

Prospects of Formation of Viable Muslim Front/Party in UP Assembly Election, 2007

In anticipation of the coming Assembly election in UP, there is an upsurge of political activity in the Muslim community, deriving inspiration, though misconceived, from the AUIF in Assam.

Several political formations in UP have already emerged with the objective of contesting the coming Assembly election in early 2007. There are already 3 or 4 in the field. More may emerge. However, one imagines that they would be wise enough at least to merge into one Front.

These formations have several aspects in common.

Their objective is to secure an effective Muslim presence in the Assembly which is independent of, not subservient to any other political party. In fact, all these formations individually or as one Front will all auction their support, for whatever it is worth, to a major political party or alliance.

Secular parties/alliances have long contested against each other for securing a majority on their own and thus coming to power tried after the election to form a coalition with one or more small parties to produce a working majority. This means that it is open for the Muslim front to formally join with the SP or the BSP or the Congress, or the BJP, and secure a few seats to contest with the support of the Big Brother.

But Muslim voters in UP are a divided lot; divided by denomination, sect, sub-sect, Zafar and Baradari. Politically they distribute their favours among the SP, the BSP and the Congress. They may not touch the BJP in any significant measure. All these fronts adopt a common political rhetoric; they berate all secular parties and even denounce secularism as practised, hoping that they may attract substantial Muslim support as Muslims are increasingly disenchanted with the secular parties. But then secular parties are always willing to embrace them as partners, experienced as they are, they do not mind public condemnation so long as the Muslim leaders are prepared to talk to them in private.

One possible choice will lie outside the mainstream. The partner may be the newly formed Jan Dal, floated by V.P. Singh's Jan Morcha which may attract the support of other minor secular parties in UP like LJP, RJD, NCP, JD(S), CPI or CPI(M) and thus appear in the Muslim eyes as a party with a big enough core to attract or desire their support.

In 1996 and 2002, there were quiet a few Muslim parties, registered but not recognized. Universally, across the board, they secured very few votes and generally their candidates forfeited their deposits.

Muslims are now mature enough not to waste their votes on parties which are not likely to win even a token seat – Parcham Party, National Democratic Party, the Indian National League, the Indian Union Muslim League, the Muslim Majlis etc. The votes secured by them in 1996 and 2002 were negligible, though there are nearly 80 Muslim concentration seats in UP which have been won by Muslim candidates of one secular party or the other in one election or the other.

In any case, unless there is a visible mass migration of Muslims from SP or BSP or Congress and unless at least 50% of the Muslim voters are seen as attracted to one of the Fronts or the United Muslim Front, they shall not have any

combination with the major secular parties and, therefore, there can be no improvement, in the electoral scene, from the Muslim angle.

If the impossible happens and all 'Muslim' fronts and parties merge and all Muslim voters exclusively vote for the Muslim-led Front and the Front decides to contest independently, without alliance or understanding with a major secular party, even then the Front can win just a score of Muslim concentration constituencies because of the division of Muslim votes among more than one secular parties, resulting in the BJP winning. Why shouldn't the Muslim voters go to Jan Morcha, if it gathers strength, in preference to other three major parties. But should they go to the weak Muslim front?

Possibly the Muslim Front may join Jan Morcha. If so, how many seats can it contest? Can it claim to be the sole representative of the Muslim community and demand all Muslim concentration seats? Can it claim even 25% of the Muslim concentration seats say **20?** With best of luck, it may win 10. If Jan Morcha defeats all the Big Four -- SP, BSP, Congress and BJP emerges at the top even without a majority, it may form a government with the help of the Muslim front. The latter may get a few ministerships. How different will this scenario be from scenario since 1950!

And who know, the consolidation of Muslim voters under a Muslim-led front may give the BJP the life breath it needs to cry 'Hinduism in danger' and thus benefit from a slide of Hindu votes from secular parties to the BJP! But the Hindu voters have also matured and this may not happen.

