. He stated that, "If attacks continue to happen despite the country having a Dalit as President, Kovind will be under pressure to take a stand. Dalits can represent to him, there will be a connect."²

Meanwhile, Gopalakrishna Gandhi, a former Governor of West Bengal and a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, was widely believed to be the likely choice of the Left parties, and the Left might have possibly liaised with the other opposition parties to build consensus favouring him. However, after learning about the BJP's choice of Kovind, Gandhi has announced his desire not to be considered as a candidate stating that, "I want to thank all those who wanted to see me contest the election and perchance to win it." This possibly is an indication of which way the wind is blowing.

² <http://www.firstpost.com>. Accessed on 20 June 2017.

The credibility and merit of Kovind aside, it is highly unlikely that there will be an all-party unanimity around his name. The opposition will certainly put up another Dalit candidate for the sake of showing its disagreement with the ruling dispensation, irrespective of what that candidate's chances of winning might be. Not doing so, in their interpretation, would be meekly subjugating themselves before the BJP.

The political matrix apart, here is an analysis of the electoral arithmetic. The Electoral College that elects the President comprises the elected members of the state legislatures and the parliament, which would be 4,120 Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) at the state level and 776 MPs. The Indian constitution lays out the process for calculating the value of each vote as per two guiding principles. Firstly, to uphold the principle of federalism, neither the Union parliament nor the state assemblies, taken together, should be in a position to overrule each other. As such, the combined value of all the MPs' votes is roughly kept equal to the combined value of all the MLA votes. The second guiding principle is that the value of each MLA's vote should be proportional to the number of citizens he or she represents. Each MP's vote contributes 708 points to the pool but the value of each MLA's vote depends on the population of the state that he or she represents, with the votes of the MLAs from the more populous states having greater value [the value of each MLA's vote is calculated by dividing the population of the state by the number of MLAs, and then multiplying that figure by 1,000]. Thus, the vote of an MLA from West Bengal is worth 151 points, whereas that from Delhi is worth 58 points. In this proportion, the total value of all MPs' votes is 549,408 points, and that of the MLAs is 549,495 – the total value of the entire Electoral College votes being 1,098,903 points. The halfway mark (representing an absolute majority for victory) would thus work out to 549,452 points.

As per an assessment made by the PRS Legislative Research, the ruling combine comprising NDA (minus Shiv Sena but including the Telugu Desam Party), and the supporting parties (Biju Janata Dal, Telangana Rashtra Samithi, JD (U) and YSR Congress Party, named after the late Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y S Rajasekhara Reddy) would muster a total value of 609,433 points – which is above the halfway mark. If the AIADMK were to support the nomination, another 59,224 points would be added. And Shiv Sena would contribute 25,893 points. There is, therefore, ample indication that the BJP's nominee will be able to sail through and get elected as the next President of India.

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