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**THE DECLINE OF A DOMINANT PARTY:
THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS 1967-1977**

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Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the phenomenon of Single Party Dominance (SPD) and the implications of such a phenomenon on the party system in post-Independence India. Specifically, the work is tasked with explaining how dominance can end by providing an analytical narrative of a single case of SPD and its collapse. This will be done by examining the precipitous decline of the Indian National Congress over a ten-year period from 1967, where Congress lost its first state-level elections, to 1977, where the party was finally rejected at the national level after three decades of dominance.

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THE SECOND COMING

W.B. YEATS

TURNING and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

THE DECLINE OF A DOMINANT PARTY: THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS 1967-1977

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Dramatis Personae



Jawaharlal Nehru

First Prime Minister of India from 1947 – 64, the year of his death. Charismatic moderniser and secular nationalist, Nehru personified the Congress after the death of Mahatma Gandhi and Sardar Patel.



Lal Bahadur Shastri

2nd PM (1964-66). Promoted by the Syndicate after the death of Nehru. A 'Nehruvian Socialist' his most noteworthy achievement was the negotiated end to the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965-6. Caretaker of the interregnum of the pre-Indira Gandhi years.



Indira Gandhi

Daughter of Nehru, and PM for 4 terms (1966-7; 1967-71; 1971-77; 1980-84). Elevated to PM by the Syndicate after the death of Shastri, but broke with the Congress Organisation in 1969 to lead the Congress (R). Instigator of the Emergency. Assassinated in 1984 by her Sikh bodyguards in retaliation for Operation Blue Star.



K. Kamaraj

Former Chief Minister of Madras, elected president of the INC in 1963. Principal leader of The Syndicate, and an instrumental kingmaker largely responsible for the promotion of Shastri and Indira Gandhi to PM. Known as the "Gandhi of the South".



Morarji Desai

Gujarati born, Desai was active in the liberation movement. A chief adversary of Indira's and a reluctant ally of the Syndicate. Congress (O) member. elected PM under the Janata Party govt. in 1977.



Zakir Hussain

Third President of India from 1967 until his death in 1969.



V.V. Giri

Varahagiri Venkata Giri was elected Vice President of India in 1967. Giri became acting president in 1969 upon the death of Zakir Hussain in office. He then went on to run as an independent, supported by the Indira faction. He was president until 1974.



George Fernandes

Leader of the AARE, Radical trade unionist and architect of the great train workers strike in 1975. Campaigned from jail to win his constituency in 1977.



Sanjay Gandhi

Younger son and trusted confidante of Indira Gandhi. Chairman of the Youth Congress, and a key role player during the Emergency. Charged with the Family Planning Programme and the disastrous "beautification" of the cities. Died in an aeroplane crash in 1980.



Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed

President of India from 1974 – 77. Declared State of Emergency in June 1975 under the instigation of Indira Gandhi.



Sanjiva Reddy

Syndicate; chief minister of Andhra Pradesh from 1956-64. Elected Speaker of the Lok Sabha in 1967 and again in 1977. Later that year elected the 6th President of the Republic of India.



Jagjivan Ram

Long serving member of the Nehru cabinet. Under Indira Gandhi served as minister for Labour, Food & Agriculture and Defence. After the 1969 split, became President of Congress (R). Resigned from Indira's cabinet in the twilight of the Emergency to form the Congress for Democracy. He would join the Janata as deputy PM under M. Desai.



Rajiv Gandhi

Elder son of Indira Gandhi. A commercial jet pilot, the apolitical Rajiv was thrust into political life after the assassination of his mother in 1984. The youngest PM at the age of 40. Resigned in 1989 following the Bofors arms procurement scandal and was assassinated by Tamil separatists on the campaign trail in 1991.

Nijalingappa

Syndicate; CM of Karnataka. President of Congress during split.

S.K. Patil

Syndicate. CM of Bombay state (Maharashtra) and national Railways Minister before losing his constituency in 1967.

Atulya Ghosh

Syndicate; Chief minister of W. Bengal

Glossary of Terms

AARF	The All-India Railwaymen's Federation. The train workers union responsible for the crippling strike of 1975. See Ch. 6.3.ii
<i>Bare admi</i>	'Big Men' Local intermediaries at the district or state level.
<i>Dalit</i>	An Untouchable
<i>Garibi Hatao</i>	Defeat Poverty
<i>Harijan</i>	Mahatma Gandhi's term for <i>Dalit</i> . Means literally, "the Child of God." Considered a pejorative term in contemporary speech.
MISA	Maintenance of Internal Security Act
<i>Sadhu</i>	A Hindu holy man.
<i>Sarvodaya</i>	Movement led by JP Narayan advocating a partyless democracy and 'Gandhian Socialism'. See Ch. 6.3.ii
SPD	Single Party Dominance
Syndicate	The cabal of chief ministers who controlled the Congress party organisation in the mid-to-late 1960s. Led the break-away Congress (O)

Institutions of Government

Prime Minister	The leader of cabinet and head of state.
Union Minister	A member of the national cabinet
President	Constitutionally the head of the executive, in reality the president acts on the advice of the PM and the Council of Ministers.
Lok Sabha	The “People’s Assembly” or lower house of Parliament. National representatives elected by common suffrage every five years.
Rajya Sabha	The “Council of States” or upper house of Parliament. Consists of members drawn from the state ministries or nominated by the President.
Chief Minister	The executive head of a provincial administration
Council of Ministers	Serve under the chief minister.
Governor	Official head of a state/province; nominal powers.
MLA	Member of the Legislative Assembly
MP	Member of Parliament. Representative of the Lok Sabha

Congress Party Organisational Divisions

INC	The Indian National Congress or simply “Congress”
President	Elected by all delegates for a two-year term.
AICC	The All-India Congress Committee. Comprising one eighth of the delegates of each province elected by the delegates of each province
WC	The Working Committee. Composed of the President of the Congress and 20 members of the AICC, 7 elected and 13 appointed by the President.
PCC	Pradesh (Provincial) Congress Committee. Party units at the state level, made up of many DCCs, and led by a PCC President.
DCC	District Congress Committee. Smallest division of party organisation.
CPP	Congress Party in Parliament. Umbrella term for Congress MPs.
CFSA	Congress Forum for Socialist Action. Group of radical Congressmen and former Communist Party members.

