

Can hearts meet and hands hold in Indian opposition alliance?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE two biggest talking points about the mega rally of anti-Bharatiya Janata Parties organised by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata on January 19 were the overwhelming presence of top leaders of key regional parties and an unprecedented candid stocktaking of the hurdles they face in a joint fight against Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led party in the coming parliamentary elections. The rally was a high-point of Mamata's more than a year-long efforts to put together an anti-BJP front.

There are four other reasons why the rally of what has come to be called as *mahagatbandhan* (grand alliance) of opposition parties was significant: 1. it provided the outlines of the rainbow coalition; 2. it charted a roadmap for firming up a long-term unity; 3. it indicated the template of a campaign narrative; and 4. for forming state-specific alliances to ensure common candidates against the BJP instead of a pan-India tie-up. The leaders who spoke at the rally agreed to set up a committee to formulate a joint policy document keeping in mind the post-poll scenario.

The most noticeable feature of the rally was the presence of 23 regional parties and just one national party, the Congress. The influential regional parties which were not part of the rally are Biju Janata Dal, Telangana Rashtra Samiti, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and YSR Congress which have never been part of this opposition alliance in the making. But the Communist Party of India (Marxist) was conspicuous by its absence despite its strident anti-BJP

posture, reflecting the inherent difficulties between the party and Mamata-led Trinamool Congress in sharing a common platform. The CPI(M) is involved in a turf battle not only with the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal but with the Congress in Kerala and Tripura states.

The numerical superiority of the regional parties at the rally was in sync with Mamata's assessment and hope that these parties will play a decisive role in government-formation post poll. Many were reminded of the unstable coalition course of Indian politics in 1989-91 and then in 1996-98. On both the occasions, the coalition governments had collapsed much before their tenure. In fact, between 1989 and now, the successive coalition governments in India have been stable only when they were anchored and led by national parties: the Congress and the BJP.

Congress President Rahul Gandhi stayed away from the rally. That is not surprising given Mamata's reservations about the leadership of an anti-BJP front by a leader much younger than her and with little experience as an administrator. That brings one to the question of the Congress party's relations with the regional outfits most of which are political rivals of the Congress in the states. The Congress was kept out of the alliance firming up by the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party for Uttar Pradesh. SP chief Akhilesh Yadav and BSP supremo Mayawati chose to skip a dinner hosted by Rahul's mother Sonia Gandhi in December last year. Mayawati and Mamata nurse national ambitions and are not comfortable with Rahul being projected as the

opposition's prime ministerial candidate.

However, Rahul was careful not to give any impression that the Congress was a hurdle to the anti-BJP front and so deputed senior party colleague Mallikarjun Kharge to Kolkata ignoring opposition from West Bengal unit of the Congress which is opposed to Mamata's party in the state. The Congress is clearly working on a two-track strategy: working hard to emerge as the biggest party in the opposition space, especially after being buoyed by its recent victory in three Hindi heartland states and at the same time not foreclosing the options of securing the support of parties led by Mamata, Mayawati and Yadav in the event of a fractured electoral mandate. That is the reason the Congress shared the dais with the SP and the BSP leaders in Kolkata even after the snub by the two regional parties in Uttar Pradesh alliance.

It is in a way in the fitness of things that Kharge and the Congress' ruling coalition leader in Karnataka and former Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda highlighted some of the obstacles before the proposed anti-BJP front. The Kolkata rally skirted the issue of the anti-BJP coalition's prime ministerial face knowing fully well it has the potential to wreck their unity given that Mamata and Mayawati reportedly have the ambitions for the post. That was why Mamata and some other regional leaders did not want the regional parties to be bogged down by the leadership issue at this juncture. But leaving the issue to be resolved later makes the anti-BJP front more vulnerable to the criticism of being a platform whose sole glue is opposition to Modi.

Toeing a line different from the regional parties leaders including Mamata, Deve Gowda stated that the opposition alliance should not give rise to perception of a rag-tag coalition united only by hatred for Modi. "People are ready to respond to our call for

by him as PM that had lasted just ten months before it fell after the Congress party pulled the rug. Kharge carried on from where Deve Gowda left. In fact, he was more blunt when he said "*agar hamarey dill nahin milta hai to kam sey kam hum milakar chal saktey hain*" (even if there is no meeting of hearts, we can at least walk hand in hand). This leaves the question unanswered: if hearts do not meet, can hands hold together?

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Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent for The Daily Star.



UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi, Majority People's Party supremo Mayawati, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee, Indian Congress party president Rahul Gandhi, Chief Minister of India's Andhra Pradesh state Chandrababu Naidu and JDS leader HD Kumaraswamy, participating at the swearing-in ceremony in Bangalore.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

How Europe's populists can win by losing


MARK LEONARD

WILL the European Parliament elections this May result in a political revolution? Populist and nationalist parties certainly hope so. They are promising not just to overturn the Brussels establishment, but also to end the free movement of people, lift sanctions against Russia, abandon NATO, eschew future trade deals, reverse policies to combat climate change, and abolish gay marriage.

Many of these ideas have long been included in Euroskeptic fringe parties' election programmes. But a major survey of the EU's 27 national political theatres, led by Susi Dennison and Pawel Zerka of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), that will be published next week, shows that voters could be more responsive to such proposals this year than in the past.

