

# ISAS Brief

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Institute of South Asian Studies  
National University of Singapore  
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
#08-06 (Block B)  
Singapore 119620  
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776 7505  
[www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)  
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



## The Shifting Sands of Bihar Politics

*As the saying goes, politics is the art of the possible. The latest example of this in the relentless politics of power in India is the re-emergence of the outgoing Chief Minister of the Indian state of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, as his own successor at the head of a new government with a different political complexion. This followed the collapse of his original ‘grand alliance’ (Mahagatbandhan) which consisted of his Janata Dal (United), the Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress in the State Legislative Assembly. Nitish has been able to form the new government in Bihar with the help of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the governing party at the Centre and an opponent of the now-defunct ‘grand alliance’.*

Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy and Amit Ranjan<sup>1</sup>

From the moment of its formation in 2015, the fate of the now-defunct ‘grand alliance’ (*Mahagatbandhan*) of the three key parties in the Indian state of Bihar, which was headed by Nitish Kumar in his capacity as the Chief Minister, seemed uncertain. Unsurprisingly, the ruling alliance collapsed on 26 July 2017. Nitish of the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] and Lalu Prasad Yadav of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) are leaders at two distinctive poles in Bihar

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Rajeev Ranjan Chaturvedy is Research Associate while Dr Amit Ranjan is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. Mr Chaturvedy can be contacted at [isasrrc@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasrrc@nus.edu.sg) and Dr Ranjan at [isasar@nus.edu.sg](mailto:isasar@nus.edu.sg). The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.

politics. They had reunited for their respective political survival with the aim of stopping the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the main governing party at the Centre, from coming to power in Bihar in the last elections to the State Legislative Assembly between October and November 2015.

After almost two years in power at the helm of the ‘grand alliance’, Nitish apparently found it utterly difficult to run his coalition government, especially insofar as managing its key constituent, the RJD, was concerned. As a result, he resigned as Chief Minister on 26 July 2017 and was allowed by the State Governor to continue in office in a caretaker capacity until alternative arrangements could be made. Immediately after his resignation, Nitish claimed that he had tried his best to work for the development of Bihar but it became impossible for him to lead the alliance government. Nonetheless, he emphatically argued that he remained true to his commitment towards the people of Bihar and its development. With the BJP supporting him in such an evolving context, Nitish was sworn in again as Chief Minister on 27 July 2017.

In the past too, as in 1994, Nitish had parted ways with Lalu and his RJD to form the Samta Party, in association with George Fernandes, a national-level politician. Subsequently, the Samta Party merged with the JD(U), led by Sharad Yadav in 2003, and became a constituent of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). With that, Nitish ultimately emerged as the main rival to Lalu, a key figure, in Bihar politics. Both Lalu and Nitish are products of ‘Mandal’ politics which is centred on quotas for jobs and education. They have their bases in two different castes under the overall category of Other Backward Class, which covers those sections of people who were originally left out of the state’s affirmative action. Lalu, as a Yadav,<sup>2</sup> has support from his own caste and the Muslims, while Nitish is a Kurmi<sup>3</sup> and also has a support base among the Koeri caste and the Mahadalits (the marginalised sections among the Scheduled Castes of Bihar). However, both also have a significant support base among the upper castes, especially the two dominant castes of Bihar – Bhumihar and Rajput.

Both Lalu and Nitish are from the same socialist camp which was once led by Ram Manohar Lohia who espoused political socialism of one form or another. During such political

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<sup>2</sup> The Yadavs are traditionally mainly non-elite peasant-pastoral communities or castes in India. They are included in the Other Backward Class category.

<sup>3</sup> The Kurmis belong to the Hindu agricultural castes in India. They are also included in the Other Backward Class category.

transitions, Nitish seemed to have grasped how the RJD had managed to survive and sustain itself in Bihar politics because of support from the other political groups like the Congress and other forces including caste-oriented bases.

Nitish's latest lurch towards the BJP should be seen in the light of the fact that he had indeed run a coalition government in Bihar, with the support of the BJP, for two consecutive terms since 2005. However, he suddenly began seeing the BJP as a communal party which was pursuing an exclusivist Hindu-majority agenda and was bent upon fielding Narendra Modi as the NDA's prime ministerial candidate during the 2014 national general election. It was clear even then that Nitish's sudden opposition towards Modi, the BJP and the NDA was not politically acceptable to many of his own supporters. Unsurprisingly, the results of that national general election in Bihar went against his JD(U). The NDA won 31 out of the 40 national parliamentary seats from Bihar on that occasion. However, after Nitish formed the 'grand alliance' for the Bihar State Assembly polls in 2015, he won, in the political company of Lalu. For the first time, Nitish began sharing power with Lalu, despite having characterised his earlier tenure as Chief Minister of Bihar for almost 15 years as an example of "*jungle raj*" or sheer lawlessness.