Selection of Parties

INC (R)	The Indian National Congress (Requisitioned). The victorious faction after the 1969 'Great Split'. Colloquially referred to as the Ruling Congress.
INC (O)	The Syndicate-led faction ejected from the Congress after 1969. Also known as the Old Congress.
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or "Dravidian Progressive Federation". A Tamil based political organisation. Advocacy of Tamil language with separatist tendencies.
Akali Dal	Punjabi party, advocates of Sikh language and religious rights.
Shiv Sena	"Shivaji's Army", right-wing Marathi-nationalist organisation in Maharashtra.
Jana Sangh	Atavistic Hindu chauvinist organisation
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party, descendent of the Jana Sangh, so named since 1980. Reached its height in the 1990s.
Janata Party	Victorious multi-party alliance of 1977.
Janata Morcha	The "People's Front". The victorious coalition in the crucial state elections in Gujarat in 13 June 1975, toppling the Congress (R) in the state. See Ch. 6.3.ii

The Indian Union



1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Understanding Single Party Dominance
- 1.2. The Indian National Congress:
Setting & Breaking the Mould of Single Party Dominance
- 1.3. Falling From Power
- 1.4. Timeframe: 1967 to 1977
- 1.5. Methodology

1.1 Understanding Single Party Dominance

Single Party Dominance (SPD) occurs when a party - by virtue of its historical status, its ability to mobilize massive constituencies, and the hegemonic force it exerts over the political system - maintains its hold on power for a sustained and uninterrupted period of time.¹ Its position allows the dominant party to influence the institutions of government, to control the state apparatus and civil service, the distribution of patronage, as well as the style and orientation of the opposition. The party, because of its status, at once reflects and shapes the society in which it operates.

Dominant party systems are the exception to the democratic norm of two- and multi-party systems in that the dominant party is the centre of decision-making and resource distribution in the political system to the exclusion of all other parties. There is a distinction between those one-party systems that are autocratic (as is the case in the People's Republic of China) and those parties that dominate the political process, but

¹ Pempel, T.J.: *Uncommon Democracies: The One-Party Dominant Regimes* Cornell University Press (1990), p.4

still maintain democratic freedoms (such as South Africa under the African National Congress)². For the purposes of this project only the latter type will be considered.

Other factors contribute to a democratic administration apart from the number of parties in the party system. The conventional 'Westminster' notion of two parties of comparatively equal standing engaging in periodic 'elite swapping' exercises is too narrow a definition for what makes democracy work. The vigour of the legislative process, holding the executive accountable to its decisions, the assertiveness and autonomy of the judiciary - generally a respect for the division of powers among the organs of government - these elements are as important as a regular change of incumbents. Other criteria include the personal freedoms enjoyed by the citizens, their adherence to the rule of law, as well as the strength of civic associational life³ (the social bonds that exist between individuals through public participation and involvement in non-political activity); and the ultimate authority of the constitution. These all contribute to the vibrancy of the system. Democracy can differ in its form according to the dictates of the local political culture, but these 'core essentials' have to be met.

In emerging dominant party systems the sustainability of democratic procedures is often tenuous and, as Huntington reminds us, there is a danger of slippage; that the institutional checks and balances that limit state power are fragile and can easily be

² A comparative study between the dominant party systems of India and South Africa is undertaken by Reddy, T.: "The Congress Party Model: South Africa's African National Congress (ANC) and India's Indian National Congress (INC) as Dominant Parties." *African and Asian Studies*, 4(3); (2005) pp. 271 - 300

³For a comparative study between northern and southern Italy on the importance of "civic communities" in building democratic institutional strength see: Putnam, Robert D.: "Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy" Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (1993).

undone.⁴ The by now clichéd warning of Lord Acton's that "Power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely" should caution us against un-critically accepting a system that risks concentrating decision-making power in the hands of the few. There is much debate about whether a true democratic culture can be realized within a dominant party system; that the trappings of power might be too all consuming for those who wield it.⁵ As a result, there is a voluminous literature on whether SPD systems are "the midwife or the gravedigger of democracy?"⁶ Such arguments are valid and necessary, but have a bearing on this discussion only insofar as the substantive quality of India's democracy will be judged. However, for present purposes, the broader discussion about democratic consolidation will not feature strongly. We are merely concerned with the experience of a single organisation in a SPD setting.

Dominance alters the way that competition for power is contested. Despite the regular occurrence of free and open elections, the opposition has little occasion to win office given the supremacy of the dominant party. The opposition parties are forced to take on a peripheral role as participants in the legislative process, holding the incumbent government to account, but acting from without. However, the notion of "throwing

⁴ As Huntington notes, of the Three Waves of democratisation, the first two (of 1828–1926 and 1943–1962) were followed by reverse waves (1922–1942 and 1958–1975).

Huntington, Samuel, P.: "The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century" Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press (1991).

⁵ Giliomee & Simkins take this position in their comparative study of SPD systems in South Africa, India, Mexico, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore.

Giliomee, Hermann & Simkins, Charles (eds.) *The Awkward Embrace: One-Party Domination and Democracy* Amsterdam et al.: Harwood Academic Publishers (1999).

⁶ Spieß, Clemens: "One-Party-Dominance in Changing Societies: The ANC and INC in Comparative Perspective." Working Paper No. 10 (October 2002), p. 26

the rascals out” is absent in the SPD system because there is no foreseeable way in which their dominance can be overcome, even when they abuse their position.⁷

What makes the SPD system so absorbing for students of comparative politics is the primacy that is placed upon the internal workings of the party itself. The dominant party is the centre of gravity in the political system. The endogenous forces within it also shape the external dynamics; for instance in its manipulation of other actors in the party system. To study these workings is to come to terms with the complex process of internal conflict, the importance of factions,⁸ as well as organisational divisions and how individuals compete for a higher place in the party hierarchy.

