

DECCAN Chronicle

Published on *Deccan Chronicle* (<http://www.deccanchronicle.com>)

'Timing of minority quota wrong'

Challakere Kareem Jaffer Sharief, a seasoned Congressman who has seen the ups and downs of the party since the days of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, needs no introduction. The 78-year-old veteran has worked with former Prime Ministers late Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and P.V. Narasimha Rao. In an interview with Deccan Chronicle, Mr Sharief put forth his views on issues like the minority quota and the revival of the Congress even as he received calls from colleagues in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Mumbai. Excerpts: Recently, the Congress entrusted four Union ministers from the state the responsibility of rebuilding the party here. How do you view the development? This is not something new. Late Indira Gandhi too did such an experiment in a different way. I was in charge of the Agra division in UP. I think the rationale behind this is that when ministers visit districts and taluks, people and bureaucrats too will arrive on the spot. The ministers can then redress grievances and infuse confidence in the party cadre. Will this help restore unity in a divided party? I would not agree if someone said a minister can sort out differences. He can have a positive influence on the party. Probably, the proximity of these ministers to the central leadership will help the party understand the realities at the grassroots and come up with solutions. When Mallikarjun Kharge was KPCC president, many leaders felt seniors should step aside, otherwise the party would be decimated. Do you think the party is going in the right direction under a relatively younger Dr G. Parameshwar? I don't endorse this view at all. Both old and new leaders are needed. I certainly agree that for the sake of the future, youngsters should come forward to take up responsibilities. That does not mean that old leaders are worthless. You should know that knowledge and experience cannot be bought in a market. Only when you have a right mix of the old and new can the mission be accomplished. Considering the Congress debacle in 19 by-elections and the internal squabble in the party, do you think the party can recover and fight back? People did not give a clear verdict in the 2008 election. At that time, the Congress went wrong while selecting candidates. As a result, many of our party workers contested as rebels and a few won. Though I know we can't compare Assembly elections with the BBMP polls, I would like to recall an example. When Mr S.M. Krishna was in power, the Bangalore city corporation polls were held. At that time, both Mr Krishna and D.K. Shivakumar were out of the country. I, along with other seniors, selected candidates and the party came to power. It depends on the attitude you adopt during the selection of candidates. If you have the party-first attitude, it will help the Congress. In hindsight, I feel the party should have inducted Independent MLAs and formed the government with the help of JD (S) in 2008. Because of our mistake, the BJP lured the independents and formed the government. Do you think, the BJP which got 110 seats in the 2008 polls and was just three seats short of a simple majority, should have been deprived a chance to form the government? It was the mistake of the JD (S). They made the BJP acceptable to the public. After forming a coalition in 2006, they refused to hand over power to the BJP. A section of people, who felt betrayed, took pride in supporting BJP. After three and a half years in government, the BJP claims it has the support of Lingayats, the majority of OBC, SC and ST communities. On the other side, the JD (S) is branded as a party of one particular community. Where does the Congress look for votes? I do not think that is the prevailing situation. No single party can permanently

boast of holding onto power with the support of one or two communities. In a Lingayat dominated constituency, all the parties will end up fielding Lingayat candidates only. So, people will go beyond the caste or community tag while deciding whom to vote for. I am really concerned about BJP rule. Sometimes I wonder if the party has forgotten its responsibility towards citizens. Why is this impression--the Congress sidelining you— gaining ground? Sometimes, it happens in politics, I guess. When a person has worked at the national level has climbed the ladder to grow, others tend to think he is overshadowing them. This might have forced some people to employ checks and balances. Of course, the party should have taken note of my contributions. The Congress has proposed reservation for minorities. Many feel that Sikhs, Jains and Christians will take away a major chunk in the quota and Muslims will be left with nothing. Comment, It is sad that my party has proposed this at the time the UP elections are happening. I do not know how my party will take this issue forward. You have to understand the situation. The Sachar Committee report is before us and then came the Ranganath Mishra Committee report. What they said about Muslims' plight is real. I wonder how the BJP will consolidate Hindu votes by opposing the minority quota? I personally feel the reservation issue should not have been brought up during the elections because it will derail the real issue of minority development.

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