



CONGRESS PARTY DOMINANCE IN INDIAN POLITICS

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Abstract

An analysis of the functioning of the Indian party system indicates that the political process has been deinstitutionalized. The process of deinstitutionalization was initiated in the 1970s. Therefore, the Indian Party system is at cross roads. Here we assume that the functioning of the party system is primarily responsible for the deinstitutionalization of the political process in India. Based on this analysis, suggestions can be made to reform the Indian party system. The four major left political parties – CPI (M), CPI, RSP and Forward Bloc obtained 61 seats in the 2004 general elections. This electoral success made more powerful than ever before in national Politics.¹ Left political parties extended outside support to Congress led UPA government. Congress Party had to be dependent on left parties support for survival of the government. This situation made Congress party politically vulnerable and communist parties more assertive in dictating terms to coalition in running the government. Replacement of the existing constitution is not the solution. Political parties are responsible for the present state of affairs of the Indian politics. Political and electoral reforms can substantially help to solve the problems of the Indian polity. It is very pertinent to identify political and electoral reforms instead of debating the constitution. In this context, reforming the political parties should get a central place. Adoption of these reforms will improve the performance of the institutions of the parliamentary democracy and federal system.

Key words: Indian party system, political parties, parliamentary democracy and federal system.

Introduction

The party system is an integral part of every political system. The functioning of a political system is greatly influenced by the nature and character of the party system. The character of the political system in any modern state is substantially dictated by the manner in which political forces are organized in a party system²

¹ Paranjoy Guha Thakurta and Shankar Raghuraman, *Divided We Stand: India in a Time of Coalitions*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007, p.389

² W.H. Morris Jones, "Parliament and the Dominant Party : Indian Experience", *Parliamentary Affairs*, 17 (3), 1964, p.,296

An analysis of the functioning of the Indian party system indicates that the political process has been deinstitutionalized. The process of deinstitutionalization was initiated in the 1970s. Therefore, the Indian Party system is at cross roads. An attempt to examine the functioning of the party system in India during the Nehru era and the post-Nehru era would help us to some extent, to understand issues responsible for the deinstitutionalization of the political process. Therefore, in this paper, an attempt has been made to examine critically the functioning of the Indian Party System and this contributes to identify issues and problems responsible for deinstitutionalization of the political process. Here we assume that the functioning of the party system is primarily responsible for the deinstitutionalization of the political process in India. Based on this analysis, suggestions can be made to reform the Indian party system.

1.1. First Model of One Party Dominance (1952-1967) during Nehru period

The Jana Sangh emerged as one of the four national political parties in the first general elections in 1952. The death of S.P. Mukherjee in 1953 was a setback to the Jana Sangh. In spite of this, the strength of the Jana Sangh improved in the 1957 and 1962 general elections.

Immediately after independence the principal objective of the Indian political system was integration and nation-building. During this period of one party dominant system (1952-1967), the Congress party maintained its dominant position. A major factor which influenced the dominant position of the Congress Party was its historical background. The Congress Party was an organization of national movement in the pre-independence period. After independence, the transformation of the Congress into a political party, gave it a positive role in Indian politics by enabling it to come to power. This background led to the implicit assumption of a large number of people that the Congress party was regarded by them as a promoter and guarantor of national independence.

The Congress party passed a resolution in January 1955 on cooperative farming at its Nagpur session. This cleared the way in forming the Swatantra party in 1959. The Forum for Free Enterprise and the All-India Agriculturists' Federation founded in 1956 and 1958 respectively helped to a considerable extent in the formation of the Swatantra party. In a meeting of the All-India Agriculturists' Federation held on 6th June 1959 in Madras, it was decided to form the Swatantra party under the chairmanship of C. Rajagopalchari. Rajagopalchari declared that this party would stand for the freedom of the men on farm, the freedom of the farm and of the family and against totalitarianism. One of the features of the Indian party system was that intra-party competition within the Congress party was more important than inter-party competition. The opposition parties functioned only as pressure groups.