Nitish apparently calculated that the 'grand alliance' and his emphasis on development issues and zero-tolerance towards corruption would help him turn a new leaf in his relationship with his alliance partners. However, this has not happened. A series of corruption charges surfaced against Lalu's family members, which made it difficult for these two now-estranged leaders to govern together. An immediate reason cited for the sudden end to the coalition in Bihar was the series of corruption charges against Lalu's son Tejashwi Yadav, who was Deputy Chief Minister in the now-defunct 'grand alliance' government. After his resignation, Nitish claimed that he was merely following the "call of his conscience" over a Central Bureau of Investigation's First Information Report against Tejashwi. In fact, Nitish at first had spread the impression of wanting to keep the 'grand alliance' in power by demanding that Tejashwi resign. However, Tejashwi did not do so, apparently because Lalu and his RJD followed a prevailing strand of dynastic politics in India and, more specifically, because of Lalu's "*putra-moh*" or doting affection for his son.

Following the break-up of the 'grand alliance' in this manner, the BJP acted swiftly, first congratulating and later extending its support to Nitish and his JD(U) in Bihar. Modi even

praised Nitish for his honesty and integrity and tweeted, “*Bhrashtachar ke khilaf ladai mein judne ke liye Nitish Kumar ji ko bahut badhai. Sava-sau crore nagrik imandari ka swagat aur samarthan kar rahe hain*” (Many congratulations to Nitish Kumar for joining the fight against corruption. 125 crore [1.25 billion) citizens have been welcoming and supporting honesty).<sup>4</sup> He added, “It is the demand of [the] time[s] and the nation to rise above personal differences and join hands to fight corruption for the bright future of the country and especially Bihar.”<sup>5</sup>

Nitish’s warming-up to the BJP and the convergence of his views with those of Modi on several issues seemed to have prepared the ground for his latest return to the NDA’s fold. Most recently in this regard, Nitish had extended support to Modi’s candidate for the country’s presidency, Ram Nath Kovind, who won and was sworn in as the 14<sup>th</sup> President of India on 25 July 2017. Moreover, the alliance between the JD(U) and the BJP in Bihar had worked well in the past, and the BJP had never questioned Nitish’s credentials for leadership in the state. Against this background, Nitish was sworn in as Chief Minister for the sixth time, now with support from the BJP, significantly within 24 hours of his resignation as the head of the ‘grand alliance’ government. The new BJP-JD(U) alliance could become a game-changer for the national general election, expected in 2019.

Several important observations can be made from the current development in Bihar.

Firstly, no formidable alliance is possible on the basis of ‘reactive and negative’ politics. Rather, opposition parties, in order to remain relevant, need to formulate common positions on substantive issues, and a credible agenda to counter the phenomenal rise of the BJP under the leadership of Modi.

Secondly, dynastic politics is doing irreparable damage to regional as well as national political parties in India. There is no better example of “*putra-moh*” in the present Bihar context where the RJD leadership permitted filial loyalty to push the alliance to its breaking point instead of showing political sophistication by replacing the then-Deputy Chief Minister with another member of the same party.

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<sup>4</sup> “Hours after PM Modi tweets in praise, BJP and JD(U) join hands in Bihar, Nitish Kumar swearing-in today”, *The Indian Express*, 27 July 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/nitish-kumar-resigns-hours-after-pm-tweets-in-praise-bjp-and-jdu-join-hands-swearing-in-today-4768787/>. Accessed on 27 July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Thirdly, as believed by many political commentators, the reunion of two old friends – Modi and Nitish – and the convergence of their political views, could expedite the development agenda in Bihar. The state is one of the poorest and least developed in India, despite being rich in natural resources like water, as well as in human resources. Due to the lack of employment opportunities in the state, a large number of people migrate every year to other parts of India in search of jobs. The new coalition of JD(U) and NDA will facilitate better coordination between Bihar and the Centre – such synergy is expected to accelerate Bihar’s development agenda and its implementation.

Fourthly, the JD(U)’s support for the NDA is also crucial for the election of the country’s Vice-President and the passage of several important legislations in the national parliament. The NDA is still short of a majority in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament). At present, out of a total of 245 seats in the Upper House, the NDA has 75 seats which will increase to 85 with the support from the JD(U). The gain of 10 seats will make the NDA a little more comfortable than it was earlier. More importantly, it is a big political gain for the BJP-led ruling coalition at the Centre that Nitish has been re-inducted as a supporter of Modi’s brand of politics.

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