1.2. The Indian National Congress: Setting & Breaking the Mould of Single Party Dominance

No party exemplifies this pattern of dominance better than the Indian National Congress (INC). From 1947 to 1977 the INC enjoyed unchecked electoral supremacy in the national government, a period of three decades of dominance. If, as Harold Wilson said, “a week is a long time in politics” then three decades is an eternity. Several questions bear asking at this point. How did the Congress manage to maintain its dominance for such a length of time? How was the Congress as a liberation movement able to make the transformation into a professional party of governance? Moreover, how do the historical associations of the movement transcend the usual notion of parties as purely instrumental interest aggregators to become embodiments

⁷ Kothari, Rajni.: “The Congress ‘System’ in India” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 12, (Dec., 1964), p.1161

⁸ Nyable, B.: “The Dynamics of Dominance” University of California, San Diego (March 31, 2004), p.8

of the national consensus, whose fate is tied to the development of the new nation? These questions are important because they ask us to interrogate an unusual phenomenon and how it is perpetuated. But there is a more compelling question, and that concerns the eventual decline of the dominant party.

1.3. Falling From Power

Nothing lasts forever and neither do dominant parties. As Duverger notes:

Domination takes the zest from political life, simultaneously bringing stability. The dominant party wears itself out in office, it loses its vigour, its arteries harden. It would thus be possible to show...that every domination bears within itself the seeds of its own destruction.⁹

During the period under review, Congress went through a variety of internal changes and was subject to overwhelming forces from without – a combination of countervailing tendencies which ultimately led it to lose power. Just what does Duverger mean when he talks about the dominant party containing the seeds of its own destruction? What, to continue his metaphor, are those seeds? How do they germinate and grow into such a self-destructive force?

If, as Pempel suggests, there is a virtuous cycle of dominance, a self-perpetuating trend of increased and deepening supremacy,¹⁰ then we need to explain why this cycle loses momentum and leads the party to eventually fall. The driving question in our discussion is this: how and why did the Congress decline? What sequence of events

⁹ Duverger, M.: "Political Parties: Their Organisation and Activity in the Modern State", (2d ed: London: Methuen, 1959) cited in Arian, A. & Barnes, S.H.: "The Dominant Party System: A Neglected Model of Democratic Stability" *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 3, (Aug., 1974), pp. 308-9.

¹⁰ Pempel, p.4

and political dynamics led to the withering away of Congress hegemony and the loss of the first national elections in 1977?

1.4. Timeframe: 1967 to 1977

The period 1967 to 1977 is commonly seen as one of flux, and ultimately, of the collapse of the party system in place since Independence. Several events occurred during this period which precipitated the Congress decline and this decade is the most eventful in the party's time as a ruling organisation.

History affords us the benefit of hindsight, and it is easy to observe the Congress decline as something of an inevitability. As the following chapters show, there is a distinct chronology that illustrates the moments of decline in successive stages. The chapters correspond roughly in terms of these thematic stages and thus adhere to the sequential order of the events as they played themselves out. Although the teleological trajectory of the Congress decline is easily observable, the danger is that one could lapse into a descriptive account that presents the sequence without critically scrutinizing it. Therefore, time will serve as an organisational unit for the ordering of key developments within the party and in the party system. However, the end goal is not to determine the question of time, of when precisely the Congress fell. The object is rather to determine causality, in an attempt to understand why Congress slipped from its golden throne.

Chapter 2 will begin the discussion by presenting the available literature on SPD. This will form the theoretical component of the thesis by looking first at the causes of

dominance, as well as the effect that such a phenomenon has on the democratic system. The focus of the research is on dominant party decline, so a section of this chapter will be devoted to the competing theories of how this happens.

Chapter 3 will explain the nature of the 'Congress System' as conceived by Rajni Kothari¹¹ and developed by W.H. Morris-Jones¹² and others. This will require a detailed account of Congress dominance as well as a discussion of its history before the decade in question. The period prior to 1967 saw the premiership of Nehru (from Independence in 1947 until his death in 1964) forming the fulcrum upon which Congress dominance turned. Nehru's premiership was characterized by vigorous support for the nascent democratic institutions, a disproportionate respect for the opposition parties and an adherence to the spirit and letter of the constitution and its egalitarian principles. Added to this was Nehru's tireless work to promote the values of secularism, socialism and non-alignment in international affairs.¹³ His death created a vacuum, precipitating a succession crisis within the ruling party. The question 'After Nehru, who?' was answered when Lal Bahadur Shastri was elevated to prime minister. However, Shastri's reign was cut short by his own death in 1966 and the ascendance of Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, was to follow shortly thereafter. To discuss how she rose to power is to illuminate the decision-making style of the Congress and its ability to exercise 'collective leadership' over its supporters and the nation – an increasingly precarious process as the schisms in the party deepened.

¹¹ Kothari. "The Congress 'System' in India"

¹² Morris-Jones, W.H.: "The Indian Congress Party: A Dilemma of Dominance" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2. (1967), pp. 109-132.

¹³ Kothari. "The Congress 'System' in India" pp. 1170-1

The general election of 1967 is where our timeframe begins: it is the earliest under Indira Gandhi and the most significant for the party since Independence. These elections saw Congress for the first time losing in at least half of the state legislatures. The once unassailable dominance the organisation enjoyed in these regions was now broken, and the divisions within the party were exposed. The fallout from these losses and the issues that caused them will be discussed in Chapter 4. Although the Congress retained its national majority, its stature as a dominant party was compromised. Academic and journalistic accounts of the time highlight the tensions within the ruling party. Added to the pressures from below - of regional movements coalescing around ethnic, linguistic and caste constituencies challenging the Congress government in the Centre in New Delhi – the defeats marked the beginning of a gradual unravelling of Congress control over the political system.