Another probable scenario is that in a 5-cornered contest, the Muslim Front contesting may lose its deposits everywhere but secure 5-10,000 votes in the constituency in which it has fielded a known candidate. These votes will go into the account of the recognized party with which the Front allies. **But these votes may tilt the balance in many constituencies to let the BJP defeat its nearest secular rival, if it is other than the partner of the Muslim Front.**

Thus none of the following alternative scenarios appear particularly enchanting:

- a) Many Muslim fronts in the contest; or,
- b) One Muslim front which contests on its own; or
- c) One Muslim front which has an alliance with a major secular party, or
- d) Many fronts, some allied to with various secular parties. Some contesting independently, some bunching together.
- e) Many Muslim fronts and many Muslim parties, in various electoral modes.

The questions which remain to be answered as

- * Can a single Muslim-led party or front materialize **and** secure at least 50% of Muslim votes? Both appear to be improbable.
- * Can the Muslim-led party or front form an alliance with and sign a deal with SP or BSP or Congress? Yes, if it has the support of a fair proportion of the Muslim voters and is in a position to deliver its support to their ally in exchange for that party's non-Muslim votes in the allotted seats.
- * What will such a party or front get as quid pro quo? How many tickets?

- * Which Muslim concentration constituencies? Will it have a say in selection of other candidates to eliminate undesirable non-Muslim candidates? Will its ideas be included in the manifesto of the major partner or alliance?
- * And, finally, in case the alliance wins, will it join the Government or support it from outside? And if it loses, will it remain a compact group in opposition.

These are all probable scenarios, whose materialization will depend on the perception of the major political partner and its faith in the capacity of the Muslim-led party or front to deliver substantial votes to make a difference in its battle against other secular parties and the BJP in the fray, even in non-Muslim concentration seats. But the gain to the community as noted above will be just a few Muslim MLAs who may perhaps become ministers. Will they be able to redress Muslim grievances or solve their chronic problems, except in the contingency that the survival of the secular government depends on the support of the Front? Political calculations will always limit the generosity of even such a government towards the Muslim community.

I strongly feel that the formation of a Muslim party, a Muslim-led party or a Muslim-front is a meaningless exercise a few months before the election. It will not break old loyalties and forge new loyalties to change the existing voting pattern.

Muslims have much more to gain by following the Mushawarat route of tactical voting – unitedly and massively for a Muslim candidate of a secular party who enjoys reputation and support in Muslim concentration constituencies and a secular non-Muslim candidate who is winnable in all other constituencies.

Muslims as citizens have the right to form a political party but they also have a duty to unite in order to be an effective player in the political arena. All friendly parties are waiting for a Muslim partner to emerge, while the hostile parties try to break their unity in the name of caste, baradari, denomination and sect through widening the social fissures and by financing candidates only to divide Muslim votes at the constituency level.

In the final analysis, the success of a Muslim-core party, as originally envisaged in the 1989 experiment of the formation of the Insaf Party, depends on the degree support of the Muslim masses. Muslim elite will then join hands in the hope of reaping a political harvest. Muslim politicians attached to various parties may not but the Muslim masses may come together to support a secular Muslim candidate in a Muslim concentration seat and a winnable secular non-Muslim candidates in the other seats which is now called tactical voting. The winner whatever his religion, will try to maintain good terms with the community. So will the loser because he may aspire to Muslim support in the next round. Key lies in the unity of the Muslim masses led by selfless leaders who do not aspire to become ministers and thus become subservient to the alliance partner.

Eternal Dilemma of Muslim Legislators

All Muslim legislators face an eternal dilemma as legislator of a major party or of an alliance. This dilemma has remained unresolved; whether loyalty to party comes first or fidelity to the community in whose name the ticket was allotted and which voted for the legislator. Can he take an initiative on his own without the permission of the leader or the party or the alliance on any question of Muslim

interest or any matter of Muslim concern? Can he even raise a question or even utter a word of mild criticism if his own party is in power?

This dilemma can be resolved, only by overcoming the communal environment through proportional representation or reservation in legislatures. But that is not on our intellectual horizon as a nation.

This problem has no perfect solution. Much depend on the capacity of the individual legislator and the understanding of the party leadership.

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