By and large, the Congress Party was successful in evolving a national consensus. Consequently, there was political stability to a greater extent during the period 1952-67. The performance of the Indian Political System was satisfactory to a considerable extent. However, the party system suffered from the following deficiencies:

1. Compared to the inter-party competition model, intra-party competition was less stable, less programme oriented and weaker in representational function;
2. The omnibus character of the party made clear-cut enunciation of ideology or programme very difficult;
3. Consensus was over-emphasized without paying adequate attention to the contents of consensus;
4. This model led to a large scale frustration on the part of the opposition parties and non-Congress voters.³

1.2. The Second Model of One Party Dominance (1971-1977)

The split in the Congress party marked the beginning of a process of polarization. It reduced the Congress government to a minority forcing it to seek the support of the Communists. There was a crucial shift in the attitude of the CPI after the 1967 general elections. The CPI shifted from anti-Congressism to support the ruling Congress party against the Jana Sangh, the Congress (O) and the Swatantra party. However, the CPI and the CPM continued their differences in respect of the assessment of national and international issues. The CPI appeared to act as Indira Gandhi's propaganda agent during 1969-1976 but it had by and large, been critical of her since her defeat in March 1977.⁴

The Jana Sangh was hesitant to cooperate with the Swatantra party due to the latter's conservatism. The Swatantra party on its part was also hesitant to cooperate with the Jana Sangh primarily due to its attitude towards Muslims. Despite these differences, both of them joined and formed coalition governments in a number of north Indian states after the general elections of 1967. The emergence of the Congress (O) in 1969 served as a bridge between the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra Party. This influenced to a considerable extent to form a grand alliances in the 1971 elections. Although the SSP's position on socio-economic issues was clearly radical, it had been closer to the Jana Sangh on linguistic and foreign policy issues.⁵ This process of coming together led to the emergence of a grand alliance in the 1971 elections. The PSP held talks with the Congress (R) on some adjustment in the 1971 elections, but they did not arrive at any agreement. Thus, there was polarization on the one side, between the Congress (R), the CPI and other regional parties, and on the other side, the Congress (O), the Jana Sangh, the Swatantra party and the SSP.

The concern of the second one party dominant model was more oriented towards performance of the government. The results of the 1971 Lok Sabha elections revived the one party dominant model. The popularity and credibility of Indira Gandhi began declining from 1973 onwards, primarily due to the

³ Ram Joshi and Kirtidev Desai, "Towards a More competitive Party System in India", *Janata* 33(1) Republic Day Number, 1978, p.19

⁴ Girilal Jain, "The Age of Mass Politics", *The Times of India*, 3 October 1979

⁵ Davey Hampton, "Polarisation and Consensus in Indian Party Politics", *Asian Survey*, 12 (8), August 1972, p.710

widespread nationwide discontent at the drought in 1971, 1972 and 1973; rise of inflation, the strike of the railway workers and the JP movement in 1974 and the decision of the Allahabad High Court in June 1975 declaring Indira Gandhi's election as null and void.

Though by 1971 Indira Gandhi was able to establish her leadership, in the 1976 elections, her leadership was questioned. Under the leadership of Indira Gandhi the Congress (R) as a broad based political party lost its independent existence and all that remained was the government. The split in the Congress party in 1969, its subsequent changes under Indira Gandhi, and her electoral victories in 1971 and 1972 were followed by a period when the government was neither able to move the economy towards greater equality nor towards growth, while state governments grew increasingly unstable and dependent upon the centre.⁶

