



Winning friends, influencing people

As expected, the election of Hamid Ansari for a second term as the Vice-President was non-controversial and smooth. The surprise, if any, was not in the outcome, but in the political churning that overflowed from the presidential election. After the Bharatiya Janata Party made an overambitious attempt to disrupt Pranab Mukherjee's bid for the presidency, this was an occasion to recover lost ground. The party sought to first retain its old allies such as the Shiv Sena and the Janata Dal (United), and then win over non-Congress allies such as the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, instead of looking to poach disgruntled elements within the UPA. The less ambitious strategy was not intended to win the election for its candidate, Jaswant Singh, but to keep the National Democratic Alliance united and in fighting mode for the 2014 Lok Sabha election. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the churning and twisting, it is that the BJP needs more allies. The Telugu Desam Party, a one-time ally, is unlikely to come over to the NDA, and even if it did, will not be as useful as it was in 1998 and 1999. The AIADMK, despite having voted for Mr. Singh, will sit on the fence for longer, maybe, even till after the general election, to leverage for itself the best power-sharing deal possible. Similarly, the Biju Janata Dal might not want to return to the NDA in a hurry.

No wonder then that the BJP's most senior leader, L.K. Advani, has begun talking of the possibility of a non-Congress, non-BJP Prime Minister after 2014. Whether this is intended as bait to bring in more allies, or as philosophical acceptance of harsh realities, the end-result is that the BJP is now shown up as a party desperately seeking partners. The Advani prognosis might actually encourage regional satraps like Chandrababu Naidu of the TDP, Ms. Jayalalitha of the AIADMK and Naveen Patnaik of the BJD to expect either the Congress or the BJP to support a third alternative from the outside. As Mr. Advani conceded, such formations, which offer little to the two principal parties, would not last long. But that would not stop these smaller players from actively seeking power. For the BJP, the real problem is that Hindutva poster boy Narendra Modi, who is the only one acceptable to its core constituency, is the one leader most unacceptable to prospective alliance partners. The core is too small to propel the BJP to power, and broadbasing of the NDA is impossible without alienating this very core. In any case, neither the Congress nor the BJP can hope to come to power on its own. Who gets to rule in 2014 depends as much on winning alliance partners as on influencing voters.