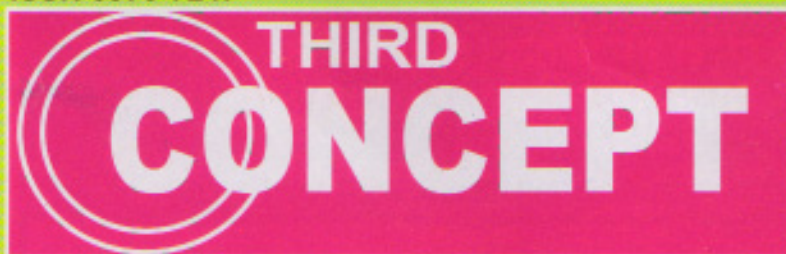


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Editor

BABUDDIN KHAN

THIRD CONCEPT aims at providing a platform where a meaningful exchange of ideas can take place among the people of the Third World. The attempt will be to communicate, debate and disseminate information, ideas and alternatives for the resolution of the common problems facing humankind. We welcome contributions from academics, journalists and even from those who may never have published anything before. The only requirement is a concern for and desire to understand and take the issue of our time. Contributions may be descriptive, analytical or theoretical. They may be in the form of original articles, reactions to previous contributions, or even a comment on a prevailing situation. All contributions, neatly typed in double space, may be addressed to:

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Designed by: Pt. Tejpal

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Craving for Stability

The past couple of decades have been characterized by the striking transformation of India's politics and the defining feature of that transformation is what is termed as 'party proliferation.' India's politics has been transformed since 1989 by the relentless rise of regional parties across the country. The regional parties represent a variety of caste, sub-caste, ethnic and linguistic groups and parts thereof. They have one attribute in common - almost all have a mass base in only one of the states that comprise the Indian Union.

In the 2004 election, regional parties won almost half of the *Lok Sabha's* 543 constituencies. The Congress and the BJP won 283 seats in all, just over half - 145 and 138, respectively - but many of these were due to alliances struck by both parties with regional parties influential in various states. India has seen a decade of relative political stability between 1999 and 2009. Unwieldy coalition governments in New Delhi headed by the BJP (1999 to 2004) and Congress (2004 to 2013) have managed to survive their full terms. However, the election of 2014 could be a game-changing event. The regionalisation of India's politics post-1989 has enhanced the representative character of India's democracy in important ways. It has, in particular, enabled the political enfranchisement of middle and lower-caste groups across a vast swathe of northern India.

The fragmentation of India's political landscape is neither unnatural nor necessarily a bad thing. If India's society is defined by diversity, why should its political map be any different? The problem is that most of the regional satraps who call the shots in the devolved framework of political power in India are notorious for poor governance and venality. There may be some encouraging exceptions, but they are as yet in the minority. Most of India's new elite of regional politicians also have a promiscuous record of switching between the Congress, BJP, and 'third front' experiments. This means that government formation post-2014 is likely to prove complicated, and the tenure of the next *Lok Sabha* may be short-lived, if either the Congress or the BJP fails to attain the magical number of 200 seats at least in the *Lok Sabha* to facilitate alliance with like-minded regional parties.

There is space for a third front, but doubts loom large over its longevity. Power sharing is what brings these parties together, but it also results in the constituents fighting each other. There is no ideology and common policy guiding these parties, and they lack long-term focus. Even if these regional parties are able to forge an alliance, it won't last long. Viewed in a broad perspective, the inherent fragile nature of the Third Front has been its undoing whenever it has been proposed. Without ideological or political understanding, regional parties have little to hold them together. In contrast, the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA coalitions not only have prominent ideological foundations, but are also helmed by big national parties around which smaller parties can gravitate.

A federal front would essentially see a cabal of opportunistic regional satraps constantly fighting each other for a larger share of the pie. It's difficult to see such a front cobbling together 272 seats to form a government. The increasing clout of regional political groups, who rule 10 major states and Union territories - individually or in a coalition — which together elect 244 members to the *Lok Sabha*, is going to be a decisive factor in ensuing 2014 *Lok Sabha* polls. In contrast the 14 Congress-ruled states and UTs account for only 210 *Lok Sabha* seats and the four BJP-ruled states just 68. So the regional parties and smaller national parties, which largely have a regional base, have already attained the wherewithal to make a bid for the national government.

Over the past two decades India has made much progress, against considerable odds, in its developmental goals. And it is unmistakably a rising power in the global community of the early 21st century. India's polity must rise to the challenge of making that promise a reality and it requires domestic political stability to pursue concrete policies and keep up the momentum of economic and social reforms. Fragmented nature of dispensation that may happen to be at the helm of affairs in post-May 2014 period could reverse the clock.

—BK