

# Who will lead the Congress after Singh?

## BALKANIZED CONGRESS NOT COUNTRY

India has survived many Cassandra-complexed prognostications. However, it has not fallen to pieces along religious or linguistic divisions. For a long time, many believed that it was the Congress Party and the extraordinary charisma of its founding figures that did the trick. They feared that once these leaders made their exit, India's fundamental fragility would be fully exposed.

Jawaharlal Nehru was not just India's first prime minister; with his death an era ended. He was the last surviving hero (and what a hero) of India's national movement. Books written in his final years speculated on how India would survive his death. Who could take his place? Could anyone? Would India collapse post-Nehru?

That India remains standing many decades later should demonstrate that the centrifugal forces holding the country together are not just a bunch of band-aids. India's survival also invites theoreticians of the nation-state to recast some of their tried and tested views.

India is both the graveyard of hallowed concepts as well as the birthplace of new ones. We now know that there is no one "yellow brick road" to a nation-state. Each sovereign country must find its own route, and *most* routes are as authentic as any other.

While India has survived, the Indian National Congress party has not fared as well. It no longer controls the politics of the country as it did for the better part of four decades. A number of factors can account for this loss of dominance—some sociological, others personal.

## THE EMERGING PRESSURES FROM BELOW

From a sociological perspective, social classes that had little or no political lever-

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age at the time of Independence slowly grew in strength, seeking singular routes to political representation. Not satisfied with being clients of the Congress, they were eager to be their own masters and articulate their special interests and outlook. While this jolted the suzerainty of the Congress, it was a healthy sign.

The stranglehold of the old elite gave way to the emergence of new classes that, while sometimes fractious and unruly, were no longer prepared to be subservient. This was primarily a rural phenomenon: the landlord oligarchs had to make way for the ascendant owner-cultivators, some of whom may have been their tenants just a short time ago. This upsurge could not have happened without universal adult franchise and free elections.

The Congress did, however, continue to contain diverse political strands within its famed "umbrella-like canopy." This is where the personal factors come into the loss of dominance. Indira Gandhi's steadfast ambition to isolate and marginalize Congress activists who did not owe their ascendancy to her munificence undermined the organizational core of

the party. This effectively ruined local-level leaders and in their place came transplants from above.

This drift began to occur with greater frequency in the 1970s and would gradually strengthen those forces that were chafing at the bit to come out on their own, independent of the Congress. The Congress lost the south, then Bengal and Punjab. When Congress lost in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, its boast of being synonymous with the nation-state began to sound hollow.

As long as Indira Gandhi was in power, this trend was kept in check. The force of her charisma shut out dissent within and ambitions without. However, after her assassination in 1984, the cracks travelling right up to the ceiling began to show. In fact, in a number of cases, breakaway Congress workers set up their own parties and became important leaders in their own right in different regions of the country. This is true of Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra as well as Naveen Patnaik in Orissa and Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal. Even earlier, there was Ramakrishna Hegde in Karnataka and Hemvati Nanda Bahuguna in Uttar Pradesh.

If Balkanization works as a metaphor in the Indian context, it applies primarily to the Congress Party and not to the nation-state. The country is still one, with different parties dominating different states. Interestingly, these regional parties retain a stake in the central pie. All have formed national-level alliances, because it pays to be part of the winning combination in Delhi.

## THE COVETED CENTRE

Thus, from the Dravidian Parties in Tamil Nadu, to the Communist Parties in Kerala and West Bengal, to hues of crypto socialists in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar,

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there is not a single organization that would spurn an opportunity to grab a seat in Delhi. This is why regional elections are usually attentive to what is happening at the national, all-India level.

How else does one explain the complete rout of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in the 2011 Tamil Nadu elections? Voters almost blanked out the DMK because a few of its members were stupidly and openly corrupt. They used their position in the centre, while the party was a partner in the ruling coalition, to amass huge fortunes, which went, rather transparently, to family and friends of the DMK *supremo*, Karunanidhi. No amount of money or material inducements could get Tamil Nadu voters to return this party to power in 2011.

Similarly, the way the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)) in 2009 brought down the Manmohan Singh coalition government in Delhi went down poorly with the electorate nationwide, as well as with the West Bengal public. This would help Mamata Banerjee in 2011 consolidate the fractured opposition to the Communists and effectively end their three-and-a-half decades of uninterrupted rule in West Bengal.

While Banerjee obviously capitalized on the built-up resentment in West Bengal against the communists, the CPI (M) also participated in its own downfall. Its controversial decision to walk out of the Manmohan Singh-led ruling coalition, which had been cobbled together after the 2004 elections, was unwise. Once the CPI (M) was out, its archrival in West Bengal moved in. This led to an open alliance between the Congress and Banerjee's Trinamool Congress. True, Congress was a junior partner in this agreement, but the votes it commanded went to Banerjee and not, as it would have earlier, to the CPI (M). The extra weight in the ballot box makes all the difference between victory and defeat.

It is important not to overlook the fact that voters emphasize different issues in

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regional and national elections. There is no doubt that, in the former, local issues count for more, as they should. Even so, there are times when all-India concerns permeate state-level elections. Interestingly, when it comes to national elections the coalitions usually congeal around the two major parties, which have an all-India presence—the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party).

While people may support this or that regional party, at the time of the national elections, decisions may rest on who is aligning with whom. The voters, therefore, have to make a Dupleix decision. That is, they have to factor in the best combination of regional and national parties on that occasion. The mix matters and this is why the centre continues to hold, even though there are many regional parties in the fray.

