

The Prospects for a Congress Party Revival

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ABSTRACT

The Congress Party must recognise that it has no hope of resuscitation in roughly half of India—in states that elect 47.9% of members of the Lok Sabha—and adjust its strategy accordingly. Several ‘solutions’ to its problems proposed by commentators have little or no promise, but others might bear fruit, most notably protests against unpopular government policies. These would both show a willingness to sacrifice in pursuit of justice and weed unreliable members out of the party organisation.

Congress may benefit from a long-standing tendency among Indian voters not to fix tenaciously upon any one of the many identities available to them, including their religious identity. And Congress, like many opposition parties in recent years, has a secret weapon: the tendency of ruling parties to make mistakes. But even if Congress gains strength, during Narendra Modi’s second five-year term, the space for open, democratic politics may be so constricted that changes of government in New Delhi become nearly impossible.

Keywords: Congress, organization building, re-democratization, re-federalization, competitive authoritarianism

Las perspectivas para un avivamiento del partido del Congreso

RESUMEN

El Partido del Congreso debe reconocer que no tiene esperanzas de reanimación en aproximadamente la mitad de la India, en los estados que eligen al 47,9% de los miembros de Lok Sabha, y ajustar su estrategia en consecuencia. Varias “soluciones” a sus problemas propuestos por los comentaristas tienen poca o ninguna promesa, pero otras pueden dar sus frutos, especialmente las protestas contra las políticas gubernamentales impopulares. Ambos mostrarían

una disposición a sacrificarse en busca de la justicia y eliminarían a los miembros poco confiables de la organización del partido.

El Congreso puede beneficiarse de una tendencia de larga data entre los votantes indios de no fijarse tenazmente en ninguna de las muchas identidades disponibles para ellos, incluida su identidad religiosa. Y el Congreso, como muchos partidos de oposición en los últimos años, tiene un arma secreta: la tendencia de los partidos gobernantes a cometer errores. Pero incluso si el Congreso gana fuerza, durante el segundo mandato de cinco años de Narendra Modi, el espacio para una política abierta y democrática puede estar tan restringido que los cambios de gobierno en Nueva Delhi se vuelven casi imposibles.

Palabras clave: Congreso, organización, redemocratización, rederalización, autoritarismo competitivo.

印度国民大会党复兴前景

摘要

印度国民大会党(简称国大党)必须承认的是,其没有希望在将近一半印度,即在选出47.9%人民院成员的各邦中重获势力,并且进行相应的战略调整。由评论员提议的几个问题“解决措施”几乎没有希望,但其他解决方案可能取得成功,最值得注意的则是抗议不受欢迎的政府政策。这将展示为寻求正义而作出牺牲的意愿,并将不可靠的成员从党派组织中清除。

国大党可能从印度选民长期存在的一个趋势中获益,即选民不会牢牢抓住其诸多身份中的任意一个,包括宗教认同。与近年来许多反对党一样,国大党有一个秘密武器:执政党犯错的倾向。然而,就算国大党获得支持,在纳伦德拉·莫迪第二个五年任期期间,开放民主政治的空间可能会十分受限,以至于新德里的政府变革几乎不可能发生。

关键词: 印度国民大会党, 组织建立, 再民主化, 再联邦化, 竞争性威权主义

After a second successive severe defeat in the 2019 general election, India's Congress Party clearly needs a revival.¹ How might this be accomplished? Can it be achieved at all?

These questions can only be answered with a cold dose of realism. It is essential to start by surveying the party's status and prospects in diverse states in this federal system. That will reveal, perhaps surprisingly, that Congress is probably beyond resuscitation in much of the country and that a revival will be difficult in another sizeable portion. Unexpected revivals of various parties—including Congress—have sometimes occurred, but these are grim findings.

Once those facts are faced, we must consider a number of supposed solutions to the party's problems that have proposed by commentators. Some offer little promise or even pose dangers for Congress. Others, which have received less attention, may bear fruit.

Three other key points then emerge. The first two offer Congress encouragement. It may benefit from a tendency among Indian voters, over many decades, not to fixate on any one of the many identities available to them—including their religious identity, which the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stresses. Second, even if a Congress revival is limited, it shares with many opposition parties in India's recent history a secret weapon: the tendency of ruling parties to make mistakes. The third point is discouraging—to Congress and to this great democracy. During Na-

rendra Modi's second five-year term, the fundamentals of India's politics are changing: the space for open democratic politics is becoming severely constricted, and changes of government in New Delhi may become nearly impossible. To understand that last alarming point, we must make use of a different analytical approach found in the literature on competitive authoritarianism.

In Discussing Revivals, Should We "Never Say Never?"

Care is needed before we conclude that a Congress revival is impossible. During the 1980s, after serious election defeats made the party appear dead and buried in Karnataka, this writer visited its headquarters in Bengaluru. Two menial employees were carrying armloads of incoming mail outside where they burned it—unopened. Party leaders in New Delhi had appointed as Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president an inept Member of Parliament (MP) who seldom visited the state. A few degenerate-looking people in the party office got into a fight in which a man punched a woman—something this writer has never seen in decades in this comparatively peaceable state.

It appeared that Congress could never be revived in Karnataka. But on a second visit a year later, things had improved. A new competent and dynamic PCC president had been appointed. He lived locally and came to the office every day. He had recruited numerous bright and obviously committed people who

performed useful tasks efficiently. The president explained, in cogent detail, his plans to rebuild the party's organization—by more careful recruitment of lieutenants, by reaching out to diverse social groups, and by campaigning against the state government's misguided policies. He insisted that Congress would win the next state election—and it did. (For details on specific steps that might produce this sort of regeneration, see the section on Organization Building below.)

