

Asia



India's north-south divide

Seating plans

CHENNAI

Why India's south is fighting plans to overhaul parliament

BATTLING INDIA'S central government is almost a way of life for M.K. Stalin, the chief minister of the southern state of Tamil Nadu. He entered politics as a teenager, helping his father (who also became chief minister) push for state autonomy and resist efforts to establish Hindi—north India's dominant tongue—as the national language. Aged 23, he was jailed for a year after Indira Gandhi, then prime minister, suspended civil liberties in the 1975-77 "Emergency". He has a scar on his right hand from the beatings.

Now, at the age of 72, Mr Stalin is reaching a moment in his tug-of-war with the national authorities that could define his career and redraw India's political map. Narendra Modi, the prime minister, plans to reallocate seats in the 543-member lower house of India's parliament after a census is completed in 2026. Supporters say this "delimitation" will account for huge demographic changes since a 1971 census deter-

mined the legislature's current maximum size. It will thus make the body more democratic, they say, by ensuring that each seat represents a similar number of voters.

Mr Stalin is leading a campaign against it, fearing that more seats will go to the poorer, more populous north. In his telling, that would not just penalise the south for its more successful family-planning policies: it would hugely benefit Mr Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which dominates the north. "This delimitation process could systematically dilute the voice of the southern states in national decision-mak-

ing, creating a permanent political imbalance," says Mr Stalin in a written interview. "We cannot simply be passive bystanders."

On March 22nd Mr Stalin hosted the inaugural meeting of a "Joint Action Committee" of leaders from four other states, who passed a resolution demanding that delimitation be postponed by another 25 years (as it was in 1976 and 2001). Those states included three more of the five in the south (Karnataka, Kerala and Telangana) as well as Punjab, which is in the north but also has relatively good family planning. Andhra Pradesh, the only southern state whose ruling party is in the BJP's national coalition, did not take part.

Divide and rule

The meeting capped a month of protests and fierce public exchanges on the subject. Amit Shah, the home minister, tried to reassure southern states at a rally in Tamil Nadu in February, promising that after delimitation they would not lose a single seat on a "pro rata" basis. "Whatever increase is there, southern states will get a fair share," he said. In the absence of more details, that only fuelled the fire.

The statement "lacks clarity", says Mr Stalin. If Mr Shah is so sure about the government's delimitation plan, "he should formally present it to parliament rather than make casual offhand remarks at pub-

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- ▶ lic rallies.” Mr Stalin also cites the government’s record of imposing disruptive changes without consulting India’s states, including the sudden withdrawal of many banknotes in 2016 and the abrogation of autonomy for Jammu & Kashmir, a Muslim majority state, in 2019.

The controversy now threatens to deepen the political, economic and cultural divide between India’s north and south. That has long historical roots but has grown starker in recent years, partly because of southern distaste for Mr Modi’s Hindu nationalism and partly because the south has moved so far ahead in economic and social development. Many southerners now feel that too much of the tax they pay gets spent on the north.

Northerners, meanwhile, say they are underrepresented in parliament’s lower house, the Lok Sabha, making it harder to improve governance. The northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), for example, is India’s most populous, with 238m people. The average Lok Sabha constituency there includes about 3m people; in Tamil Nadu, down south, it has 2m. And the discrepancy is set to worsen as fertility rates in the north’s two most populous states, UP and Bihar, are well above the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman, whereas all southern states are significantly below it.

There is no easy fix. One suggestion is to maintain the Lok Sabha’s current size but redistribute seats based on the new census. That is controversial as it could strip southern states of as many as 26 seats. A second option is to expand the Lok Sabha and allocate new seats proportionately based on the census. Parliament would need to grow to 848 seats for southern states to retain the number they have now, reckons the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, an American think-tank.

That is thought to be Mr Modi’s preference, not least because a new parliament building that opened in 2023 has 888 lower-house seats. But southern states reject that option too, as it would cut their vote share in parliament, cementing the BJP’s grip on power. Mr Stalin says he will only accept a formula that keeps Tamil Nadu’s current share of Lok Sabha seats.

Mr Modi could try to force delimitation through parliament: he has ways to cajole opposition leaders. Still, he would probably need a constitutional amendment. And after losing the BJP’s outright majority in 2024, he might struggle to get the requisite two-thirds majority in both houses, as well as ratification by over half of all state legislatures. He might also torpedo the BJP’s drive to win more southern votes.

Postponement would be a climbdown. But it is politically manageable, since Mr Modi has not set an exact timeline. And it would give northern states time to control population growth. Internal migration