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Dr Manmohan Singh
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You have reposed great faith in me in asking me to be a member of the National Advisory Council (NAC), and the Second Administrative Reforms Commission (SARC). As is well-known, Lok Satta movement has been scrupulously non-partisan, interacting with all political parties with cordiality and respect, and working closely with them on issues of political and governance reforms. Given that history, I accepted the invitation to join the NAC with some trepidation. Looking back, I do not regret that decision. The NAC acted as an expert body for unhurried deliberation and policy advice. As in any body of fiercely independent thinkers, we had intense debates, and on occasion had serious disagreements on the best course to promote public good. But we all developed mutual respect, and enriched the public discourse.

I believe NAC has proved to be of value in integrating expert advice and civil society voices with the formal institutional mechanisms of decision making in government. NAC always acted with restraint and humility appropriate for an unelected advisory body, and the supremacy of the Parliament and elected government has been scrupulously upheld. Your personal leadership proved to be invaluable in making this unique institutional arrangement successful. The NAC experience has strengthened the case for obtaining policy inputs from civil society leaders and experts through an institutional mechanism. A government will naturally seek advice from experts of its choice; but the case for unhurried deliberation and institutional arrangements for expert opinion from outside government seems unassailable, irrespective of the parties in office.

However, our political system is trapped in a vicious cycle. Elections, change of governments, vigorous contestation and political freedoms make our democracy vibrant and robust. But increasingly, most mainstream parties have become

victims of a culture of politics-as-business. Huge investment, largely to distribute money and liquor, bribe officials, and hire criminals has become the dominant feature of our elections. Most elected politicians habitually resort to promotion of personal gain from public office. A vast rent-seeking industry has come into existence, with large sums of money changing hands for transferring public officials, awarding contracts, interfering with crime investigation and due process of law, extending undue patronage to favoured individuals and corporates, distorting tax administration, protecting criminals and corrupt elements, and defrauding public exchequer. In such a culture, public good is an incidental byproduct of politics for private gain, not the primary purpose of political activity.

The mainstream political parties have shown some willingness to address this decay in the public domain. Disclosure of candidate details, political funding reforms, limiting the size of council of ministers, strengthening anti-defection provisions, and right to information law are some of the concrete expressions of the resilience and dynamism of our political system in recent years. However, it is increasingly clear that the mainstream parties have neither the will nor the energy needed to bring about far-reaching political reforms.

For some time now, many of my colleagues in Lok Satta movement and I have come to the inescapable conclusion that India needs a new political culture. The first generation leadership after independence gave us stability and laid foundations of a liberal democratic polity. The urge for political alternatives led to emergence of several parties all over the country to successfully challenge the monopoly of Congress. But most parties in the country are steeped in the same political culture; As a result, elections have only effected periodic change of players, without altering the rules of the game.

Even as the decline in our polity continues, newer challenges are emerging. The vast majority of Indians is denied the opportunities to participate in wealth creation in a growing economy. Centuries of discrimination by birth is aggravated by the failure of state to create opportunities for vertical mobility through education, healthcare and skill promotion. Economic growth itself is imperilled, thanks to governance and political failure. The danger of rising crime with rapid urbanization is complicated by criminalization of politics and partisan control of police apparatus. All these challenges need robust and mature responses from the political and governance system. But the polity, steeped in a culture of politics-as-business and power-as-private-property, is incapable of addressing them swiftly or sufficiently.

It is in this context that many of us have come to the conclusion that we need to foster a new political culture, based on internal democracy of parties, complete transparency in political funding, probity in public life, and robust policy responses to growing challenges. Above all, we need to mobilize public support for such a new political culture, and make it viable and sustainable. Only when public support is demonstrated through voting will the mainstream parties undertake the necessary political reforms to transform the nature of our politics. All parties have outstanding men and women whose integrity, competence and commitment are beyond question. But parties are trapped in a vicious cycle, and

such elements are increasingly isolated and helpless in shaping events. Only a broad political movement which can galvanize public opinion and prove the electoral support for clean politics will generate forces for transforming our polity.

With this intention, we have generated wide public debate in Andhra Pradesh on the need for a new political culture. The overwhelming view is in favour of a new political party spearheading the movement for political reforms, equitable growth, elimination of discrimination by birth, decentralization and rule of law. Accordingly, we are in the process of building a new political formation – Lok Satta Party. Lok Satta will continue as a non-partisan movement, and a new party is being built to pursue the goals in the electoral arena. Our goals are national, and unity and integrity of India are of paramount concern to all of us. Therefore, the new party's concerns will transcend religion, region, caste and language. For the time being, however, our electoral presence will be limited to Andhra Pradesh which we know best, and where these ideas enjoy wide public support. Meanwhile we will work with like-minded individuals and groups in other regions and states to build a nation-wide movement for a new political culture.

Congress, as India's oldest and largest political party, and you as the head of the Union Government, have a vital stake in the future of our country and its polity. You and other leaders have often expressed deep concern about the political decline in our country. I am sure the major political parties and their leaders will play a crucial role in rejuvenation of our republic. We believe all parties should, and can work together to build a clean, robust, mature, just and equitable polity. We look forward to your personal leadership in this vital transformation of our politics.

At a personal level, I am grateful to you for the kindness and courtesies extended to me. Millions of Indians feel gratified that a person of your integrity, expertise, experience, commitment and wisdom is heading the Union Government in these troubled times. Your fairness, warmth and cordiality have always made my work enjoyable and fruitful. I am now resigning from the NAC on account of the demands of my political work (letter enclosed). I hope I will continue to enjoy a warm and cordial relationship with you and your colleagues in the future also. I will continue my association with the Second Administrative Reforms Commission for a few more weeks to help finalize the reports on civil services reform, public order, local governments and ethics in governance. On my next visit to Delhi, I will call on you at your convenience.

Jayaprakash Narayan