

THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS' INTRA-PARTY ELECTIONS: THE ROADMAP TO 2024 FOR THE GRAND OLD PARTY

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



According to the schedule determined by the Congress Working Committee, the Indian National Congress will be electing its new President by September 20th, 2022.¹ The party has already held elections for block committees and the state-level Pradesh Congress Committees.² The President of the party is elected by the delegates of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC), which are nominated by the state-level Pradesh Committees. The members of these state committees are in turn nominated or elected by district-level bodies. It is important to remember that the AICC will be conducting its first election for the post of President since 2017, when Rahul Gandhi was elected unopposed. In the aftermath of the Congress' poor showing in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, Rahul Gandhi resigned as the leader of the party. Since then, Sonia Gandhi has been serving as the interim President. The inability of the party to elect a consensus candidate since the 2019 polls is an indicator of the malaise that India's first political party finds itself in. Even now,

¹ "Poll Schedule to Elect New Congress Chief Gets Underway, Party Says It Will Stick to Schedule," *The Hindu*, August 21, 2022, sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/poll-schedule-to-elect-new-congress-chief-gets-underway-party-says-it-will-stick-to-schedule/article65793793.ece>.

² "Over 6 Cr Congress Members Enroll For Organisational Elections To Elect New President," ABP Live, April 22, 2022, <https://news.abplive.com/news/india/congress-president-election-over-6-cr-congress-members-enroll-for-organisational-elections-to-elect-new-congress-president-1527704>.

there is no clear indication of whether Rahul Gandhi will stand for these elections or that another candidate will attempt to attain the top post of the party.

Currently, the INC finds itself at a crossroads. Even though it is still India's second-largest party based on vote share, it is rapidly losing ground to the BJP and regional parties. Since 2014, the Congress has lost numerous state-governments due to defections of its legislators to the BJP.³ The scale of these defections is an indicator of the dissatisfaction that regional-level politicians hold towards the party leadership. At the same time, the top party bosses maintain that there can be no Congress without the Gandhi family. In this regard, there is a clear dissonance between the desires of the grassroots base of the Indian National Congress and the influential sectors of the party.

In general, there are no constitutional provisions that regulate the level of democratization within political parties. In fact, in the case of the *Indian National Congress v. Institute of Social Welfare & Others*, the Supreme Court ruled in 2002 that the Election Commission of India does not have the jurisdiction to enforce inner-party democracy within registered political parties.⁴ Most political parties in India, including the INC, hold non-transparent elections for internal posts. In many cases, the election of party President is more of a formality than an inclusive democratic process. Party bosses in the Congress Working Committee have an oversized role in approving the President.⁵ As a result, this creates a very centralized party structure in which the President, with the aid of party bosses, distributes party tickets to influential members of the party, rather than based on merit. Thus, the electors in the AICC are beholden to the incumbent or favored candidate.

There is a great degree of confusion regarding the election of the party President. So far, no exact date has been finalized by the party. Furthermore, it is unclear as to who will be contesting these elections. Rahul Gandhi has remained extremely coy regarding his desire to contest these elections.⁶ Moreover, it is unclear whether any challenger will emerge. In 2017, Rahul Gandhi stood uncontested. These were the first elections held since 2001, when Sonia Gandhi was reelected as

³ "Congress Has Lost Six Governments to BJP since PM Narendra Modi Assumed Power in 2014 | Deccan Herald," accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/national-politics/congress-has-lost-six-governments-to-bjp-since-pm-narendra-modi-assumed-power-in-2014-954411.html>.

⁴ *Indian National Congress (I) vs Institute Of Social Welfare & Ors*, AIR 2002 SC 1258.

⁵ Ambar Kumar Ghosh, "India: Reinstating the Imperative of Inner-Party Democracy," Observer Research Foundation, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-reinstating-the-imperative-of-inner-party-democracy/>.

⁶ Vani Mehrotra, "Congress President Election: Party May Elect Non-Gandhi Chief, Say Sources; Rahul Reluctant to Contest Polls," India TV, August 22, 2022, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/congress-president-election-2022-rahul-gandhi-internal-polls-non-gandhi-president-priyanka-gandhi-sonia-gandhi-2022-08-22-801882>.

President with 98.98% of the vote.⁷ The possibility of a 'non-approved' candidate challenging the Gandhi family is also unclear. The prospect of this occurring strongly hinges on whether a member of the family chooses to contest directly or if the family decides to nominate a candidate. If the latter scenario unfolds, then it is quite likely that disgruntled members of the party would feel slighted by not having their preferred candidate selected and could band around a challenger.⁸

Sonia Gandhi is reluctant to continue as the President, due to the disgruntlement exhibited by a number of party leaders referred to as 'G23', who desire a massive overhaul of the party's functioning.⁹ Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also remains an option due to her personal charisma. However, her brother is adamant on nominating a 'non-Gandhi' candidate. It seems as if the party leadership may be cognizant of the idea that the party's dynastic nature is a burden that is impeding their prospects of dislodging the NDA in 2024. Furthermore, it is also likely that due to the weakened state of the party, a non-Congress candidate may be put forward as an alternative to Modi for the 2024 polls.