Endogenous factors within the party also contributed to the loosening of its hold on power. In this light, the events of 1969 are telling. In Chapter 5 we look at the competing factions and contestations over the ideological trajectory of the party which led to the first split in Congress in November of that year. As a party renowned for its ability to accommodate a multitude of different interests, Congress had been described as an “open umbrella.”¹⁴ However, the consensus that existed during the Nehru period was no longer sustainable, and Chapter 5 will evaluate how this came to be. What caused the consensus-seeking function to deteriorate to such an extent as to lead to a split? The events and personalities involved in this haemorrhage will be dealt with in terms of their relative positions and a detailed description of the two factions will follow. The Indira Gandhi-led Congress (R) and Congress (O), headed by an

¹⁴ Roy, Ramashray: “Dynamics of One-Party Dominance in an Indian State” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 7, Modernization in South Asian Studies: Essays in a Changing Field (Jul., 1968), p. 574

association of party bosses known as the Syndicate, are the two rival groups in this contest. Understanding the victory of the one faction over the other will be the main concern of Chapter 5.

The 1970s were some of the most turbulent years in the history of modern India, and the deprivation and economic turmoil of the time were mirrored by political upheaval. Chapter 6 primarily addresses the slide towards authoritarianism that characterized the first half of the 1970s. This period is notable for two events: The elections of 1971, which saw a surge in popular support for the new Congress (R) under the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi, and the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1975. This chapter will evaluate the social and political conditions of these years. How, in such a short space of time, could Mrs. Gandhi's vindication at the polls crumble in the way that it did, and what explanations can we attribute to her actions? The many abuses of authority during the Emergency will be examined, and some discussion will take place on the effects of the suspension of the fundamental rights of privacy, press freedom and habeas corpus. The clamp-down on opposition parties and the implications that this had for the political culture of the period will also be discussed.

The Emergency is one of India's darkest hours and the threat of institutionalised authoritarianism has never been more apparent. Chapter 7 discusses how this moment of virtual dictatorship came to an end. Firstly, what led Mrs. Gandhi to withdraw the Emergency after so many of the constitutional provisions had been suspended? Why, from her position of relative advantage, did she throw away her power by declaring elections in 1977? The mobilization of large numbers of people in widespread civil unrest and the victory at the polls of the opposition coalition, the Janata Party, are the

crucial events of this time. A disparate group of opposition parties which had been unable to unite previously, but who consolidated their support at the critical juncture, Janata were able to constitute India's first non-Congress government. It was a short-lived exercise, but long enough to restore suspended freedoms and transform the SPD system into a multi-party one. New party systems usually emerge from the rubble of a major social or political upheaval. Chapter 7 provides an account of such a break from the past.

It will also be necessary to examine some of the events of the period immediately before and after the three decades in question. Many of the internal mechanisms within Congress will have to be explained, especially the delicate process in place during the Nehru years. In order for us to better understand the Congress collapse, it is vital that we come to terms with what kept it together for such a length of time. If we can identify the initial strengths of the system, we can go some way towards understanding its deterioration. What will emerge is that far from being a system based on the fortitude of circumstance or historical eventuality, Congress was dominant due to the deliberate machinations of a diligent party leadership. The party was flexible enough to be able to incorporate emergent sectional interests in society whilst simultaneously maintaining the stability of the *status quo*.

Returning to the timeframe question, it is also necessary to give an account of what the party system evolved into after the first national defeat of the Congress; that is, after 1977. Although Congress has occupied government on several occasions since its historic loss they have not enjoyed the same dominant position as before. The INC has often been unable to form a government on its own, and has had to turn to

opposition parties to form alliances in order to do so. In the 1980s Congress was the biggest actor in a genuine multi-party system with the opposition forming coalition governments for several years at a time. In the 1990s and into this decade, Congress operated in a two-party system, with the virulently Hindu nationalist movement, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as their principal opponents. Today it is back to a multiparty environment. The system has changed and the party of the 1960s and 70s is far different from the party as we see it today. Unfortunately, the changes in the political and social character of the country are too broad and fundamental to account for here, and this will only be done in passing.

The concluding chapter of the thesis will hope to re-present some of the lessons gleaned from the Congress party during this most eventful of decades. In order to be successful this project needs to have shown several things. Of course, a clear explanation of the sequence of events leading up to the loss of 1977 should be given. An account of the authoritarian period is also essential, because it illustrates how badly these systems can go awry if their mediatory mechanisms are allowed to stall. Mostly, however, the project should provide a catalogue of explanations for Congress decline though an analytically comprehensive narrative.

1.5. Methodology

The project concerns a point in time long past, in a far off country, that places limitations on the writing of the thesis. Although primary texts are scarce, this has not proved to be an obstacle, as they are not directly relevant for this specific topic. Therefore secondary sources will be consulted with a view to assessing the competing

explanations for Congress decline. The question is not a new one, but it is nevertheless important to explore it once more. The intention is not to re-tell the story of Congress dominance, but to understand the case at hand in order to make generalisable claims about the way dominant parties behave when their power is threatened. The benefit of this case is that of hindsight, for unlike many other dominant party systems, dominance in India has risen and fallen, allowing for more definitive conclusions to be made.

The author also travelled extensively throughout India from November 2006 to February 2007 in which time many individuals were consulted and books read concerning the subject. Several informal interviews were conducted with scholars during this time, but they will not be cited officially in the present document. However, the influence of the journey will no doubt be revealed in the text.

2. THE THEORY OF SINGLE PARTY DOMINANCE: SURVEYING THE LITERATURE

- 2.1. The Purpose of Theory
- 2.2. Defining Single Party Dominance
- 2.3. Why Do Dominant Parties Decline?

2.1. The Purpose of Theory

The objective of Chapter 2 is to outline the theoretical limitations of the thesis and to show the body of material that will be drawn upon to inform its analytical position. The chapter will have two specific concerns. The first is to define the term “Single Party Dominance” (SPD). This was partially addressed in the introduction, but further conceptual clarity over what SPD is (and is not) is needed before the study commences. An appreciation for how a dominant party remains in power, and what strategies it uses to maintain its dominant position, is required. However, it is the failure to sustain these features of dominance over the long term that drives this investigation, and which will be the specific concern of section 2.3. The section will examine the literature on dominant party decline as discussed in the theoretical formulations of several scholars whose work has shaped the discourse on the subject.