Even though there is a strong, nearly jingoistic affirmation of our nation-state's borders that keep the country from disintegrating, the vertical integration of the economy across the subcontinent is important. Bihar may be underdeveloped, even by Indian standards, but it sends migrant workers to Andhra

Pradesh, Punjab, and now even Kerala. This clearly helps these states do well economically by capitalizing on cheap labour.

In addition, timber, iron ore, and bauxite are shipped to different parts of the country from Bihar, Orissa, and Jharkhand, some of the poorest parts of India. Uttar Pradesh is far from being prosperous, but India earns a lot of foreign exchange from the textiles, brasswork, and carpets produced in this state. Maharashtra, on the other hand, is prosperous, but there are migrants there from Mumbai, Pune, Kolhapur, and Nashik.

Ernest Renan once famously made a distinction between thinking nationally and thinking rationally. In India, the strong national, and perhaps irrational, commitment to territory is complemented by rational economics.

## WHY CORRUPTION IS A SCANDAL NOW

Today, India is in a rather reflective mood. Who will follow Manmohan Singh? Will it be Rahul Gandhi or some other lucky winner outside the "family"? Who will lead the Congress? The answers are not clear. Yet, the Congress-led coalition in the centre seems quite settled because none of the alliance partners is in the mood to flirt with other combinations, and for good reason. Those elected know that in Indian politics one cannot rely on a winning streak because fortunes change rapidly. It is this uncertainty that has kept the ruling United Progress Alliance (UPA) firmly in place since the 2004 elections where no party won a clear majority.

Every cloud indeed has a silver lining. Fresh cases of corruption erupt on an almost daily basis, embarrassing this government at every turn. This is bad news, no doubt. On the other hand, there is a greater degree of civic vigilance in India today, made possible by television and the press. Whether it is the 2G spectrum scam or the Commonwealth Games scam, the media has brought the scandals to the public's

attention. To beat official stonewalling, journalists had to toss the scooped dirt high enough for it to fall on the other side of the wall. This made a mess of many political calculations.

However, it is not as if corruption is a new phenomenon in Indian politics. Scandals also plagued the Nehru government. The difference is that today the media is better positioned and quite tenacious—in some cases at least. One wonders why other instances of financial misappropriation do not get equal attention. Nevertheless, what is unearthed and made public makes a lot of mud slinging possible.

In addition, villagers are not that gullible any more. At one time, their lands could be easily acquired on the pretext of setting up projects for national development, but today they are much more aware of real estate prices. Although this awareness took some years to sink in, the consequence is that resistance to massive land grabs, whether by the state or private players, in the name of setting up factories, dams, or airports, is impressive. One might say that this again demonstrates the strength of Indian democracy. Rural India is as aware as urban India about how the real estate market functions.

## LEGACY OF MANMOHAN SINGH

The next elections are three years away and that is a long time in politics. Anything could happen in this period, but if the Congress-led coalition wants to ensure another victory and leave a legacy for the future, it must do some things urgently. First, it should amend the colonial, 1892 *Land Acquisition Act*. It is both surprising and disgraceful that this law has been around for so long. An independent India must respect its citizens and provide them with adequate compensation when their land is acquired for development purposes. Second, and this might be a longer and more tedious process, the government has to tighten up the existing anti-corruption laws. Anger against the misuse of public office is real and growing; it will

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not just go away. It is, therefore, imperative that the administration begins to operate with transparency.

These measures may seem superficial, but they would have a great impact. The party that comes out looking clean first is the one that will get the votes. While corrupt politicians in the centre get the most attention, there are even dirtier hands among state-level actors. Increased transparency might pressure the system such that a new breed of politicians emerges, although we are now ahead of ourselves. If this government is to leave behind a worthwhile legacy, it can only be along these lines. On everything else, it will be more of the same. Liberalization is here to stay and so is privatization.

It would be rash to make any projections on the next general election now. We can say that Manmohan Singh's government has not delivered to its potential, but neither has the opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by the right of centre, Hindu-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) covered itself in glory. The most we can expect from Manmohan Singh is continuity, stability, and a slow incremental increase in prosperity. And what can we expect from the opposition? We cannot be sure what they will do.

It is true that after the UPA came to power in 2004, identity politics took a backseat; but it is also true that the UPA has not been able to raise standards of economic well-being in the way it promised. Despite rolling out many grandiose programs, poverty figures stubbornly hold their own. Having said that, we must acknowledge that there remains a widespread belief that Manmohan Singh can still pack a punch. He is perceived by many to be on the right track, but caught

on the wrong foot.

One of the major reasons why UPA government programs have not made a difference to poverty statistics is the reluctance to invest in health and education. The privatization of large chunks of the economy has made certain classes richer, but the numbers of those in regular employment have not gone up in real terms. This has led to greater uncertainty among the working people as the overwhelming majority (93 percent) are still in the informal sector. They are not covered by health insurance, social insurance, or old age pensions, which is why they remain both vulnerable and poor.

Further, there is no thinking on delivering quality health and education universally. As targeted approaches will continue, so too will the substandard delivery of these merit goods. International experience shows that public health and educational services work best only when they are aimed at citizens in general and not at an identified population. However, on issues of this kind, there is no national debate, indeed no national consciousness. Sadly, even left parties are not thinking in this direction.

Chances are that, when people look back at the Manmohan Singh legacy, the overwhelming consensus may well be that this government had all the opportunities but blew most of them. The government has no straightforward agrarian policy, which is surprising given that 70 percent of the population lives in villages, although, admittedly, they are not full-time farmers. There is no policy toward enhancing formal employment, which is why 93 percent of India's labour force is still in the informal sector. Even today, about 39 million people annually sink into debt because of illness.

The optimists might well say that "things could have been worse." We could have had minority bashing and we could have had a situation where capital was shy of entering the country, but none of this has happened because the UPA has kept such damaging forces well under control. 