So should we “never say never” about a Congress revival? We must still proceed cautiously here. In some states where votes are split among more than two parties, a poor Congress election performance might not imply that it cannot recover. But signs of resurrection in such states may also be misleading. In Uttar Pradesh (UP) in mid-2020 – where Congress had finished a poor fourth in the 2019 national election – its leaders gained prominence in the media when they raised the most vocal objections to the state's BJP government, as leaders of the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party adopted lower profiles. But the condition of Congress in UP is dire. Consider two recent visits to the party's headquarters there. An eminent political scientist found it populated by “undesirables, criminals and pimps.” Then a perceptive Congress strategist, sent from New Delhi to inspect the organization there, found it “terrible, terrible.”² That strategist stressed that the decay in the UP Congress ran so deep that it was impossible, even for a brilliant political manager, to resuscitate the party there – because it

lacked enough able, principled people of the kind found in Karnataka.

In some states, we should “never say never” because Congress is revivable. In others, “never”: is the right word.

Congress, State by State

Let us examine the position of Congress in sizeable states, those electing seven or more MPs in a House of 543. We should bear in mind Yogendra Yadav's rule of thumb that once Congress gains less than 20 percent of the vote in a state, it cannot be revived³—although it may not be appropriate in states where three or more parties compete for power. The resuscitation of Congress is probably impossible in several states where it is decidedly (and it appears, permanently) marginalized. So the real question here is: “Can Congress be revived not in every part of India, but in the portion of it where that may be possible?” To understand the size of that portion, let us sort states into three categories.

States where a revival is probably impossible [total MPs: 260]

Andhra Pradesh [25 seats/of which Congress won 0 in 2019/with 0.96% of the vote] *Congress collapsed after its support shifted to the Y.S.R. Congress. Three other parties pushed it into fourth place in a state where it long won many seats.*⁴

UP [80/1/6.31%] *Fourth best again, marginalization is probably irreversible. Lost a huge number of deposits in 2019.*

Bihar [40/1/7.70%] *Fourth best again, far behind rival parties.*

Tamil Nadu [38/8/12.76%] *Congress has been marginalized since 1967 by two Dravidian parties. Its eight seats in 2019 came thanks to an alliance with one of them.*

West Bengal [42/2/5.61%] *Congress has fared poorly since 1977, first against the Left Front and later against the Trinamul Congress, whose main challenger is now the BJP.*

Odisha [21/1/13.81%] *Third best behind the Biju Janata Dal and the BJP.⁵*

Jharkhand [14/1/15.63%] *Congress has long been marginal; various regional parties and, since the 1990s, the BJP have dominated inter-party competition.⁶*

States where a revival and significant gains in a national election are not unthinkable but will be difficult [total MPs: 110]

Delhi [7/0/22.51%] *In 2019, Congress came second after the BJP, ahead of the Aam Admi Party. But it made a poor showing in the 2020 state election.*

Telangana [17/3/25.34%] *Congress is not marginal. It has some good leaders and came second in the vote share, ahead of the BJP but behind the Telugu Rashtra Samithi. It may lose leaders and support to those parties.⁷*

Maharashtra [48/1/16.27%] *Congress is unlikely to improve on being just one of four significant parties. Most of its leaders' influence is confined to one or two districts. Maratha voters are dispersed across the party spectrum, and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Shiv Sena are better able to attract them. The NCP is a major impediment because it competes well for the Congress label.⁸*

Haryana [10/0/28.42%] *A revival is unlikely, and caustic factional conflict that may result in a split afflicts Congress, but it held power recently and some support remains.*

Gujarat [26/0/32.11%] *The BJP has governed since 1998, but Congress ran close in the 2017 state election. That and its vote share might justify its inclusion in the third, more promising category just below.*

States where a revival or continued success are realistic possibilities [total MPs: 140]

Karnataka [28/1/31.88%] *Three-sided competition against the BJP and the Janata Dal (Secular) (JD[S]). Congress's organization is reasonably strong. Congress and JD(S) formed a government after the 2018 state election despite the BJP winning a plurality of seats, but in mid-2019, the BJP enticed enough defections to topple the coalition and take power.*

Kerala [20/15/37.27%] *Congress, with an unusually good organiza-*

tion, leads the United Democratic Front, which has alternated in power with a Left Democratic Front for thirty years.

Madhya Pradesh [29/1/34.50%] *Bi-polar competition; the BJP governed for fifteen years until Congress narrowly won a state election in December 2018.*

Rajasthan [25/0/34.24%] *Bi-polar competition; alternations in power with the BJP since 1990. Congress won a state election victory in December 2018.*

Chhattisgarh [11/2/40.91%] *Bi-polar competition. Congress fared badly in the national election in 2019, but won a solid state election victory in December 2018.*

Punjab [13/8/40.12%] *Usually, Congress alternates in power with the Akali Dal (a BJP ally); Congress state election victory in 2017.*

Assam [14/3/35.44] *Congress has governed here recently and its vote share remains substantial.*

In summation, a revival is probably impossible in states that elect 47.9 percent of MPs—nearly half—and will be difficult in states that choose 20.3 percent of MPs. Only states sending 25.8 percent of MPs to New Delhi are realistically likely to have a revival or continued success.

Even a resuscitated Congress will be a shrunken version of its old self—unable to win a parliamentary majority on its own. To govern in New Delhi, it

must form a coalition with regional parties, as it did between 2004 and 2014. It will face a painful choice. To capture power in a national election, it must refrain from contesting—earnestly or at all—in states in the first category above, to avoid siphoning votes from regional parties that might govern with it. For a party with its history, that is a lot to ask.

There some are signs, however, that it may be moving towards such a pragmatic approach. It has joined with other parties in Maharashtra and Karnataka to pose strong challenges to the BJP. And at the February 2020 state election in Delhi, it appears largely to have gone through the motions of running,⁹ for two reasons. The Aam Admi Party was clearly better placed to defeat the BJP—as it did, resoundingly. And defeating it was seen within Congress as the most urgent priority. This strategy has not yet jelled into a firm plan for future elections. Some Congress leaders oppose it, and it was never openly acknowledged. But the choices that it made in these states suggest that a new realism that would enhance the party's prospects may be gaining ground.

'Solutions' for Congress

How might Congress revive? Various solutions to its problems have been proposed. Some have only limited—or no—promise. Others are worth pursuing.