This chapter and Chapter 3 will serve as the foundation for the thesis. Chapters 4 to 7 will look at the trajectory of Congress decline beginning in 1967 and culminating in 1977, whilst Chapter 8 will tie these strands together to determine causality. But before exploring the decade in question several factors need to be accounted for. Chapter 2 therefore considers what SPD is and how it is maintained, and how

dominant parties eventually fall. Chapter 3 follows with a discussion of how Congress fulfils this model, and offers some formative opinions on why it lost its dominant position.

2.2. Defining Single Party Dominance

When discussing the notion of Single Party Dominance it is important to clarify that the focus is on dominant party systems in democratic regimes, and not authoritarian one-party systems where state power rules supreme. Some cases of SPD systems include the ANC in South Africa (1994-today), Mexico's Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) from 1917-2000, the Mapai party in Israel (an ancestor of today's Labour Party; 1948-77). Other examples include Italy's Christian Democrats, the Kuomintang (KMT) in Taiwan from 1948-2000, as well as Sweden's Social Democrats and the Liberal Democrats of Japan (1955-93).¹⁵

Unlike in one-party states, opposition parties are allowed to compete for power in SPD systems.¹⁶ Their representation may be paltry, but the opposition has the benefit of legal protection, and its existence and participation is ensured through regular and free elections based on universal suffrage. In these elections citizens make informed choices about their representatives, but tend to repeatedly favour a single organisation. In addition to this, the importance of the basic civil liberties of expression and association is respected. There is also universal equality before the law and a formal

¹⁵ Schneider, S.G. & Abedi, A.: "Winning is Not Enough: A Reconceptualization of Single-Party Dominance in Established Democracies" Paper for presentation at the CPSA Annual General Meeting in Toronto, ON (June 1-3, 2006), p.13

¹⁶ Jacob, Suraj: "Institutional Change in the Congress Party: An Application of the Greif-Laitin Theory" (Jan. 2006), p.4

separation of the organs of state with the *triumvirate* of the legislative, executive and judicial bodies all enjoying autonomy and oversight capacity. These elements serve to limit the dominant party's exercise of power and help to check potential authoritarian tendencies. However, the depth of these countries' democratic commitment is sometimes variable.¹⁷

Bearing in mind the above examples and common features, what constitutes dominance in the first place and how is dominance maintained? The French theorist Maurice Duverger (1959) attempts to define the concept by examining the peculiar character of dominant parties and their relationship with the polity. His observations are captured in the following quote:

A party is dominant when it is identified with an epoch; when its doctrines, ideas, methods, its style, so to speak, coincide with those of the epoch... Domination is a question of influence rather than of strength: it is also linked with belief. A dominant party is that which public opinion *believes* to be dominant ... Even the enemies of the dominant party, even citizens who refuse to give it their vote, acknowledge its superior status and its influence; they deplore it but admit it.¹⁸

Although Duverger avoids specifying what constitutes dominant party systems, he does refer to an ethos that accompanies SPD. He shows how closely the dominant party depends upon the creation of an historical consensus or an 'epoch'. Not every party with a parliamentary majority held over a long period will automatically be considered a dominant party.¹⁹ Rather, to be dominant requires an intimate association between the party and the very structures of society and, in most cases, an active

¹⁷ For example, in the case of Taiwan under the KMT the opposition was tightly regulated and, for a period, formal opposition was disallowed. However, this was an interim phase whereby the dominant party oversaw the transition to a more procedural multi-party system. A similar sense of "stewardship" characterized the PRI in Mexico with the transformation from hegemonic party to single-party dominant democracy being accompanied by manipulation of electoral rules and tight control over unionized labour by that organisation.

Ibid.

¹⁸ Duverger, p. 308

¹⁹ Ibid.

participation in a project of nation building. This is the case with former liberation movements turned governing parties (INC, ANC)²⁰, as well as transitional arrangements from soft- or bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes to multiparty democracies (PRI, KMT).

Pempel (1990) outlines four characteristics that a party must exhibit in order to be classified as dominant. Pempel's model is more focused than Duverger's and his work is useful in that it shows a level of theoretical parsimony, providing specific criteria for what constitutes a party's dominance.

The first criterion Pempel offers is an obvious one: that the party should be numerically superior and enjoy an electoral majority to secure its dominance. In other words the party must be dominant in number.²¹ In order to capture state power the party must enjoy a majority of the electorate's support. By positioning itself as the arbiter of the aggregate interests of society, the party acquires the strength of numbers in parliament to legislate its wishes. Fragile majorities or coalitions of opportunity set limits on a party's behaviour in office. A dominant party should be unencumbered by such concerns.

Secondly, if the party wishes to be dominant it must place itself in a dominant bargaining position with regards to other political actors in the party system.²²

Whether the dominant party is the sole party in office or the key actor in a broad alliance should not change the fact that it is the most influential organisation, dictating the terms of interaction with other parties.

²⁰ Reddy, "The Congress Party Model", p.25

²¹ Pempel, pp. 3 & 16

²² Ibid., pp.4 & 16

If a party has a large amount of organisational strength, but is only in power on an *ad hoc* basis, its ability to dominate the political system is stunted. Therefore, the third criterion is that the party must be dominant chronologically.²³ Especially if it wishes to implement its historical agenda the dominant party needs to spend a great deal of time in office.²⁴

Fourthly, Pempel highlights the need for the party to be dominant governmentally. This means that the party must control government institutions in such a way as to maximise its access to resources and its ability to distribute patronage.²⁵ In this way, the implementation of the party's historical agenda depends largely on its capacity to use instruments of state to exert its will.²⁶ This in turn continues to bolster the party's image amongst the electorate as 'the party of the nation'.

An idea that emerges from the work of Arian & Barnes (1974)²⁷ and others²⁸ is of the dominant party as a microcosm of the broader society, reflecting its values and inner tensions. Purely majoritarian parties are often supported by ethnic racial blocs and exploit demographic divisions to force their will on smaller actors and marginal groups. However, a dominant party can also serve as the 'glue'²⁹ that holds together

²³ Ibid., p.4

²⁴ Ibid., p.16.

