

The Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Future of Indian National Congress (INC)

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Introduction

The Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) emerged as a popular political party following Narendra Modi's first term in the office. The party managed to secure another term, leaving the Congress with a seemingly irredeemable defeat. The BJP won a staggering 303 seats in the 545-member parliament, acquiring 50 per cent of the vote in its bid to establish itself as the sole national party across India. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, The Indian National Congress (INC) managed to win a meagre 52 seats. While the Modi-led BJP continues its march forward, the INC, i.e., the grand old party which led the nation through independence from the British colonial rule seems to be on its way to an inevitable decline.

There are several underlying determinants behind the rise of the BJP over the years. Very precisely though, its success can be attributed to the way that the BJP leadership projects the rise of a new and better India. The INC, on the other hand, stands without proper leadership or organisational structure, leaving room for critical observations about its future.

The Rise of BJP as the Leading Ruling Party of India

According to a survey conducted among 2,521 respondents in India from 23 May to 23 July 2018 by the Pew Research Centre, most

Indians appeared 'satisfied' with the economic and overall performance of the BJP government.¹ 65 per cent of the respondents in the survey believed that the economic situation of average Indians had considerably improved from what they used to be 20 years ago. Only 15 per cent believed things to be worse than they were before BJP was in power.²

Literature and commentaries on the rise and popularity of the BJP iterate several determinants of a positive support base for it. To name a few, leadership style, rightful use of social media, playing the INC errors to its strength, etc.

Most Indians gauge effective leadership in connection with the economic performance by the ruling government. According to this perspective, Modi, for most Indians stood as someone who entered the political system as a commoner, i.e., as someone without a political dynasty.

One of the leading factors that helped BJP earn popularity lies in the unsubstantiated claims made by the INC. Iterating Modi's inclination towards corruption, the INC launched the slogan 'Chowkidar Chor Hai' in the hope of causing a shift in the prevailing public proclivity towards Modi and by extension, the BJP. However, since the slogan had an inadequate base, and the INC leadership did not have enough evidence to convince the Indian

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population of Modi as a corrupt leader, the entire effort went in vain. Alternatively, it had a positive impact on the BJP's campaign.

The BJP's campaign was mostly premised around the pillars of strong leadership and Modi's aggressive sense of nationalism—a construct that the Indians hold extremely significant as a matter of their general national conduct. Most commentators on Indian politics certainly believe that people voted for Modi because of his nationalist narrative. In particular, Modi's policy orientation towards Pakistan and his hard-line approaches have had a huge impact on making his party what it is today. His decision to execute an attack in Kashmir was seen as a bold move with a nationalist niche by many in India. Relatedly, his notion of 'muscular nationalism' has similar if not equal support in India. Today, the BJP is the richest, largest, and the most popular political party in India. It is mostly so because it came with the Hindutva ideology to counter the secular ideology of the INC. The adoption of the Hindutva ideology was a suggestion made by Atal Bihari Vajpayee who subsequently served as the Prime Minister of India. Nationalism, Hindutva ideology, and corruption busting was a tactic played by BJP. To win elections and to stay in power, BJP had to perform well economically by keeping inflation at a record low.

Furthermore, BJP's rapid growth can also be traced back to how its leadership accorded due importance to social media and ensured optimal reliance on it for furthering its narrative among the general public. Relying on social media to establish its dominance enabled the BJP to reach the masses at an entirely different level. Additionally, the Indians sought a change from the long INC rule, which, to them, lacked

proper campaign or ideology. Slogans like 'party with a difference' helped the BJP gain the confidence of the voters and emerge as a party capable of leading India out of its redundancy.

This does not really mean that the BJP does not have its own set of challenges. In lieu of the current events however, the pitfalls in its policy and errors in its administration may only become evident in time. If the party fails to form the next central government and performs weakly in state elections, its newly created coalition could fail, leading to an earlier demise of the BJP-dominated party system. The BJP has enjoyed its dominance in the previous two elections but needs to look into the future strategies as well in order to retain its relevance and dominance.

India National Congress (INC): A Sinking Ship

In 1947, after the Indian independence, the country was trying to survive on its own. Division of the Indian subcontinent had grave socioeconomic implications for both the newly independent countries. Indian industrial and agriculture sectors had gaps in capacity. Thus, the Indian National Congress planned to focus more on the agricultural and the industrial sectors.³ The restructuring of the economy was set as the central aim for the INC, but it also worked on improving the physical and administrative infrastructure of India. The key points of this plan were multi-dimensional strategies for economic development, rapid industrialisation of essential sectors as a substitute for imports of goods and prohibition on foreign capital, and work on land reforms.⁴ Under the leadership of the INC, India's economy was on the path of progress for a few years after

independence. The government had formed an Economic Program Committee to prioritise the performance and development of the public sector. However, needs of the Indian public evolved over the years and now require a re-orientation of the INC party policy if it is to reclaim its position as India's largest national party.

