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Indian National Congress: A Party in Crisis

Weak leadership has left the party wandering the political wilderness.

By Sudha Ramachandran
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The Indian National Congress is in crisis. Almost 18 months after its humiliating defeat in general elections, when it slumped to its worst performance ever – winning just 44 of the 543 seats in the lower house of Parliament, the Lok Sabha – the Grand Old Party is in a state of drift. It appears unsure of its next steps and bereft of ideas for its revival.

Electorally, the last 18 months have been a washout for the Congress party. It has performed miserably in every state assembly election held since the general election debacle. For instance, in the election to the Delhi state assembly in February, the party failed to win even one seat. The Delhi government had been in the hands of the Congress for 15 uninterrupted years till 2013.

The party's footprint across India is shrinking rapidly. Of India's 29 states, just ten are Congress-ruled today; in four of these states it rules as part of a coalition. It is absent in major states like Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. In the ongoing elections to the Bihar state assembly it is a "bit player," a humiliating comedown for a party that was once a political colossus. It is without a strong base anywhere in the country.

Not only has the Congress lost its central role in Indian politics to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance, it appears to have ceded its position as the standard bearer of the center-left agenda to a political greenhorn, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

Founded in 1885, the Congress led the country to freedom from British colonial rule. It has dominated India's post-independence politics, ruling the country for 54 of the past 68 years, either on its own or as the leader of coalition governments. It was only in 1977 that the Congress was defeated for the first time ever in national elections, when voters punished the party for "excesses" committed during Emergency rule (1975-77). So angry were voters with the party and its leaders that a political comeback seemed impossible.

Yet the Congress bounced back to power in 1980, won a landslide mandate in 1984 and until the early 1990s formed governments without the support of other parties. Between 2004 and 2014, a Congress-led coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ruled for two five-year terms. The second of these terms was marked by poor governance and unprecedented levels of corruption. While a Congress defeat in the May 2014 election was widely predicted, even its worst critics did not expect it to be mauled as severely as it was.

'Still to Recover'

Eighteen months later, the Congress "is still to recover" from the electoral rout observes Sandeep Shastri, political analyst and pro vice chancellor of Jain University in Bengaluru. There are "no visible signs" of its prospects having improved, he says, attributing this in part to the reluctance of the party "to make a dispassionate analysis of the factors responsible for its defeat."

In the wake of the Congress' defeat in the general election an in-house probe was instituted into the reasons for the party's dismal performance. Rather than pointing the finger at the party leadership, it laid the blame for the electoral drubbing at the door of the Congress-led government. In fixing culpability for the poll debacle it was thus silent on the lackluster leadership of Rahul Gandhi, who led the election campaign.

The Congress "conveniently placed the blame on 'collective responsibility,'" Shastri observed, stressing that in doing so it chose "to duck the challenge" of tackling the underlying reasons for its defeat instead of "facing it head on."

In the process the party has failed to reform its organization or tackle issues related to its functioning and leadership that may have contributed to its decline and fall.

Heavily centralized in its decision making, particularly since the 1970s, the Congress has a top-down style and is heavily dependent on the Nehru-Gandhi family to provide it with leadership, hold the party together, and win it votes. The party "has also not thought it fit to groom state level leaders with a popular base who can galvanize the state units of the party," Shastri noted.

Especially in the wake of the Congress' annihilation in the general election, calls for reform of the party's organizational structure and functioning have grown, but the past 18 months have seen little progress in this direction. Questions have been raised, too, over the leadership skills of

45-year-old Rahul Gandhi. A scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, which has given India three prime ministers, Rahul is expected to take over the reins of the Congress from party president, Sonia Gandhi, his mother.

The Trouble With Rahul

In the run-up to general elections, Rahul was derided for his lack of charisma and oratory skills, his disinterest in politics and shirking of responsibility, long absences from the country and rare appearances in parliament. During the 2014 election campaign, Rahul was criticized for his bland approach, especially in comparison to the electrifying style of the BJP's Narendra Modi.

In the 18 months since he led the party to its most spectacular defeat, Rahul has yet to prove his capacity as a vote-catcher for the party. He hasn't been able to boost the sagging spirits of the Congress rank and file. His two-month long sabbatical during the crucial budget session of parliament earlier this strengthened the perception that he lacks interest in politics and does not have the stamina demanded of a leader looking to rebuild a battered political party.

What is more, doubts over his ability to lead the Congress' revival have triggered an array of rifts in the party over the past year. Congress old-timers are reportedly unhappy with Rahul's "handling of organizational matters." Intense opposition to Rahul's leadership in various states could snowball into open rebellion. Indeed, it is widely believed that it is to avert an all-out revolt that Rahul's elevation to the post of party president later this year was put off.

Gandhi family loyalists are firm in their belief that Rahul has what it takes to lead the party out of the political wilderness. His growing visibility, increasing interventions in parliament, and new-found aggression in taking on the Modi government, which forced the latter to abandon a contentious land acquisition bill, has enthused party workers somewhat. But rebuilding the Congress and saving it from political irrelevance needs much more than Rahul's intermittent interventions.

If the Congress is keen to revive its prospects it will alter the way it functions. It will need to "groom state level leaders with a popular base who can galvanize the state units of the party," Shastri says. Such state level leaders, who "have their ear to the ground," should be made "part of the central leadership team," he says, "so that the right inputs can be provided to the party 'high command.'"

Importantly, the Congress needs to be leading the opposition to the BJP-led government. In the past 18 months, on several occasions the Congress could have mobilized the masses against the BJP's policies. But it "allowed these opportunities to slip by," Shastri observes, pointing to the land acquisition bill and the rise of religious intolerance as two classic examples where it allowed other political formulations to take the initiative.

Since it came to power, the BJP government has failed on multiple fronts. Prices of essential commodities are soaring. The agrarian crisis is deepening. And religious intolerance and anti-minority violence have assumed worrying proportions.

While Rahul has visited rural communities that are seeing a surge in farmers' suicides or were at the receiving end of communal attacks, the Congress has not attempted a systematic critique of the BJP's policies or ventured on a mass mobilization on any of these issues. It could use such mass mobilization against the government to forge unity within the party and to rally other opposition parties behind it. This could provide the basis for its own political and organizational rejuvenation.

But before setting out to do that, the Congress needs to set its house in order. An important first step in that direction would require it to set in motion a genuine process of democratization of the party, its structure and functioning. This will require elections for all posts, including those of party president, members of the Congress Working Committee, its apex decision making body, and state presidents.

If the Congress party is keen to present a new rejuvenated face to the electorate, it needs to radically reform itself. Fail to do that, and it will only sink further into political oblivion.