Re-democratization

Many commentators recommend this solution, but it poses grave risks. In

the 1970s, Indira Gandhi radically centralized power within the party and the government in pursuit of personal rule. She abandoned intra-party democracy. Posts in Congress were filled by appointment from above, not election from below. To weaken potential challengers, she systematically encouraged factional conflict in all regions and at all levels of the party. As she intended, pervasive infighting ensured the need for an unquestioned arbiter atop the organization—Mrs. Gandhi, and latterly, her family members who succeeded her.

Factionalism has remained a serious problem ever since. That became vividly apparent when Congress leader P.V. Narasimha Rao attempted to re-democratize the organization in 1993. He knew that the party was populated by unsavory elements. He said privately that it was “like a railway platform ... anyone can come and go as he likes, and can push others aside to place himself in a better position.” He believed that while initial rounds of intra-party elections would be extremely untidy, eventually they would yield more reliable leaders who had earned popular support.¹⁰

His experiment with party elections ended in disaster. Seething infighting emerged. Huge sums were spent to buy votes. Membership rolls grew bloated with phony names. Violence between Congress factions was widespread. In some cases, Congressmen murdered Congressmen, and there was even an instance of a Congressman biting another Congressman. He eventually concluded that no further elections should take place.¹¹ More recently,

tentative attempts by Rahul Gandhi to hold elections in parts of the party may have produced some limited benefits,¹² and perhaps now that those in Congress are less confident of the party as a dominant force, they may be more restrained, to prevent another debacle. But it is hard to believe that the underlying problem has diminished much. A thorough attempt to re-democratize is likely to lead to severe disarray, and possibly even chaos.

Factional feuding remains so deeply institutionalized within the party that, in the interests of order, there remains a systemic need for an unquestioned arbiter at the apex of the organization. This is the key to Gandhi family members' importance. As one Congress MP told this writer, “when we speak of the family, we are all a bit castrated.”¹³ It will be extremely difficult for any other leader to acquire adequate authority because no one outside the family has been permitted to achieve sufficient prominence. It is likely that only a family member, however disappointing their leadership has sometimes been, can be the required arbiter—although a party president backed by the family might make some headway. Any new attempt to re-democratize—with or especially without a Gandhi at the apex—will probably revive turmoil. This is an extremely dubious solution.

Ideology

Some have suggested that Congress needs to develop or return to its ideology—to inspire enthusiasm among voters and to serve as a device to discipline party members. But in reality, Congress

ideology has always been vague. Before independence, it needed to unite as many diverse interests as possible to maximize pressure on the Raj. Thereafter, it has continued attempts to please a broad array of interests. That has limited its ability to develop a focused ideology.

Under Nehru, it advocated a socialist pattern of society, but landed castes, which dominated both the party and most state governments, used that formulation to channel the lion's share of government benefits to their own people. When disadvantaged groups gradually awakened and made demands, Congress added them to the range of interests to be cultivated. Indira Gandhi won the 1971 election on the slogan *garibi hatao* (abolish poverty), but delivered far too little to make a pro-poor ideology credible.

It would be more effective for Congress to offer voters not an ideology, but a strategy for governing and development: a package of initiatives similar to that seen during its decade in power after 2004. It used the surge in revenues that began in 2003 to fund programs for prosperous groups while committing unprecedentedly massive sums to poverty reduction.¹⁴ As a result, it reduced poverty and —more notably, since the task is extremely difficult—it reached the poorest of the poor, although it did not reduce economic inequality, which is even more difficult.¹⁵

Such a hybrid strategy—linking pro-poor policies with programs for prosperous interests, with clarity about which specific social groups would benefit—could aid a Congress

recovery. Something like this was indicated in the party's 2019 election manifesto.¹⁶ But since few read manifestos, it needed to be dramatized by specific pledges like NYAY (*Nyuntam Aay Yojana*), a minimum income guarantee for poor families. That promising idea was incompetently introduced too late in 2019, just two weeks before voting began, and was publicized too little.¹⁷ If it had been adroitly promoted, such a strategy, stressing specific policies, rather than an ideology or emphasis on constitutional values, secularism, and democratic principles—all of which are rather abstract to many voters—might bear fruit.

Re-federalization

In those states where Congress might revive, gains could be made if adroit, promising state-level leaders were backed by national leaders as they seek to strengthen the party. This was anathema to Indira Gandhi and was largely ignored under her son Rajiv. As a result, in key states such as Maharashtra and West Bengal, frustrated Congress leaders broke away to form regional parties that flourished.

In recent years, however, Sonia Gandhi has been more willing to trust and support such leaders in most states. Examples include Y.S. Rajashekar Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, Sheila Dixit in Delhi, Amarinder Singh in Punjab, and Siddaramaiah in Karnataka. Reddy and Dixit have passed away, and Reddy's son Jagan Mohan made such extravagant demands that it was impossible to accommodate him. He then developed his own version of Con-

gress, which marginalized the parent organization. But the party's national leaders could improve matters by continuing this approach,¹⁸ if promising leaders can be found—a big if in some states. They could reduce the inevitable factional challenges to these leaders if—like Sonia Gandhi on several occasions—they turned away dissidents seeking endorsements from on high. But national party leaders must avoid backing destructive state-level leaders, as has sometimes occurred.¹⁹

The party's national leaders must permit state-level leaders to develop distinctive strategies, tailored to distinctive conditions in their states. When Congress holds power in various states, they should be encouraged to experiment with imaginative programs that might demonstrate the party's constructive potential across India. Those programs should then be adopted nationally—something that has not always happened.

State-level leaders must also be permitted to centralize power by making use of massive fundraising opportunities available to Chief Ministers, thanks to their power to grant various permissions and favors in India's far from neoliberal order²⁰—however unseemly that may appear. Re-federalization would facilitate organization building, to which we now turn.