²⁵ Kothari, R.: "The Congress System Revisited: A Decennial Review" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, No. 12, (Dec., 1974), p. 1038

²⁶ Pempel, p.16

²⁷ Arian, A. & Barnes, S.H.: "The Dominant Party System: A Neglected Model of Democratic Stability" *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 3, (Aug., 1974)

²⁸ Jacob, p.2:

Joshi, R & Desai, K.: "Towards a More Competitive Party System in India" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 11, (Nov., 1978), p. 1097

²⁹ Rimaneli, Marco: "Introduction – Peaceful Democratization Trends in Single-Party-Dominant Countries" in Rimaneli, Marco (ed): *Comparative Democratization and Peaceful Change in Single-Party-Dominant Countries* MacMillan (2000), p. 7

the constituent parts of a highly fractured society. Because of its broad social base, the dominant party becomes home to the whole spectrum of different political beliefs, creating an internal network of interest groups, sheltering “many contradictory outlooks and countervailing influences.”³⁰ Arian & Barnes describe the composition of this glue as follows:

Cohesion emerges from the mutual desire to share the fruits of power, a desire sufficiently strong to hold extreme demands in check and to moderate potentially disintegrative tendencies. In this respect and in others the dominant party is a microcosm of a partially pluralist society. Its factions reflect the divisions of the society; its internal decision-making processes are, in effect, identical with those of the polity, and since they are, the close identification between party and polity is reinforced in the public mind.³¹

As a result, the development of factions becomes an inevitable and necessary bi-product of the SPD system. Because of the marginal role of the opposition, politics increasingly comes to depend upon *intraparty* co-ordination (of sectional interests and demands), rather than on *interparty* co-ordination.³² Given the weakness of the opposition, factions can provide an effective substitute for external political party competition, acting as miniature ‘parties’ within the broader organisation.³³ The existence of competing entities within the dominant party essentially serves the consensus-driven aim of accommodating the divergent tendencies of the body politic as a whole.³⁴

Now that we have established what SPD is, the question of how to maintain this dominance naturally follows. How does the dominant party preserve itself in office and fulfil the criteria of longevity and continuity?

³⁰ Joshi & Desai, p.1097

³¹ Arian & Barnes, p.602

³² Nyable, p.8

³³ Hanson, A.H. & Douglas, J.: *India's Democracy* Weidenfeld and Nicolson (1972), p.67

³⁴ Belloni, F.P. & Beller, D.C.: “The Study of Party Factions as Competitive Political Organisations” *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, (Dec., 1976), p. 542

As Pempel notes, "Dominance ... involves an interrelated set of mutually reinforcing processes that have the potential to beget even more dominance".³⁵ This interrelationship he terms the 'virtuous cycle of dominance'. The cycle is perpetuated by continually reinventing the basis for the party's support; concentrating on absorbing new social forces and interest groups into the ambit of the dominant party. At the same time however, the dominant party seeks stability, and the maintenance of the status quo is an important element to the party's success. In other words, "the party must be rigid enough to hold on to key supporters for long, but flexible enough to replace this loyal core."³⁶ Pempel notes that this seemingly "intellectually fuzzy" contradiction is one of the crucial elements of the dominant party's success. John Stuart Mill's famous observation that healthy political systems will contain both "a party of order and stability" matched with a "party of progress or reform" is seemingly contradicted by the phenomenon of SPD.³⁷ However, further reading of Mill reveals that this could alter when "the one or the other shall have so enlarged its mental grasp as to be a party equally of order and of progress, knowing and distinguishing what is fit to be preserved from what ought to be swept away."³⁸ It is this form of 'dynamic conservatism' that keeps the party in a dominant position and on a centrist path.

Consequently, Pempel asserts that dominance is about more than only winning consecutive elections. To understand SPD is to see beyond the make-up of organisations or the fluctuations of the party system, but to observe how dominant

³⁵ Pempel, p.16

³⁶ Pempel, p.340

³⁷ Mill, John Stuart: "On Liberty" in Ryan, A. (ed.) *Mill*, W.W. Norton & Co. (1997). Ch.2, para. 36, p. 78

³⁸ *Ibid.*

parties create and sustain regimes. In this way, the party's influence seeps into every facet of civic life and becomes, to borrow Gramsci's term, a 'hegemonic force', exercising active control as well as "soft power" to enforce consensus.³⁹

2.3. Why Do Dominant Parties Decline?

Having deliberated on the general characteristics of SPD and its implications it is necessary to examine the literature on dominant party decline. In order to trace the experience of Congress dominance in India, as well as its fall, some possible explanations for SPD decline will now be considered.

Although dominant parties seem to occupy an unassailable position, their high status can be misleading. Arian & Barnes remind us that "Dominant parties carry a large baggage of historical, ideological, and organisational commitments that set real limits on their freedom of manoeuvre."⁴⁰ Although the dominant party can to some extent manipulate these boundaries there are still limits set on its behaviour. Step outside of those boundaries and the dominant position can easily be lost. In order to avoid this the dominant party must "adjust to the changes in society, and the greater the fragmentation of the society the greater the difficulty it experiences in doing so."⁴¹

³⁹ Bates, T.R.: "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (Apr. - Jun., 1975), p.352

"The concept of hegemony is really a very simple one. It means political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class."

⁴⁰ Arian & Barnes, p. 597

⁴¹ Ibid.

This chapter has often discussed the work of Duverger, and he has much to say about the decline of dominant parties. Drawing on Hatschek⁴², Duverger outlines the two primary reasons for the disintegration of the dominant party. Firstly, the pressures of occupying office for a long time “compels a party to attenuate its programme and not to fulfil completely the promises made to its electors.”⁴³ This alienates the voters and drives many of them toward the opposition parties, slowly tipping the scales of support against the dominant party.⁴⁴ Secondly, the dominant party experiences internal fragmentary tendencies when in power for too long with antagonism often developing between “an intransigent left wing and a temporising right wing.”⁴⁵ In opposition a party can be less concerned with such internal strife, as its dedication to replacing the incumbent party provides a unity of purpose and an impetus to resolve internal disputes. However, in the case of the dominant party, the “struggle for the soul of the party” can lead to a trend of internal fragmentation that is detrimental to its long-term success.⁴⁶ This ossification can be borne out of the lack of a formidable challenger, which leads to complacency and, eventually, the party’s demise.⁴⁷ Although the classical conception is that the opposition poses the direct challenge to the incumbent’s power, it is the internal dynamic of the dominant party that provides the biggest threat to their continuance in office. For Duverger, it is clear that “[just] as the decline of Rome was attributable to endogenous political forces, so is the decline of a dominant party.”⁴⁸