Political analysts have also argued that Rahul Gandhi's reluctance is merely a political maneuver in order to disassociate himself from accusations of dynasticism.¹⁰ Furthermore, Rahul Gandhi wants to take a leadership role in the scheduled *Bharat Jodo Yatra* (Uniting India Rally) and use this as a platform to justify his dominant position in the party. Commencing on September 7th, the party plans to launch a *padyatra* (foot march) from Kanyakumari to IIOJK. The march is scheduled to be completed in about 150 days and will cover 12 states and 2 Union Territories.¹¹ This movement is being billed as the longest political march since the days of the independence movement. Rahul Gandhi intends to involve over 150 civil society organizations in this march. He has been holding consultations with activists such as Aruna Roy of the National Federation of Indian Women, Bezwada Wilson of the *Safai Karmachari Andolan* (SKA) and Syeda Hameed, who is a social activist who

7 Manoj CG, "Congress Party and Its Presidents: Past and Present, as Future Nears," *The Indian Express* (blog), November 22, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/congress-leadership-past-and-present-as-future-nears-4948840/>.

8 Manoj CG, "In Window for Congress Chief Election, Disquiet and Speculation but No Consensus Candidate," *The Indian Express*, August 22, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/in-window-for-cong-chief-election-disquiet-and-speculation-but-no-consensus-candidate-8103779/>.

9 Manoj CG, "Sonia Gandhi Meets 3 G23 Leaders in Peace Effort, They Tell Her Don't Rely on Select Few," *The Indian Express*, March 22, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/azad-sonia-anand-sharma-manish-tiwari-g-23-meetings-expected-7831568/>.

10 Fatima Khan, "Congress to Elect New President Soon: The Story Behind Rahul Gandhi's 'Silence,'" *The Quint*, August 12, 2022, <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/congress-elections-party-president-rahul-gandhi>.

11 Saubhadra Chatterji, "Rahul Gandhi Urges Civil Society Groups to Join Bharat Jodo Yatra," *Hindustan Times*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/rahul-urges-civil-society-groups-to-join-bharat-jodo-yatra-101661194082376.html>.

campaigns for the rights of Muslim women.¹² It is clear that Rahul Gandhi is trying to construct a 'big tent' that can serve as the platform for launching a campaign for the 2024 polls.

Furthermore, the Congress leader is trying to reinvent his image. There is a realization that there is a dire need to shed his image of being the 'anointed son' to that of an enlightened leader. By focusing on socio-economic issues during this movement, he seeks to disassociate himself from agitating for a strictly political platform. In theory, building a coalition of a diverse set of interest groups may work to counter BJP's capitalization of the North Indian 'Hindu' vote. However, it remains to be seen if the Congress can reverse the rot that has plagued the party over the last decade. The organizational instability and general inaction of the party has allowed the BJP to build its own portfolio of regional and caste-based allies. At the same time, the inability of the BJP to maintain these relationships has opened the door for the creation of an anti-Hindutva platform.

Rahul Gandhi's desire to cultivate his own image sets a dangerous precedent for Indian democracy. He has referred to his desire of launching a march as an act of *tapasiya* (devotion), rather than one of political maneuvering.¹³ By painting himself in a Gandhian light, he seeks to juxtapose this new image with that of Narendra Modi. If he is the Prime Ministerial candidate of a joint opposition in 2024, then the Lok Sabha polls could become a referendum on the respective personalities of Modi and Gandhi, rather than being a constituency-based contest. On the other hand, one could argue that the 2019 polls were already conducted as a Modi vs. Gandhi tussle, as the BJP's rhetoric had revolved around the inexperience of Rahul Gandhi and the nepotistic structure of his party.

In this context, if the party is to nominate a 'non-Gandhi' that has the seal of approval of the party, it remains to be seen what sort of autonomy such an individual would have. Ashok Gehlot, the CM of Rajasthan is one possibility.¹⁴ However, he is reluctant to cede his place of authority in the state to other regional-level politicians such as Sachin Pilot.

In conclusion, regardless of the choice that the AICC makes, the Congress needs to go through a major overhaul in order to remain competitive in elections. Sonia Gandhi has argued that the party

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "‘Bharat Jodo Yatra’ a ‘Tapasya’: Rahul Gandhi," *The Hindu*, August 22, 2022, sec. India, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/bharat-jodo-yatra-a-tapasya-rahul-gandhi/article65798782.ece>.

¹⁴ Sunil Prabhu, "Did Sonia Gandhi Offer Congress Chief Post To Ashok Gehlot? His Reply," NDTV.com, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/did-sonia-gandhi-offer-congress-chief-post-to-ashok-gehlot-his-reply-3281447>.

can afford to only undergo 'minor surgeries' due to the upcoming national elections.¹⁵ However, the party also needs to be cognizant of the fact that there is a great divide that exists between the central authorities of the INC and its regional and local-level bodies. Analysts argue that the Congress has been in decline since the 1980s due to the rise of regionalism in Indian politics. However, one could also make the case that the Congress has in fact failed to empower regional level politicians in order to boost its fortunes in specific states. It is necessary for the Congress to not only rethink who leads the party, but to also reconfigure the structure of the party as well.

¹⁵ Manoj CG, "Sonia Gandhi Meets 3 G23 Leaders in Peace Effort, They Tell Her Don't Rely on Select Few," Indian Express, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/azad-sonia-anand-sharma-manish-tiwari-g-23-meetings-expected-7831568/>.