Organization Building

This is the area that holds the most promise for Congress: efforts, especially at the state level, to revive the party's organization. Even in most of the

states where Congress might recover, its organization is usually weak and faction-ridden. It cannot develop disciplined sets of cadres in the manner of parties on the left or the Hindu right. Since independence, Congress has had few such people within it. But it can take steps to strengthen its organization—greatly or at least somewhat. The devices listed below have all been adopted by state-level units of the party at various times, and they have been productive enough to be worth noting.

During certain periods in nearly all states, the party's organization has suffered serious damage when wretched leaders have headed it—as Chief Ministers when Congress held power, or as PCC presidents when it was in opposition. Their wretchedness has taken various forms. Some have been unintelligent,²¹ extravagantly normless and abusive in their behavior,²² vastly corrupt and obsessed with the political futures of just a few of their favorites or relatives,²³ unskilled at analyzing the damaging policies of rival parties and at generating protests against those policies,²⁴ unable to identify and develop promising policy ideas for Congress, and/or inept at managing other actors and conflicts within the party.

But after those periods of decline, new leaders often took over and were able to rebuild the organization and the party's popularity, at least somewhat. The brief description early in this paper of such a process in Karnataka offered an example, but more details on the steps that they might take are needed here.

First, leaders who have rebuilt the Congress's organization have promoted (or recruited new) subordinates who are skilled at recognizing what actions are needed to make the organization more disciplined and effective, and at proposing and then taking those actions. In some states—UP and West Bengal are examples—it may be impossible to find such people because Congress has become too degenerate. In most states, it is feasible, but difficult. State-level party leaders have often found it necessary—but, with care, possible—to inform and to train key subordinates in how to understand these things and to act appropriately.²⁵

Such subordinates must have or acquire some knowledge of important social forces in the state—their numerical strength, tensions between them, their sensitivities and felt needs, and how to attract support from them. They may be assigned specific social groups, or specific sub-regions, to cultivate. They need diplomatic skills to appeal to key groups and to mitigate factional conflicts and the backbone (reinforced by state-level leaders) to confront destructive elements in the party. They must be reasonably honest and committed to the leaders and to the cultivation of a suitably broad, diverse array of interest groups. In states where Congress is in power, these subordinates must monitor the implementation of constructive government programs and facilitate their implementation.

They must also be able to reach out to three sets of actors at the local level. The first are village- and town-level political entrepreneurs who seek to ob-

tain benefits from government for their localities.²⁶ The BJP sometimes struggles to attract them because its army of committed rightist cadres alienates such people. The second, in states with reasonably strong *panchayati raj* institutions, are elected members of local councils.²⁷ The third are leaders of civil society organizations and popular protest movements (discussed below).

Congress Chief Ministers enjoy one further opportunity that was noted above, but is sometimes overlooked. India's far from neoliberal economic order has left substantial powers in their hands that can be used to raise massive illicit funds from people who need Chief Ministers' permissions or favors to undertake profitable projects. That money is sometimes used to centralize in ways that cause the party organization to atrophy. But it can be deployed to enable organization building if Chief Ministers distribute funds to bankroll promising subordinates—especially those from disadvantaged groups with numerical strength. Funds can also fund caste associations for those groups and associations for other interest groups in order to mobilize their support for the party.

Finally, state-level Congress leaders and their subordinates also need to understand how to create problems for rival parties. A method exists to achieve this when Congress is in opposition: agitation against the unjust policies of ruling parties. It has the extra advantage of weeding out deadwood and unreliable opportunists, both of whom abound in the ranks of Congress, and of easing factional strife.

The most vivid example emerged in Andhra Pradesh in the late 1980s. The Telugu Desam Party held power there. M. Chenna Reddy, Congress leader of the opposition, selected unpopular government programs and mounted a protest campaign in which Congress activists undertook civil disobedience and filled the jails. This earned Congress popular support for making sacrifices in opposition to hated policies, but it also had a constructive impact on the party's organization. Opportunists within Congress declined to participate and could be shed by the party. Activists from different factions, jailed together, developed a limited sense of solidarity. A stronger party organization emerged—and Congress won the next state election. This strategy bore an uncanny resemblance to pre-independence *satyagrahas*—which is what Chenna Reddy intended.²⁸ If this weeds out opportunists and unsavory elements, it might even facilitate re-democratization.

For this approach to be adopted, it is necessary to give state-level Congress leaders the authority to pursue agitations. National party leaders must also accept—and welcome—the influence over state-level party units that those leaders gain as a result of protests. They must be perceived as assets and not threats to national-level leaders. This is, after all, an essential aspect of re-federalization.

Congress activists could also be encouraged to reach out to civil society organizations and popular protest movements that might become allies as agitations develop. That would allow

the party to re-establish roots in society that it has sorely lacked in many states. Civil society leaders can alert Congress leaders to issues that will resonate with significant sections of society. It is worth recalling, for example, that it was a network of civic organizations and not opinion pollsters that discovered in 2009 that large numbers of voters had responded enthusiastically to the Domestic Violence Act that the Congress-led government had passed.²⁹

Fluidity

Let us now consider one important reality that provides Congress with a distinct advantage over the BJP and that might facilitate a revival for the party. Indians have many identities available to them: linguistic, national, regional, sub-regional, gender, urban/rural, class, religious (including sectarian divisions within broad religious groups), and three kinds of caste identities (*jati*, *jati*-cluster, and *varna*). At successive elections over the years, voters have tended strongly to shift their preoccupations from one identity to another, and then another—often and with great fluidity.³⁰ This is bad news for parties on the left (which seek to fix preoccupations to class identities) and on the Hindu right (which seek to fix preoccupations to religious identities). It holds promise for less ideological, broadly centrist parties—like Congress.

The BJP's election victories in 2014 and 2019 are partly explained by the salience of Hindu identities, but several other things also loomed large.

In 2014, they included discontent with the incumbent Congress-led ruling alliance, the BJP's organizational strength, and the depiction of Modi as a leader capable of delivering on stirring promises that he stressed. In 2019, they included the BJP's massive advantage in campaign funds; its organizational strength; its dominance of the media; Modi's image as a strong leader, which most media outlets fawningly projected; his emphasis on insecurities and resentments (rather than aspirations, many of which had been disappointed as his promises went unfulfilled); and hyper-nationalism in the aftermath of the terrorist atrocity at Pulwama and the subsequent air strike at Balakot.

The preoccupation with national security, which never had great influence in previous national elections (with the possible exception of 1989), is probably not sustainable. The BJP and the Modi government will continue efforts to fix Hindu voters' preoccupations to their religious identities, but they will struggle to overcome the long-standing tendency toward fluidity. Note the volatility in voters' perceptions over just a few weeks in 2019.³¹ Since fluidity is likely to reassert itself, Congress and other opposition parties should have opportunities.

A Secret Weapon

Even a limited Congress revival might benefit from a secret weapon available to many opposition parties down the years: the tendency of ruling parties to make mistakes. At numerous state and even some national

elections, we have seen opposition parties with poor leadership, weak organizations, limited funds, and few ideas winning victories—because the incumbents had alienated so many voters. The classic case is Odisha, where successive state elections before 2000 (when Naveen Patnaik's winning streak began) saw two feckless parties alternating in power. India's citizens, with almost seven decades of experience as voters, have mastered the logic of democratic politics and are not timid. They have ousted ruling parties in eight of twelve national elections since 1977 and at a similar proportion of state elections—an extremely high rejection rate by international standards. If governments make mistakes, this sophisticated, impatient electorate will punish them.

Narendra Modi and his chief aide Amit Shah are sometimes seen as infallible geniuses. But let us not forget demonetization; the mishandled Goods and Services Tax; and state elections in Delhi (twice), Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh.³² Poor economic management may continue to curtail growth, damaging the interests of the prosperous and poor alike. The government's preference for threatening legislation may alienate neutrals and even some supporters—as when its criminalization of industrialists' non-compliance with corporate social responsibility rules was described by supporters as “foolish,” “atrocious,” and “beyond ridiculous.”³³ Voters may tire of Modi's limited rhetorical repertoire—stressing denunciations, resentments, and what Indians call tall promises. His radical centralization of power may cut

him off from crucial political advice from within the government and ruling party, so that he is flying half-blind. BJP leaders in four states have complained, often bitterly, to this writer that this has already happened.

Complacency may also cause the BJP to damage itself, unintentionally. Consider two recent small signs of this. First, when asked about the BJP's avoidance of leaders from the most powerful caste groups to head governments in many states, the party's leaders said that their recent general election victories had—once and for all—transcended caste, so that caste equations can now be ignored. This is highly dubious.³⁴ Second, some key BJP leaders now think that they have taken “socialism and welfarism away from Congress and other opposition parties,” and that “they have established a social contract with India's poor, much as Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi had done.” This “has made Modi unbeatable, they think.”³⁵ The Modi government has made some headway on this second front,³⁶ but this grandiose assumption is still open to doubt. If these debatable ideas influence BJP strategizing, the party could pay a price.

The BJP government may also encounter misfortunes not of its making—a pandemic, bad monsoons, an international economic downturn, conflict in the Persian Gulf, damage wrought by Donald Trump's recklessness, etc. We may not have seen the last of the secret weapon.

Constricting Democratic Politics May Make a Congress Revival Irrelevant

A recent, fundamental change in the nature of India's political system may mean that any revivals within Congress, or other opposition parties, count for little or nothing. The Modi government is constricting the space for open politics so severely that it may become impossible for rival parties to make significant gains in national elections. The BJP's strangulation of democracy is of course attended by a deception: its leaders' reaffirmations of their commitment to democracy, a key part of their master narrative.³⁷ But the assault on openness is a patent reality. It follows logically both from the stated desire for an opposition-*mukht* (free) India and from the utter contempt for opposition parties that Modi's right hand man, Amit Shah, has expressed by assigning them sub-human names: snakes, rats, cats, and dogs.

The BJP's assault on democracy has begun to create a new kind of political system: “competitive authoritarianism.”³⁸ In such a system, those in power do not eliminate all formal democratic rules, but they manipulate them in abusive ways. Elections may not be entirely free and fair. Governments curtail “political rights and civil liberties, including the freedom of the press, freedom of association, and freedom to criticize the government without reprisal.” They “deny the opposition adequate media coverage Journalists, opposition politicians and other government critics

may be spied upon, threatened, harassed, or arrested.”³⁹

Given this fundamental change in the character of Indian politics, we need to alter our perspective and make use of the literature on competitive authoritarianism for an accurate understanding of events. A small number of analysts have used such concepts in studies of India. During Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, W.H. Morris-Jones wrote of “Creeping but Uneasy Authoritarianism,” and a few more recent studies (often using slightly different terms) have briefly identified this trend in India.⁴⁰ But there is nothing creeping or uneasy about the current constriction of space for open, democratic politics. Modi and Shah are pursuing it swiftly, aggressively, and blatantly, on many fronts. Here are seven examples (there are others).

Misusing Investigative Agencies

Witness the flagrant, widespread deployment of India’s numerous investigative agencies for political advantage. One editor wrote, “There is no doubt that the Narendra Modi government has been misusing various probe agencies ... especially through the fears of raids and arrests, for advancement of its political agenda.”⁴¹ Another report stated that “All” of those agencies “have been going around conducting investigations against opposition leaders, their associates and donors With the naked use of anti-corruption agencies as political vendetta.”⁴²

Controlling the Media

The president of the Editors’ Guild of India has stated that the government

has “declared war” on the media. Proprietors of newspapers and television channels have been intimidated by raids and arrests by investigative agencies. The authorities have used offers to corporate owners of media outlets of preferment for their various undertakings, and punitive treatment of others, to turn most of India’s once vibrant media into “an undisguised, unthinking, unquestioning mouthpiece of the reigning ideology ... conditioning minds, building myths, deflecting attention, normalising the abnormal.”⁴³ The BJP and one government ministry employ two large teams monitoring both the views expressed in the media and coverage of Modi—telling media outlets which positive reports on him should be reissued to foster his personality cult and warning them when critical reports appear. Several proprietors have yielded to pressure by sacking editors and reporters, some of them quite eminent. News outlets that remain stubbornly independent have lost government advertising, faced defamation suits seeking crippling damages, or been raided by investigators on flimsy charges. One television channel even had its telecasts jammed.

Sedition

The government has made extravagant use of sedition charges, punishable by life imprisonment or three years plus fines. A total of 179 people were indicted between 2014 and 2016, many for trivial actions—mainly to intimidate, since only two were convicted.⁴⁴ The former Home Minister stated during the 2019 election campaign that the law would be tightened to induce greater fear, “so

that even the soul of the anti-nationals would shiver.”⁴⁵ Sedition charges have been used to attack dissenters and organizations that the BJP government cannot control. They include two Nobel Peace Prize winners, Médecins Sans Frontières, which the Intelligence Bureau has placed on what one report called its “hitlist,”⁴⁶ and Amnesty International, whose bank accounts have been frozen.

Fundraising

Money seldom decides Indian elections. Between 1977 and 2014, most state and national elections were lost by parties that had the most funds. But when one party has vastly more to spend than all others combined, the yawning disparities have a potent impact. Between 2016 and 2018, the BJP received 93 percent of openly reported corporate donations to parties. And of a further Rs. 5,800 crores (US\$846.3 million) anonymously poured into electoral bonds, 95 percent went to the BJP.⁴⁷ This gave that party a massive electoral advantage that it now seeks to enhance.

Undermining Parliament

As power has been radically centralized by Modi, the influence of Parliament has plummeted. During his first term, only 26 percent of bills were scrutinized by parliamentary committees—far less than the 60 percent and 71 percent in the previous two Parliaments. After his re-election in May 2019, the trend intensified. Only one of the first eighteen new acts passed by late July and none of the seven further bills to be enacted by August 7 were scrutinized. An opposi-

tion leader asked “Are we delivering pizzas or passing legislation?” and called it “a mockery of Parliament ... smothering the Opposition.”⁴⁸ Some bills were submitted without even one day’s prior notice, leaving opposition parties no time to organize their responses.⁴⁹

Several new laws reduce the space for open, democratic processes. One strongly constricts information flows, public scrutiny of government actions and open politics by crippling India’s admirable Right to Information Act. A second enables top-down control of the National Human Rights Commission. A third resonates strongly with the tightening of the sedition law by empowering the government to designate any individual a terrorist without evidence or due process.⁵⁰

Centralizing Power to Undermine Federalism

The Prime Minister took power in 2014 promising cooperative federalism, but since then he has gathered massive powers into his hands and used them coercively to undermine state governments. Consider one telling example. As one immensely authoritative, non-partisan commentator⁵¹ has written, state governments face a “dire” situation, a “severe financial crunch.” Taking advantage of this, the Modi government has, for the first time, “put conditions on market borrowings of the states.” This creates a dangerous precedent that the central government “will now use to further its agenda.” State governments will be “merely agents to implement decisions handed down to them.” Such “excessive centralisation ... does not bode

well either for democracy or for federalism.” This has a crippling impact on numerous state governments headed by Congress and regional parties.

Dominating the Election Commission

Until recently, India’s Election Commission was scrupulously neutral. But during the 2019 parliamentary election campaign, it treated Modi generously, refusing to intervene as the heroism of the armed forces was associated with him, as hyper-nationalism was stoked, as opposition criticisms of his actions were said to show disloyalty to the nation, etc. When one Election Commission member dissented, it refused to reveal his written arguments. In response, he stopped attending Commission meetings. Since then, investigative agencies have brazenly harassed him, his son and his wife, in an unsuccessful attempt to uncover misdeeds. Efforts to achieve unanimous support on the Commission for the BJP can be expected.

The seven examples discussed above suggest the possibility that after another four years of the Modi government, even if Congress and other opposition parties are revived, they may be checkmated because India will have become a competitive authoritarian system.

Congress might achieve something of a revival if it gives its state-level leaders and party units greater autonomy and flexibility to adapt to distinctive conditions in India’s diverse regions, if it strengthens its organization, partly by mounting agitations (in concert with popular protest movements) against un-

popular BJP policies, and if it can competently offer voters an appealing strategy for governing and development.

But it needs to face up to two grim realities. First, the serious potential for factional infighting within its organization makes efforts to re-democratize very risky. So at a minimum, it must proceed cautiously with that—perhaps after the rigors of agitations against BJP policies weed out unsavory, opportunistic elements. Second, Congress must recognize that it is beyond resuscitation in nearly half of India—so that it can step aside for more promising regional parties in many states, and agrees to alliances with them. If it fails to do that, it could damage the prospects of the broader opposition.

These changes might enable Congress to regain a share of power in New Delhi. But there is also a danger that the space for open, democratic politics will be so severely constricted that competitive authoritarianism takes firm root. That may not occur. Mistakes by the BJP government may undermine its popularity. The tendency of Indian voters not to fix tenaciously to any one identity may thwart efforts by the BJP to promote a majoritarian outlook anchored in Hindu chauvinism. India’s impatient, assertive voters might—as they have usually done over the last forty-two years—oust the ruling party at the next parliamentary election, if the drive toward competitive authoritarianism falters enough to make that election free and fair. But that fairness and the capacity of Congress to make necessary changes are both open to serious doubt.

Notes

- 1 This discussion does not engage with the debate about whether Congress should be revived or should die. For more details on that, see for example Yogendra Yadav, “Why Congress can’t: It doesn’t Possess the Vision, Strategy or Ground Strength,” *Indian Express*, May 22, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/lok-sabha-elections-elections-results-congress-bjp-rahul-gandhi-5741251/>; reply from Suhas Palshikar, “Dear Yogendra, I Disagree,” *Indian Express*, May 22, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-congress-exit-polls-2019-lok-sabha-elections-bjp-5741245/>.
- 2 These comments were made to this writer, in confidence, in interviews in 2015.
- 3 He has argued this in discussions, not in print. Private communication, July 27, 2019.
- 4 K.C. Suri provided insights on this state. Private communication, June 17, 2019.
- 5 Odisha might eventually move into the second category, since the BJD’s strength depends almost entirely on Naveen Patnaik, who at some point will leave the political stage.
- 6 Louise Tillin provided insights on this state. Private communication, June 20, 2019.
- 7 K.C. Suri again provided insights on this state.
- 8 Suhas Palshikar provided insights on this state. Private communication, June 15, 2019. Congress attracted less than 20 percent of the votes, but it ran in only part of the state’s constituencies, leaving the rest to an allied party.
- 9 See The Print Team, “Congress Outsourcing Fight against BJP to State Parties: Smart Strategy or Suicidal?” *The Print*, February 12, 2020. theprint.in/talk-point/congress-outsourcing-fight-against-bjp-to-state-parties-smart-strategy-or-suicidal/364244/.
- 10 This emerged from this writer’s discussion with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, New Delhi, February 11, 1992.
- 11 For more details, see James Manor, “The Congress Party since 1990,” in *Politics and State-Society Relations in India* (New Delhi/London/New York: Orient BlackSwan/Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2016), 83–108.
- 12 Sudha Pai may be right to argue that his efforts helped to strengthen the party in December 2018 state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. See her “Two Principles the Congress Party Needs to Reinvent Itself,” *The Wire*, June 9, 2019. <https://thewire.in/politics/congress-party-rahul-sonia-gandhi-reinvention>.
- 13 Interview, New Delhi, March 16, 2017.
- 14 James Manor, “Did the Central Government’s Poverty Initiatives Help to Re-Elect It?” in *New Dimensions of Politics in India: The United Progressive Alliance in Power*, ed. Saez (London/New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 13–25.
- 15 James Chiriyankandath, Diego Maiorano, James Manor and Louise Tillin, *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India: The UPA Government* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2019).
- 16 Indian National Congress, *Congress Will Deliver*. <https://manifesto.inc.in/pdf/english.pdf>.
- 17 Only 46 percent of poor respondents knew of it. Lokniti Team, “Did NYAY Help the Congress Make a Leap?” *The Hindu*, May 20, 2019. <https://thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/did-nyay-help-the-congress-make-a-leap/article27180048.ece>. That same incompetence was ap-

parent in tardy nominations of Congress candidates—a chronic problem in the party going back many years.

- 18 For arguments in this vein, see for example Pai, “Two Principles the Congress Party Needs.”
- 19 Consider two examples. In Chhattisgarh, national leaders allowed the wildly undisciplined Ajit Jogi to ride roughshod over party colleagues and to sabotage Congress Chief Minister Digvijay Singh in neighboring Madhya Pradesh by denying that state electricity supplies. In Haryana, Bhupinder Singh Hooda channeled such excessive resources to the constituency of his son that he starved others. This led to the exit to the BJP of the estimable Birender Singh, who became a Union minister under Modi.
- 20 For details, see James Manor, “India’s States: The Struggle to Govern,” *Studies in Indian Politics* (May 2016): 8–21; reproduced as Chapter 14 in Manor, *Politics and State-Society Relations in India*, 261–83. See also the discussion of organization building below.
- 21 An example was R. Gundu Rao, Congress Chief Minister of Karnataka (1980–1983). For extensive details, see Chapters 4 and 5 of E. Raghavan and James Manor, *Broadening and Deepening Democracy: Political Innovation in Karnataka* (London/New Delhi: Routledge, 2009). Another was Chief Minister Babasaheb Bhosale in Maharashtra (1982–1983).
- 22 One example among several was A.R. Antulay, Chief Minister of Maharashtra (1980–1982).
- 23 For example, as noted in note 19 above, Chief Minister Bhupender Singh Hooda in Haryana (2009–2014) was so preoccupied with cultivating a constituency for his son that he drove formidable leaders like Birender Singh to defect to the BJP, which made him a Minister in the central government after 2019.
- 24 Protests are discussed further below.
- 25 For details on one instructive example, see Chapters 1 and 2 of Raghavan and Manor, *Broadening and Deepening Democracy*.
- 26 They are sometimes called “fixers”; James Manor, “Towel over Armpit: Small-Time Political ‘Fixers’ in the Politics of India’s States,” in *Politics and State-Society Relations in India*, Chapter 10, or *naya netas*; Anirudh Krishna in, for example, *Active Social Capital: Tracing the Roots of Development and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- 27 It may not be accidental that the Congress organization has promise in several such states: Kerala, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and perhaps Rajasthan, where *panchayats* are somewhat less strong.
- 28 Interview with Chenna Reddy, Hyderabad, March 14, 1993. Similar methods were used in Bihar when Digvijay Singh was the party’s man in charge. Rahul Gandhi participated briefly in such protests in Jhansi some years ago.
- 29 Manor, “Did the Central Government’s Poverty Initiatives Help to Re-Elect It?”
- 30 These comments are based on assessments of voting patterns between 1980 and 2004, conducted in discussions between this writer and Yogendra Yadav. For a more detailed discussion, see James Manor, “Political Bargaining and Centre-state Relations in the Federal System,” in *Politics and State-Society Relations in India*, Chapter 9.
- 31 See the marked change in respondents’ views between a post-poll and an earlier pre-poll conducted a few weeks earlier. Lokniti Team, “The Issues that Mattered in an Issueless Election,” *The Hindu*, May 20, 2019. <https://thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/the-issues-that-mattered-in-an-issue-less-election/article27179964.ece>.

