

THE RETURN OF THE MAHAGATHBANDAN IN BIHAR AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON THE NDA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On 9 August 2022, the Janata Dal (United) broke off ties with the BJP-led NDA government and chose to align itself with its old partners such as Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Indian National Congress, and the left parties.¹ In effect, the new *Mahagathbandan* (Grand Alliance) now controls 2/3rds of the Bihar Legislative Assembly. Nitish Kumar, the leader of the JD(U), had previously formed a similar partnership with these parties in 2015, only for this alliance to dissolve acrimoniously in 2017. By allying with different parties over the years, Nitish Kumar has managed to serve as the Chief Minister of Bihar for over 15 years.²

The decision of the Janata Dal to break away from the BJP is curious, in the sense that the saffron party has more legislators in the assembly than JD(U). However, Nitish Kumar and JD(U) leaders have felt that the BJP is undermining their party by encouraging defections and having ministers directly report to Amit Shah, rather than the Chief Minister of the state.³ In fact, in the last three years, JD(U) is the third key ally to sever its ties with the BJP after the Akali Dal and Shiv Sena. In 2014, the NDA

1 "Nitish Kumar Takes Oath as Bihar CM Again after Break-up with BJP," *BBC News*, August 10, 2022, sec. India, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-62474574>.

2 Ibid.

3 Manish Kumar, "Nitish Kumar Upset By Amit Shah's Attempts At 'Control': Sources," *NDTV.com*, accessed August 16, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/why-nitish-kumar-is-upset-with-amit-shahs-perceived-grip-on-bihar-3235302>.

consisted of 29 parties, but now only 17 are left at the central level.⁴

Another factor in the decision to abandon the BJP is Nitish Kumar's adherence to secular principles. He opposed the introduction of the National Register of Citizens in Bihar and voted with the RJD to block it in the state.⁵ However, he did vote for the Citizenship Amendment Act, arguing that his party votes on legislation on a case-by-case basis and not simply based on electoral ties. Due to the reliance of both parties on minority communities for electoral support, it was unsustainable for them to support the BJP's Hindutva agenda in the state.

Caste-politics in Bihar

The decision of the Janata Dal to leave the NDA will have major implications on the prospects of the BJP in future elections. Currently, the BJP is the second-largest party in Bihar with 77 seats. The RJD, which has chosen to align itself with a new Nitish Kumar government, has 79 seats.⁶ While the BJP has managed to capture a large chunk of the Dalit and OBC (Other Backward Classes) vote in the U.P., it has failed to do so in Bihar. Its vote share remains limited to the upper caste population of the state. Lalu Yadav's RJD enjoys the support of the Yadav and Muslim vote in Bihar, which constitutes over 30 percent of the state's population. At the same time, Nitish Kumar has a stranglehold on the support of the non-Yadav OBC communities. As a result, the BJP will struggle to increase its share in the state. Realistically, the fortunes of the BJP in the state depend on its ability to ally itself with either the JD(U) or the RJD.

The Future of the BJP in Bihar

The defection of the JD(U) from the NDA cannot be merely viewed as Nitish Kumar pouncing on an opportunity to maintain his status as the leading politician in Bihar. Smaller parties in the NDA are worried about the BJP seeking to eradicate elements of regionalism in state-level politics. There is a growing fear that the BJP is inching towards turning India into a one-party state. At the same time, the political machinery of the BJP is very effective in hollowing out regional allies by relying on political rhetoric that is based on Hindutva and developmentalism. However, Nitish Kumar's reputation as an administrator makes this extremely difficult. Between 2005 and 2012, the growth

⁴ "JD(U) Quits NDA - Which All Parties Are Left in the Ruling Alliance at Centre?," TimesNow, accessed August 16, 2022, <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/jdu-quits-nda-which-all-parties-are-left-in-the-ruling-alliance-at-centre-article-93461845>.

⁵ "Nitish Kumar Drops Bihar from NRC List, Asks Why Should It Be Implemented | Latest News India - Hindustan Times," August 9, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/nitish-kumar-drops-bihar-from-nrc-list-asks-why-should-it-be-implemented/story-4WNq8m8BHkiCKM2MvD2zDK.html>.

⁶ "Bihar Vidhan Sabha 2020", <https://vidhansabha.bih.nic.in/>.

rate in Bihar was 84 percent.⁷ As a result, Nitish Kumar has a large following in the state due to his developmental track record. Moreover, considering the JD(U)'s alliance with the RJD, it has become increasingly difficult for the BJP to perform the same level of caste-based engineering as it has done in states such as U.P.

It is also important to consider what the decision of the JD(U) to abandon the NDA coalition will have on national-level politics. Being one of the most populous states in India, Bihar has 40 legislators in the Lok Sabha. With the JD(U) withdrawing its support, the position of the BJP has become extremely precarious in the state. In the 2019 general election, the NDA won 39 of the 40 seats it contested.⁸ With the absence of an electoral alliance, the BJP will not be able to capture the non-Yadav OBC vote in the constituencies it contests.

There is speculation that in the next state-level election, Nitish Kumar will pass on the baton to the Deputy Chief Minister of the state, Tejashwi Yadav of the RJD, whose party has the largest number of seats in the state. However, the *Mahagathbandan* could become a model for non-Hindutva politics in the Hindi belt. The BJP no longer has any major allies in this region, and the seven-party alliance in Bihar could become a launching pad to ignite the Opposition's electoral program for 2024. On the other hand, the BJP needs to reconsider the way it seeks to expand its own electoral prospects at the expense of its allies. The JD(U) is only the latest party to walk out on the NDA, as it feels that the BJP does not offer the adequate amount of support to its allies, and in fact seeks to actively undermine them by bringing defectors into its fold.

While the implications of the fall of the NDA government in Bihar will definitely have an impact on state-level politics, there is a strong effect that this move may have on national-level politics. In Nitish Kumar, the opposition now has one of the most experienced Chief Ministers of India in its camp. If Nitish Kumar maintains his track record of effective governance, then Bihar could be at the center of the anti-BJP movement in the run up to the 2024 elections, as it could become an example of a non-Hindutva secular mode of governance.

⁷ Astha Oriel, "How Has Bihar's Economy Performed Under Nitish Kumar Since 2005?," <https://www.outlookindia.com/>, August 13, 2022, <https://www.outlookindia.com/business/how-has-bihar-s-economy-performed-under-nitish-kumar-since-2005--news-216193>.

⁸ "Bihar Lok Sabha Elections Results 2019: Party Wise Seats, Constituency Wise Result, Winners & Runner-up, Opinion Poll, and News," The Indian Express, accessed August 16, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/elections/bihar-lok-sabha-seats/>.