1.3. The Third Model of One Party Dominance (1980-1989)

The 1980 elections revived the one party dominance system despite the organizational weakness of the Congress party. The major concern of the Indian political system after the 1980 elections was to improve the performance of government. The electorate in 1971 supported restoration of democracy. In 1980 the electorate wanted a government which would function. The Congress (I) demonstrated that it was a national political party with nation-wide base and revived its dominance in the Indian politics. Indira Gandhi did not allow any Congressman to develop an independent base in the electorate. Therefore, by 1980s a majority of old Congressmen were replaced by young Congressmen who were close to Sanjay Gandhi, elder son of Indira Gandhi. Consequently, the Congress (I) became synonymous with Indira Gandhi and she treated it as her personal party. Indira Gandhi was also criticized on the ground that she had no commitment to any ideology. As several observers noted, she was a leader with attitudes rather than policies, with a point of view rather than a coherent ideology.⁷

The nature of opposition parties during the third one-party dominance model was different from the period of the second model of one-party dominance (1971-1977). During the second one-party dominance model, it seemed that opposition parties held extreme position on a number of issues, and they were against Indira Gandhi but the non-communist opposition during third one-party dominance model did not hold extreme position against Indira Gandhi. Perhaps, one of the major reasons may be due to exercise of power by the non-communist parties which might have made them to dilute their hostile and extreme position. However, the confrontation between the Congress (I) and opposition parties on centre-state relations and other issues continued to a considerable extent. The chief ministers of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry held a meeting in Bangalore and formed a Council of Chief Ministers for Southern Region in March 1983. Indira Gandhi announced the decision to appoint a Commission under the chairmanship of Justice R.S. Sarkaria to look into the problems of

⁶ Myron Weiner, *The Indian Paradox: Essays in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 1989), p.12

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.233

centre-state relations and recommended amendment if necessary, to the Indian Constitution. The opposition parties were fragmented and not able to substantially influence the government.

With Sanjay Gandhi's death in a plane crash in June 1980 and due to pressure of a number of Congressmen, Rajiv Gandhi, the younger son of Indira Gandhi, joined politics, much against his will. In February 1983, Rajiv was appointed as Secretary of the Congress (I). It is said that Rajiv Gandhi's role was primarily to weaken the opposition parties in the context of the then prevailing political situation. In this regard it was reported that Rajiv Gandhi encouraged Jarnail Singh Bhindaranwale, the militant Sikh priest, whose call for the creation of an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, was aimed at dividing the Akali Dal.⁸

Indira Gandhi was assassinated on 31 October 1984. The Congress (I) chose Rajiv Gandhi as the successor to Indira Gandhi. The outcome of the eighth Lok Sabha elections of 1984 was greatly determined by the sympathy wave for the Congress (I) following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. The mandate of 1984 election was regarded as a positive one for reviving national consensus. The national consensus had been disturbed by the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and the fourth Lok Sabha elections of 1967.

The outcome of the 1984 elections was historic as well as remarkable in the sense that the Congress (I) secured 403 seats out of 515 in the Lok Sabha. The Congress party never got such a massive mandate, not even during the regime of Jawaharlal Nehru or Indira Gandhi. The issue which figured prominently in this election was national unity.

Prominent leaders of opposition parties, viz., Chandrashekhar, H.N. Bahuguna, A.B. Vajpayee, George Fernandes, Ram Jethmalani etc. were defeated in the 1984 elections. The opposition parties in the Lok Sabha became weak in terms of numerical strength in parliament and political leadership since eminent leaders of opposition parties were defeated.

Rajiv Gandhi made a very good beginning by adopting a new approach and demonstrating his willingness to take a fresh look at various problems like terrorism, corruption, restructuring of the Congress (I), etc. His youthfulness, his managerial style, his modern attitude towards technology as manifested by his eagerness to expand India's computer industry, his reputation for personal integrity (MR. Clean) and his contempt for old style politicians pleased India's large modern urban middle class who had become disheartened by the slow pace of change, the rising tide of violence, the inefficiency of government, and the absence of political leadership.⁹ Subsequently, Rajiv Gandhi was not able to maintain consensus in the Congress (I). Rajiv Gandhi's differences with V.P. Singh and Arun Nehru surfaced and indicated the problem of consensus within the Congress (I). Such differences were the result

⁸ Ibid., p.295

⁹ Ibid., p.298

of clash of personalities. This ultimately led to the decision of V.P. Singh and Arun Nehru to join the opposition. Perhaps, this was a major factor (i.e., anti-Congressism) for promoting unity among the opposition parties in the 1989 Lok Sabha elections.