⁴² Hatschek “Englische Verassungsgeschichte”. Berlin, 1913 *quoted in* Duverger, p.300

⁴³ Duverger, p.300

⁴⁴ Thackrah, Simon: “Unpacking One-party Dominance” Annual Conference of the Australasian Political Studies Association, Australian National University, Canberra, ACT, (4-6 October 2000), p. 3

⁴⁵ Duverger, p.301

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.300

⁴⁷ Jacob, p.2

⁴⁸ Thackrah, p. 3

Rajni Kothari (1974) uses the endogenous/exogenous typology when discussing the decline in the dominant party's popularity.⁴⁹ Echoing Duverger, Kothari locates the primary independent variable affecting decline in the internal sphere: the erosion of the dominant party's strength from within. This division, which can deepen into a schism or a split, eventually plays to the advantage of the opposition, resulting in loss.⁵⁰ The exogenous independent variable on the other hand, takes the form of direct challenge from the opposition, i.e. a movement that generates from without, beyond the scope of the dominant party's influence. If the adversaries are able to unite against the dominant party a real threat can be made against its strength.⁵¹ Kothari's work reveals that when trying to comprehend the dependent variable of dominant party collapse there is a propensity to focus on the endogenous factors as the origins of decline. Although there is still concern with exogenous factors the changes therein have their beginnings within the dominant party's internal strife and contradictions.

Benjamin Nyable (2004) in his study on the institutional changes in the Congress also does this. Drawing on the work of Riker, he provides a noteworthy contribution to the albeit small literature on SPD decline. Nyable continues the emphasis that Duverger and Kothari put on endogenous political factors and how they lead to the breakdown of the dominant party. He attributes the party's dominance to its ability to occupy a central ideological position on the political spectrum. The parties of the left and right, he says, despite their shared opposition to the centrist organisation in power, cannot bring themselves to unite on a common ideological platform.⁵² As long as this fragmentation exists in the opposition ranks, the dominant party's good fortune will

⁴⁹ Kothari "The Congress System Revisited: A Decennial Review"

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 1042

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Nyable, p.4

continue. However, there is a flipside, "Implicitly, the end of dominance could occur when the left and right succeed in allying against the centre."⁵³ This could only happen if the dominant party ceases to maintain its centrist position; conceivably, if the dominant party's fragmentary tendencies produce a polarizing ideological schism within. If the party "tilts" towards a certain ideological position this might jeopardize its dominance. With Nyabale we see a continuation of the typology used by Duverger and Kothari, by putting primacy on the fluctuations within the party. However, there is more of an explicit explanation for how these internal changes affect the dominant party's relationships at the interparty level.

Thus, the role of the opposition becomes incidental to the workings within the dominant party. Edward Shills (1960) notes that the despondency of the opposition when faced with the dominant party forces them into retreat.⁵⁴ "Meanwhile, the dominant party, through long tenure in office grows "soft" and perhaps "corrupt".⁵⁵ The inability of the dominant party to meet the ever-changing needs of the populace leads to disaffection and anomie. In due course, the party will lose power and subsequently break down and disintegrate. The disintegration for Shills occurs *after* the fall from power (here there is divergence with the previous theorists in that they see the internal disintegration occurring beforehand). Shills sees this dissolution as detrimental to the unity of the nation. Because the dominant party has come to fashion itself so carefully as the builder of that nation, its absence leaves a void in its place. The void is only partially filled by a disorderly opposition who serve narrow constituencies and lack the same unifying ability of the dominant party.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Shills, Edward.: "Political Development in the New States" *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 2, No. 3, (Apr., 1960), p. 289

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Lastly, there are the external variables that lie beyond the realm of party politics. These are the “known unknowns” of economic flux, changes in the international environment and the sociological developments that alter the playing field for or against the dominant party. War, famine, natural disaster; all these can radically affect the perception of the dominant party’s ability to govern, and lie beyond its range of control.

The objective of this thesis is to address which of these processes – institutional decay, intraparty fragmentation, or consolidation of the opposition – occurred first in the SPD system in India, and which held the most significance. Given what we know about SPD and the theoretical work on SPD decline, some understanding of how this complex organisation operated in the Indian context will be dealt with in Chapter 3. Thereafter, how the party eventually became a victim of its own success will form the body of the work.

3. THE INDIAN CASE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">3.1. The 'Congress System'3.2. The Congress Hierarchy & the Federal Diffusion of Power3.3. Organisational vs. Governmental Wings3.4. Towards an Understanding of Congress Decline |
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"The Congress is the country and the country is Congress"

- Jawaharlal Nehru⁵⁶

3.1. The 'Congress System'

The Indian National Congress is the classic example of a dominant party at work. It embodied many of the tendencies discussed in Chapter 2 in that it was dominant in number and in its bargaining position, it ruled in a chronological fashion, and effectively controlled the instruments of state to maintain its dominance over a long period of time. Congress had all of this for thirty long years; from Independence in 1947 until its first national loss in 1977.

One of the leading theorists of the Congress Party, and of SPD more generally, is Rajni Kothari (1964, 1967, 1974). His term for SPD in India, the 'Congress System', refers to the complex set of procedures and the distribution of power within the Indian party system, and the role of Congress' dominance as a democratising agent in that system.