- 32 For an argument that if multiple economic problems and policy errors are not addressed, the government will lose the next national election, see R. Jagannathan, “Modi won’t Win in 2024, unless these Nine Economic Follies are Reversed,” *The Print*, August 2, 2019. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-wont-win-in-2024-unless-thee-nine-economic-follies-are-reversed/271101/>. On the Bihar state election of 2015, see James Manor, “Undone by Its Own Mistakes: How the BJP Lost Bihar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 51 (March 5, 2016): 60–69.
- 33 Remya Nair and Neelam Pandey, “Ridiculous, Foolish, Atrocious—How Modi Govt Fans are Slamming It on Economic Policies,” *The Print*, August 3, 2019. <https://theprint.in/economics/ridiculous-foolish-atrocious-how-modi-govt-fans-are-slamming-it-on-economic-policies/271796/>. Amid such protests, this policy was reversed in late August.
- 34 See Satish Deshpande’s perceptive comments in an interview with Ajaz Ashraf: “Hindutva has Done More for Upper Caste Politics than What was Thought Possible: Satish Deshpande,” *The Caravan*, July 26, 2019. <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/hindutva-has-done-more-for-upper-caste-politics-than-what-was-thought-possible-satish-deshpande>.
- 35 Shekhar Gupta video, “One Point BJP, Congress Agree on: Modi’s Unbeatable. Frozen Politics Waits for Big New Idea,” *The Print*, June 29, 2019. <https://theprint.in/national-interest/if-mo-di-is-viv-richrds-congress-can-flee-or-set-deep-defensive-fields-like-england-wait-/255913/>.
- 36 Modi’s “New Welfarism” entails the provision of “toilets, cooking gas, bank accounts, rural housing, power, targeted transfers to farmers, medical emergency insurance, and now water.” An estimated 1 percent of GDP has been committed to these initiatives. Arvind Subramanian and Josh Felman, “Understanding Budget Policy” *Business Standard*, 28 February 2020. Available online at: businessstandard.com/article/opinion/understanding-budget-policy-120022800021_1.html.
- 37 See for example, Shivam Vij, “Modi’s Fear of Narrative is our Insurance against his Excesses,” *The Print*, July 29, 2019. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modis-fear-of-narrative-is-our-insurance-against-his-excesses/269413>.
- 38 Important sources for this approach include Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 13 (April 2002): 51–65; Andreas Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 39 Levitsky and Way, “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” 52–53.
- 40 Morris-Jones’s article appeared in *Government and Opposition* 12 (Winter 1977): 20–41. More recently, Yogendra Yadav has used the term “electoral authoritarianism.” See the interview with him in Sayanfan Bera, “BJP Poll Campaign was a Perfect Ambush: Yogendra Yadav,” *Livemint*, May 19, 2019. <https://www.livemint.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections-bjp-poll-campaign-was-a-perfect-ambush-yogendra-yadav-1558283953036.html>. And for other examples, Levitsky and Way briefly refer to India in their 2020 article “The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism,” 60; as do Anna Luhrmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here: What is New about It?” *Democratization* 26 (2019): 1095–113. This last article contains many helpful references.
- 41 Maneesh Chhibber, “Is Modi Govt Using CBI, ED for Political Battles, or is it Opposition Propaganda?” *The Print*, February 5, 2019. <https://theprint.in/talk-point/is-modi-govt-using-cbi-ed-for-political-battles-or-is-it-opposition-propaganda/188204/>.

- 42 “Modi Government is so Busy Throwing Stones at Others that it has Forgotten its own Glass House,” *The Print*, 5 June 2018. <https://theprint.in/opinion/modi-govt-is-so-busy-throwing-stones-at-others-that-it-has-forgotten-its-own-glass-house/66234>.
- 43 Krishna Prasad, former editor-in-chief of *Outlook*, “Democracy can Die in Daylight Too,” *The Hindu*, June 14, 2019. <https://thehindu.com/opinion/lead/democracy-can-die-in-daylight-too/article27902292.ece>.
- 44 Sunaina Mathur, “Sedition Law: Pro-Government or Pro-Nation?” *Spontaneous Order*, May 10, 2019. <https://spontaneousorder.in/sedition-pro-government-or-pro-nation/>.
- 45 IANS, “Sedition law will be made more stringent: Rajnath Singh,” *Economic Times*, May 16, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/sedition-law-will-be-made-more-stringent-rajnath-singh/articleshow/69357362.cms>. The bill to change the UAPA makes it possible to designate individuals as “terrorists” is in a similar vein. See Siddharth Varadarajan, “UAPA Bill: India’s Most Dangerous Law Yet,” *The Wire* video, July 26, 2019. <https://thewire.in/video/beyond-the-headlines-11-uapa-bill-dangerous-law>.
- 46 Sanjib Kr Baruah and Rajesh Ahuja, “Narendra Modi Govt Cracks down on NGOs, Prepares hitlist,” *Hindustan Times*, January 24, 2015. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/narendra-modi-govt-cracks-down-on-ngos-prepares-hitlist/story-Q9lGg6i2YimcSehgA7W4lN.html>.
- 47 Achyut Mishra, “BJP Got 93% of the Rs.985 Crore Corporates Donated to the National Parties in 2016-18,” *The Print*, July 9, 2019. <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-got-93%-of-the-rs-985-crores-donated-to-national-parties-in-2016-18/260764>; Siddhatha Varadarajan, “Modi and the BJP: Just Follow the Money,” *The Wire* video, July 13, 2019. <https://thewire.in/video/beyondtheheadlines-modi-and-the-bjp-just-follow-the-money>. They used a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms, “Analysis of Donations from Corporates & Business Houses to National Parties for FY 2017-17 & 2017-18. <https://adrindia.org/content/analysis-donations-corporates-business-houses-national-parties-fy-2016-17-2017-18-0>.
- 48 PTI, “Are We Delivering Pizzas, Derek O’Brien Asks over Hurried Passing of Bills,” *The Hindu*, July 31, 2019. <https://thehindu.com/news/national/are-we-delivering-pizzas-derek-obrien-asks-over-hurried-passing-of-bills/article28767394.ece>. See also Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprasasta, “Monsoon Sessions Shows Better Laws are Not Modi Government’s Preference,” *The Wire*, July 28, 2019. <https://thewire.in/government/monsoon-session-bills-passage-modi-governments-effects>.
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- 50 Varadarajan, “UAPA Bill.”
- 51 M. Govinda Rao, “States’ Loss of Fiscal Autonomy in a Centralised Federal System,” *The India Forum*, June 5, 2020. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/states-loss-fiscal-autnomy-centralised-federal-system>.