In the past, European elections have been predominantly national, low-turnout, and low-stakes affairs. But those days are over. The campaign season has already become a transnational, pan-European event. While the American populist agitator Steve Bannon is attempting to build a coalition of right-wing nationalist governments, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini have forged a populist alliance that marries the anti-austerity left with the anti-migration right. Orbán and Salvini's goal is to capture EU institutions and reverse European integration from within. They envision nothing less than a re-founding of the West on illiberal values.



Moreover, voter turnout this year will most likely be far higher than the usual 20-40 percent. Just as the Brexiters managed to mobilise three million Britons who generally abstain from voting, continental populists could attract Europeans who feel as though mainstream parties have forgotten about them. If these voters turn out while supporters of moderate leaders like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron stay home, populist parties could significantly outperform current polls.

Moreover, the ECFR study finds that even with a parliamentary minority, a Euroskeptic party grouping could severely curtail the EU's ability to address voters' concerns, as well as threats to its fundamental governing principles. For example, with just one-third of parliamentary seats, populists could block sanctions against member states that violate

EU rules and the rule of law. The EU is currently pursuing such measures against both the Law and Justice (PiS) party's government in Poland and Orbán's government in Hungary.

Populist insurgents could also derail EU budget negotiations, and even precipitate an EU "government shutdown", by preventing the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework if they garner an absolute majority. With a blocking minority or control of certain parliamentary committees, Euroskeptics might also be able to stand in the way of international trade deals and appointments to the European Commission.

Populists who win parliamentary seats will also be eager to weaken EU foreign policy, either through the power of the purse or amendments to policy resolutions. Given that many European populist parties have financial ties to the Kremlin, the goal will be

to water down sanctions against Russia. Beyond that, populists also seek to frustrate environmental-policy efforts such as the Paris climate agreement.

The risk, then, is not so much that populists will capture a parliamentary majority and overturn everything on day one, but that they have some representation in the European Commission and secure a large enough minority to bring EU policymaking to a crawl. That, in turn, will prevent the enforcement of EU rules, strengthen nationalist governments, and further undermine European voters' confidence in EU governing institutions. The illiberal governments in Budapest, Warsaw, and Rome would be free to violate EU rules with impunity.

Moreover, the European Parliament elections coincide with a widespread political realignment within EU member states. Thus, for populists and moderates alike, electoral success in May could translate into success at the national level. Estonia and Slovakia will hold general elections before the European Parliament elections, and Belgium and Denmark will hold elections later in the year. In each case, populist parties could ascend to power as coalition partners.

Making matters worse, pro-European parties appear to be falling into the trap laid by these anti-European parties. Across Europe, liberals, Greens, and many left-wing parties are approaching the election as a fight between cosmopolitans and communitarians—between globalism and patriotism. This political framing is more likely to help the insurgent Euroskeptics than anyone else.

Nothing is lost yet. But to avoid a rout, pro-Europeans must stop behaving in ways

that confirm the populists' stereotypes of them as supporters of the *status quo* in Brussels. That means offering an up-front, honest critique of the EU's shortcomings while avoiding the wrong kind of polarisation, particularly on issues where they do not have the support of a clear majority.

At the same time, pro-Europeans need to start deploying "wedge" issues of their own. For example, on the crucial question of migration, it is clear that Orbán and Salvini's interests are not even particularly aligned. While Orbán wants to keep all migrants out, Salvini has called for asylum seekers arriving in Italy to be distributed throughout the EU. Pro-Europeans should be pointing out these contradictions to voters in Hungary and Italy.


Putting aside his other current difficulties, Macron at least is aware of the populist trap. In his speech last November commemorating Armistice Day, he described patriotism as the opposite of nationalism, thus repudiating the narrative that true patriots oppose "globalists". But he has done little to show how his politics can make "left-behind voters" feel safe from globalisation and European integration.

In theory, at least, Macronism still represents the best pro-European alternative to atavistic nationalism. But to avert a populist revolution this May, Macron and other leaders will have to reach beyond their own close circle of cosmopolitan elites. Otherwise, they will have fallen into the Euroskeptics' trap.


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Mark Leonard is Director of the European Council on Foreign Relations.

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QUOTABLE Quote



SUSAN SONTAG
(1933–2004)

American writer, filmmaker, philosopher, teacher, and political activist

The likelihood that your acts of resistance cannot stop the injustice does not exempt you from acting in what you sincerely and reflectively hold to be the best interests of your community.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Periods

5 "I have a dream"

9 Danger

10 Notions

12 Pal, to Pedro

13 Namely

14 Concern of 5-

Across

16 One day — time

17 Narrow cut

18 Lumber worker

21 Long, long time

22 More minuscule

23 Seth of "Neighbors"

24 River parts

26 Nile serpent

29 January birthstone

30 Largest continent

31 Coffee dispenser

32 What tourists see

34 Country division

37 Steeple topper

38 Arrive at, as a solution

39 Spine-tingling

40 Must have

41 Glimpsed

DOWN

1 Venus —

2 Source

3 Form-fitting

4 Mailbox part

5 First-aid case

6 Wedding words

7 Soothing music

8 Spat

9 Analyze grammatically

11 Flag feature

15 Insults

19 Wallet bills

20 Martini base

22 Carry

23 Enter the race

24 First name of 5-

Across

25 Highly decorative

26 On the beach

27 Subs

28 Out of style

29 Be effusive

30 Be of one mind

33 Frozen treats

35 Sock part

36 Complete

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S	T	I	R		O	P	A	R	T
L	I	N	U	S		M	I	S	E
A	D	A	G	E		A	N	I	S
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BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott