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The Indian National Congress' identity crisis

India needs an effective opposition to fight Modi's authoritarianism. But the Congress is too engaged in navel-gazing

As a rule, rebellion does not come easy for members of the Indian National Congress (INC), one of the world's oldest political parties. Though now in the opposition, after ruling India for about 60 years, party members generally have great faith in the ability of their leadership to help them navigate to power.

The Nehru-Gandhi family has led the INC since India gained independence in 1947. It is perhaps the oldest surviving political dynasty in the world. It all began with India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, followed by his daughter, Indira Gandhi. She was succeeded by her son, Rajiv, after her assassination. When Rajiv was also killed, his Italian-born widow Sonia became the President of the INC. Ultimately, her son Rahul held the reigns from 2017 to 2019, when Sonia took over again after the INC's historic election defeat.

Considering the party's loyalty to its Gandhi leadership, it was a big surprise when 23 senior Congress officials recently wrote a letter to Sonia Gandhi, arguing that the Congress would be forced to sit out in the opposition if it did not democratise and fix its glaring infirmities. These urgent changes were needed, they wrote, to take on the challenge posed by the pandemic to democracy and the domination exercised by religious-fascist forces.

As long as the INC is weak, Narenda Modi's BJP government can aggressively push forward its authoritarian agenda.

Modi's authoritarian agenda

After being re-elected in May 2019, Modi's government brought in constitutional amendments, which many believe undermine the secular

and plural character of the country. The government amended the Citizen act (CAA) that granted citizenship to non-Muslim persecuted minorities from India's neighbourhood. By bringing in religion as a criterion to grant citizenship, the BJP government, in one stroke, changed the secular basis of the Indian constitution. The persecuted Shias or Ahmediya Muslims of Pakistan were no longer welcome in BJP-run India.

The amendment to the constitution, along with creating a national register of citizens (NRC), which demanded the citizens to prove their citizenship, ostensibly meant to weed out illegals, sent disquiet and anxiety amongst the minorities. Perceiving this as a serious threat to their lives and status in the land of the birth, there was a countrywide agitation against it by minorities and those who worried about India becoming a Hindu religious State. Millions took to the streets in capital Delhi and elsewhere. If it hadn't been for communal riots in Delhi and the lockdown brought in by the pandemic, the protests would have continued.

Moreover, on 5 August 2019, the government brought in a constitutional amendment that annulled Article 370 of the constitution that granted special status to the disputed State of Kashmir, over which India and Pakistan have fought three wars and which is a major cause for terror and instability in the region. Through this constitutional change, the government refused to countenance the region as disputed and took steps to assimilate it. This process also saw withdrawal of certain rights, including that of access to the Internet. All the political leaders of Kashmir were put behind bars for months.

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In all of this, the judiciary has been the most heavily impacted. It has not had the time to take up the cases pertaining to the abrogation of Article 370 on Kashmir or on how the government has gone about criminalising dissent expressed during the anti-CAA protests. Because of this somnolence of the courts, hundreds of young protestors are facing charges of sedition and terrorism and languishing in jails.

The TV media landscape, too, has been wrecked. The ruling party uses it to build its narrative to de-legitimise the dissenters in the country. It is a strange circus that plays out every night where those opposed to the ruling party are subjected to a harsh media trial. This smacks of McCarthyism, but a weak opposition and judiciary allows its

perpetuation.

The Congress and the BJP

At the face of it, the disquiet in the country over these developments afforded the INC an opportunity to align itself with the citizenship issue or the Kashmir agitation. But the party leadership chose to stay away, fearing that its image of being a pro-Muslim party may get reinforced.

As political scientist Suhas Palsikar put it: 'Rarely has any party hogged headlines for not doing anything. In traditional whodunnits, murders masquerade as suicides; in the case of the Congress, suicide feigns murder.'

The INC's collapse is not just causing disquiet and anxiety within the party – as evidenced by the letter –, but also amongst all those who want the country to remain a secular democracy. Why is it not leading protests against economic hardships caused by the pandemic and poor economic management, emasculation of the media and the judiciary? The weakening of the opposition is hurting Indian democracy and its institutions.

Hence, there is a national obsession about what is really happening to the main opposition party and its former leader, Rahul Gandhi, at such a crucial time. The letter by the 23 senior Congress officials was not viewed as a challenge to the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, who still enjoys a lot of respect in the party, but to Rahul, who led Congress to a disastrous performance in 2019 parliament election and who may still try to return as its president.

After the 2019 loss, he had owned up to the responsibility for his party's ignominious defeat and resigned from his post. This was a low point for a national party led by a youthful leader that won less than ten per cent of the total number of 543 parliament seats in two successive parliament elections.

The young, as the letter pointed out, had deserted the party and shifted their loyalties to the BJP and its leader, Narendra Modi. What was particularly distressing for these senior Congress leaders was that its highest decision-making bodies had not got into a huddle to find out why they lost so heavily – despite the government's dismal economic record exacerbated by demonetisation, flawed and hasty roll out of Goods and Services Tax (GST) and political disenfranchisement of the minorities.

Though these dissenters are products of party's institutional ad-hocism – no one was elected to any organisational post – they are articulating a sentiment within the party and outside for a robust opposition that can question the policies of an extremely aggressive BJP government.

Rahul Gandhi's lack of focus

Rahul Gandhi and his mother, party president Sonia, have not taken the revolt of these senior Congressmen kindly. They have made light of their demands to democratise the party, as they perhaps believe that in a period of crisis, organisational elections could not only deepen divides, but also allow those ideologically aligned to the majoritarian politics of the BJP to take over the reins of the party. These fears could be genuine or an excuse to keep the party under their firm control. The reality is, though, that many Congressmen do not find Modi's stand on either Kashmir or the CAA ideologically abhorrent.

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This ambivalence in the Congress stems from ideological confusion brought about by successive defeats in the parliamentary elections. After the 2014 debacle, an internal Congress committee had made one recommendation: prevent the image that the party is anti-Hindu.

In one of the party meetings a few months ago, Rahul Gandhi claimed that the entire burden of criticising the Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his policies had fallen on him. He hinted that some leaders of the Congress were mixed up with the ruling party and were afraid to criticise Modi. Those who were in the arc of fire resented this trenchantly, as they claimed that their advice shouldn't be construed as an act of disloyalty. There were also suggestions in this meeting that Rahul Gandhi's targeting of Modi and calling him corrupt or a thief had hurt the party's fortunes. This assertion is only partially true, however. In eight state elections in the past few years, the BJP, bewilderingly, lost. They only managed to corner these states by engineering defections.

The Congress needs to re-invent itself

So the biggest challenge for the Congress leadership is how to re-invent itself when the country has been in the sway of hate-based islamophobia aggravated by pandemic-induced lockdown that has restrained legitimate political activity. Reticence has marked the assembly of MPs in the

parliament and all political parties, driven by fear, have been keen to end parliamentary sessions as early as possible.

A tanking economy, attacks on protestors and the judiciary as well as the capture of the media demand India's main opposition party to question the government. But the peripatetic Congress leader, Rahul Gandhi, who disappears in the midst of political crises, has betrayed a lack of focus as well as the ability to build a political coalition to save India's troubled secular democracy.

The letter by the senior INC officials also brought to the fore the troubling fact that, save for the Congress, there is no other party or a political actor steadfast around whom a coherent challenge to the BJP could be built. Either these actors are too small for a big nation or have no problems cobbling an alliance with the BJP. That's why such high expectations rest on the INC and Rahul Gandhi.



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