Lucknow, home to over 300 million people, has given eight prime ministers to India. A few kilometres away from Lucknow is the district of Amity. A casual visitor might be forgiven for thinking of Amity as a common place in India but it happens to be one of the most important constituencies of the country considering its role in election victories in India. Amity, in addition to other districts in its surrounding, constituted as areas which served as home ground for the Congress, leading the party to swift successes during the elections. However, the BJP took the aforesaid areas for itself too, winning in the said constituencies by a huge margin. Rahul Gandhi was defeated by BJP's Smriti Irani during the recent elections in Amity, leaving the INC in shock. Some INC leaders were of the opinion that this defeat was a direct result of the improper campaigning approach. INC campaign strategy marred with inadequacy consequentially led the party to lose touch with the general public and assess the basic needs of an Indian commoner.

Most members of the Congress seem to agree over the INC's failure to optimally highlight the issue of nationalism that came after the Pulwama attack in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK). On the other hand, the BJP turned out as a truly nationalistic party in the public eye because of Modi's nationalistic speeches while the entire opposition rested as a

silent spectator. Shashi Tharoor, former Minister of State for External Affairs, believes that people like him underestimated a matter of national security when this attack took place.⁵ Congress did not shift the narrative from development to nationalism and religion. They completely lost the plot on nationalism and how to take it forward. BJP on the other hand, set the agenda once the narrative of nationalism arose. He added that another factor that the Congress was missing was the true essence of leadership that the party had lost over the past few decades.

Future of the INC

The INC needs to turn the election into a presidential competition to put up a credible challenge in addition to working on its leadership and ideology. The nationalist narrative might help the Congress in surviving this race. The INC also missed the social media factor in the past, seemingly ignoring 190 million internet users during its previous campaigns, not a number to be ignored.⁶ According to former member of the Congress, Priyanka Chaturvedi, there are multiple points to the social media strategy implemented by the INC to pawn negative and misleading propaganda of political opponents. The INC needs major reforms to be back on track. The present leadership of the INC has not done enough to convince majority of the population. The party's organisational structure, confusion, failures, and shortcomings of the leadership are not the only reasons for its failure. A trustworthy and popular leadership is also essential to structure the vision for the political revival of the Congress at the national level. Personality-based political change is a major part of India's democratic history; a face with a coherent and unique political message of better

governance and long-term development must lead the party.⁷ In order to settle the leadership question, free and fair organisational elections for the leadership position of the party at various levels would help the party in reviving its future.

The INC is still trying to come to grips with a new dramatically altered nation. The handful of states where the Congress is still in power are also facing troubles. The Congress coalition government in Karnataka had also collapsed after several Congress members resigned from the state assembly. Not just that, the government in Madhya Pradesh also collapsed because its MPs resigned and joined the BJP. Once a dominant player in Indian politics for decades, the INC seems to have lost its place in the hearts of millions of its voters.

Conclusion

The BJP represents the rise of a new India with its polices. The people of India could associate with the leaders of the BJP because of the party's campaigning strategy, leadership, organisational structure, and ideology. People used to vote for INC for its leadership back in the

days. As discussed earlier, people vote for the BJP because of Modi and his leadership. Some of its voters say that they would not vote for BJP when Modi retires. He is the face of BJP and they love him because of the way he speaks bluntly. To the Indians, he is the kind of leader who does not shy away from making swift decisions in the favour of the national interest. Another factor that makes Indians love Modi is the anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim stance, which is because of the Hindutva ideology of the BJP. India is a democracy where the party that resonates with the people, wins the elections.

Even though the INC did perform well in the past, it lost track with time, which eventually led to poor leadership and deteriorating organisational structure. Campaigning of the INC through the last elections in 2019 was done to bash the BJP leadership which eventually benefitted the BJP instead. For a flourishing democracy, a sturdy and effective opposition is essential. For a strong democratic India, the revival of the congress party in the opposition is an important factor.

Notes and References

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- ⁵ Channel News Asia, "India's Crumbling Dynasty," 7 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d4Adl2E-1NY&t=1653s>.
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