1.4. Relationship between Left Parties and the Congress during UPA regime:

The four major left political parties – CPI (M), CPI, RSP and Forward Bloc obtained 61 seats in the 2004 general elections. This electoral success made more powerful than ever before in national Politics.¹⁰ Left political parties extended outside support to Congress led UPA government. Congress Party had to be dependent on left parties support for survival of the government. This situation made Congress party politically vulnerable and communist parties more assertive in dictating terms to coalition in running the government.

In the beginning Congress had to adjust with Leftists on number of issues. Due to left parties suggestion Congress party had to talk about not to privatize profit making Public Sector Undertakings, creating job opportunities for those belonging to the SCs and STs. Both Prime Minister and Finance Minister went one step ahead and called leftists as patriots and conscience keepers.¹¹ However, this does not mean that left and Congress had good relationship for long period. Left political parties opposed inclusion of representatives of agencies like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Asian Development Bank in various consultative groups constituted for the midterm appraisal of the Tenth Five Year Plan.¹² It succeeded in its effort to stop inclusion.

Left parties opposed UPA government's plan to disinvestment of shares in Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL). One important issue united the partners of the UPA was that of expeditious enactment of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

Congress and left held different position during four year UPA on FDI in retail trade, policy on special economic zones, pension reforms, patent laws, etc. An important issue on which Congress and Left had complete divergent stand is Indo-US Nuclear deal. Regarding India's decision to vote against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency left perceived it as "further evidence of the Manmohan Singh government's willingness to be co-opted into playing a supportive role to US Global interests".¹³

1.5. Conclusion

Regional parties played a vital role in the regimes of coalitions from 1996 to 2008. They joined the national parties in playing negative role in the coalition politics for tactical reasons. One of the rises of new actors in scene, new forms its political expression and new definition of the content of politics.¹⁴ Politics has ceased to be service oriented activity and it has become highly remunerative. Politics has

¹⁰ Paranjoy Guha Thakurta and Shankar Raghuraman, *Divided We Stand: India in a Time of Coalitions*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007, p.389

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.87

¹² *Ibid.*, p.87

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.102

¹⁴ Rajni Kothari, *Interpreting Indian Politics: A Personal Statement*, in Upendra Baxi and Bhiku Parekh (eds.), *Crisis and Change in Contemporary India*, Sage, New Delhi, 1995, p.165.

become a lucrative profession that gives its practitioner's power, pelf and position or a highly paid job which is available without any qualification or ability except that of building the vote bank, usually on caste or communal basis, and with the support of mafia, money and muscle power.¹⁵ With this state of politics, it is difficult to expect an effective functioning of the institutions of parliamentary democracy and federal system. The political process has been deinstitutionalized and party system has ceased to function properly. These are not only attributes of crisis of governance but also deinstitutionalization of the political process in India.

As a result, the responsive and regulative capabilities of our polity have considerably declined. The problems confronting our Indian polity are political instability, decline of parliament, absence of consensus on basic issues, over polarization, over-centralization, personalized politics, survival politics, criminalization of politics, development of sectarian feelings based on language, caste and religion, corruption, populism, etc. These problems do not stem from the failure of the constitution. They are functional problems of the institutions of parliamentary democracy and federal system indicating the deinstitutionalization of the political process. Replacement of the existing constitution is not the solution. Political parties are responsible for the present state of affairs of the Indian politics. Political and electoral reforms can substantially help to solve the problems of the Indian polity. It is very pertinent to identify political and electoral reforms instead of debating the constitution. In this context, reforming the political parties should get a central place. Adoption of these reforms will improve the performance of the institutions of the parliamentary democracy and federal system.

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¹⁵ Subhas. Kashyap, *Power Perks*, Eminence, 1(4), September 1999, p.22.