

# A CHURNING IN ANDHRA PRADESH

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File photo of Amit Shah and Chandrababu Naidu in New Delhi. | Photo Credit: MOORTHY R.V.

The no-holds-barred attack by Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Chief Minister on the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy-led government, at a public meeting in Visakhapatnam, has set the tone for politics in Andhra Pradesh ahead of the 2024 general and Assembly elections. Mr. Shah claimed that Mr. Reddy's government was "ridden with corruption". He accused the government of turning Visakhapatnam into a hub of "antisocial elements" and "drug peddlers".

The general secretary of the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) demanded that Mr. Shah provide proof to substantiate his allegations. And for the first time since he became Chief Minister, Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy indicated at Palanadu, a few days after the Home Minister's attack, that his party may not have the support of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 elections. This has given rise to speculation that the winning combination of the 2014 elections — the BJP, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Jana Sena Party (JSP) — could be back in the reckoning.

While the three parties performed well in 2014, in 2018 TDP chief Chandrababu Naidu pulled out of the National Democratic Alliance alleging that the Centre did not fulfil its promises regarding special status to Andhra Pradesh. Many believe that this was Mr. Naidu's biggest political blunder. He not only walked out of the alliance, but also launched a tirade against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Shah. TDP workers carried black flags when Mr. Modi toured Andhra Pradesh and threw stones at Mr. Shah's convoy when the Home Minister visited Tirupati, thus burning bridges with the BJP.

However, after being routed by Mr. Jagan Reddy in the 2019 elections, Mr. Naidu has been making great efforts to patch up with the BJP. He met Mr. Shah in New Delhi about two weeks ago, before the Home Minister's visit to Visakhapatnam. BJP president J.P. Nadda was also present at the meeting. JSP leader Pawan Kalyan and Mr. Naidu have also met several times in the last one year. All this has led to speculation of a tie-up between the three parties. Some believe that the softening of the BJP's stand towards the TDP could be because of the national party's disastrous performance in Karnataka.

There is also some speculation that the Naidu-Shah meeting was more focused on working out a formula in Telangana, where the contest is more direct between the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS), the Congress which is picking up steam, and the BJP. Andhra Pradesh has 25 seats in the Lok Sabha and Telangana has 17. The BJP is aiming to make inroads into both since, after

Karnataka, the Telugu-speaking States are its best bet in the south.

Compared to Telangana, the role of the BJP in Andhra Pradesh is still not clear, however. Many people have raised the question of the timing of the Union government's doling out of funds to the State government. In the last one month, the Union government has given close to 23,000 crore to the State government under revenue deficit grants and the Polavaram project.

BJP MP G.V.L. Narasimha Rao defended the grant saying it was handed by the Union government and not the BJP. The grant was given under provisions of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, he said.

Even if there is an alliance between these three parties, it would face an uphill challenge. Mr. Reddy's schemes are popular with the people. In the latest Budget, he allocated over 54,000 crore for direct benefit transfer schemes, which is about 20% of the total expenditure outlay of 2.79 lakh crore. More importantly, despite the financial crunch and the Opposition raising a hue and cry that the government is funding the scheme by pushing the State into a debt crisis, the Chief Minister has never discontinued his schemes. The beneficiaries of these schemes could therefore be loyal supporters. He also now appears to be addressing the issues of the State government employees. The new Guaranteed Pension Scheme seems to have been received well by the agitating employees.

Meanwhile, the TDP and JSP have started reaching out to the people. TDP leader Nara Lokesh's Yuva Galam padayatra has received a good response in the Rayalaseema region, while Pawan Kalyan's Varahi Yatra has made waves in the East Godavari region. While Mr. Naidu is desperate to revive the past glory of the TDP, the BJP is trying its best to gain some following in the south. Whether the speculation of an alliance becomes reality remains to be seen.

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