⁵⁶ Spieß, p. 21

According to Kothari's formulation, the Congress System consists of a *party of consensus*, in this case the dominant Indian National Congress, as well as *parties of pressure*.⁵⁷ The parties of pressure (the opposition) function outside of the sphere of government, holding electoral minorities and no direct access to power. Nevertheless, these parties operate in a cooperative space that Kothari terms the *margin of pressure*.⁵⁸ The margin is the division between the parties of consensus and pressure, but it also serves as the contact point for a range of actors in the political system, all of whom are linked through an elaborate network of "various social groups and leader-client relationships."⁵⁹ It is here, on the margin, that the parties of pressure seek to influence the various factions and interest groups within the party of consensus, pressurizing pliable sectors of the incumbent elite to promote their own interests. Kothari notes that ultimately, "[the] sensitivity of the entire system depends on the sensitivity of the *margin of pressure*, its flexibility and general responsiveness being a function of the elbow room it provides to factions, dissident groups and opposition parties in the making of critical choices and decisions."⁶⁰

Despite its dominant position, however, the party of consensus is by no means invulnerable. Although Kothari assumes that the party of consensus is attuned to the popular sentiments of the public, there is nevertheless a *latency factor* at play, the distant possibility that the opposition may one day emerge victorious. According to Kothari, this serves as a constant reminder to the dominant party not to exercise decisions unilaterally or abuse its power, lest it be booted out.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Kothari: "The Congress 'System' in India" p.1162

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.1163

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.1162

⁶¹ Ibid.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the intra-party dynamics of the party serve an important function by acting as a political sub-system within which the conflict of factions and the competing demands of interest groups were tolerated in order to “prevent them from colliding with the party’s grand design for power.”⁶² Kothari speaks of the flourishing factional life that existed within the party of consensus as a “regulatory thermostat.” The thermostat responds to the agitations of the parties of pressure, incorporating a wide range of actors and perspectives in a continual process of adjustment and accommodation.⁶³ In this system the majority position would not always triumph. Instead, dissenting voices were encouraged as they added to the vitality of the party. In this way, the party came to serve as an “agglomeration” of miscellaneous social groups through bargaining and coalition-making instead of an “aggregation” of interests in the classical Western conception.⁶⁴

The ‘Congress System’ sought to link these structural processes - the “operative mechanics of the system”⁶⁵ – with the historical mission of building the new nation.⁶⁶ Congress’s central role in this mission was facilitated by the distribution of authority between centre and state, the allocation of resources, and the emergence and absorption of new social groups into the system.⁶⁷ Kothari reminds the reader that, “[to] think of the system merely in terms of aggregation of votes and seats is a gross misunderstanding.”⁶⁸ For the Congress System is not merely a political system, but an

⁶² Roy, p.559

⁶³ Kothari, Rajni: “Continuity and Change in India’s Party System” *Asian Survey*, Vol.10, No.11, Elections and Party Politics in India: A Symposium, (Nov.,1970), p. 939

⁶⁴ Ibid:

Palmer, N.D.: *The Indian Political System* Houghton Mifflin Company (1971), p. 208

⁶⁵ Kothari, “The Congress System Revisited” p. 1036

⁶⁶ Jacob, p.4

⁶⁷ Kothari, “The Congress System Revisited” p. 1036

⁶⁸ Ibid.

explanatory framework for the relationship between the party and society - and its mediation in the divides and stratifications of that society.⁶⁹⁻⁷⁰

Certainly, Congress's role as an historical agent of nation-building was also lent enormous credibility by its prominence as the leading organisation in India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. The nationalist agenda that it embodied during the struggle remained long into independence. A product of this association was that Congress was able to attract the highest calibre of individuals to its leadership ranks, giving it a significant advantage when it came to forming a government. The statesmanship and intellect of Jawaharlal Nehru and the organisational ability of Vallabhai Patel contributed to the party's success in government. Added to this was the contribution of countless Congressmen, whose personal sacrifices for the movement resonated strongly with the populace, giving the Congress an advantage that could not be matched by the opposition. Another asset was the towering moral legacy of Mahatma Gandhi. His association as the 'father' of modern India would be promoted at every opportunity. Few remember Gandhi's suggestion that the Congress be dissolved at Independence, as it had served its function as a force for liberation.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 1035

⁷⁰ Palmer, "The Indian Political System" p. 208

⁷¹ Gandhi's argument for Congress to serve as a *Lok Sevak Sangh*, or social service league, was seen as inconsistent with the needs of modern India and was mostly discarded after his death. However, his *Panchayati Raj* or the vast decentralised system of village republics was revived, and from the 1960s has served as a vital component of local administration.

Vora R. & Palshikar, S. (eds): "Introduction" in *Indian Democracy – Meanings and Practices*. Sage Publications, India. (2004) pp. 15 – 17

3.2. The Congress Hierarchy and the Federal Diffusion of Power

One of the pillars of Congress dominance was that party structures were divided in such a way as to parallel state and local administrative divisions, vertically devolving decision-making power within the organisation in a form of internal federalism.⁷² Although Congress was dominant nationally, its dominance was based on its close links to 17 relatively autonomous state systems. These consisted of separate Congress organisations, each dominant in its own regional system and exhibiting unique features.⁷³

In his epochal work on party building and organisation, Myron Weiner (1967) discusses the structural dynamics of Congress during its golden period of dominance (or what is referred to as the 'First Party System' of 1947-67). Weiner asserts that given the plural nature of Indian society and the proliferation of diverse sectional groups in the political arena, the national organisation could not survive without responding to the parochial demands of local interest associations across the country.⁷⁴ At the district and state levels Congress was tailored to meet these specific demands:

Seen from one viewpoint, Congress is not a single party, but a coalition of party organisations. The state party organisation can be viewed as a coalition of quasi-independent district organisations, and the national party, as a coalition of state party organisations.⁷⁵

⁷² Weiner, Myron.: *Party Building in a New Nation – The Indian National Congress*. University of Chicago Press (1967), p.463

⁷³ Brass, P.: "Coalition Politics in North India" *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 62, No. 4, (Dec., 1968), p.1175

⁷⁴ Weiner, "Party Building in a New Nation " p.479

⁷⁵ Ibid.

This resulted in a pyramidal relationship, with the districts forming the broad base, and authority ascending upwards to the state and national levels. Power was thus diffused through the Congress hierarchy between the Provincial or “Pradesh” Congress Committees (PCCs), themselves consisting of dozens of District Congress Committees (DCCs), the smallest unit of party organisation. The PCCs were consolidated into the All-India Congress Committee (AICC), the nationwide leadership organ of the Congress. The AICC discussed and issued key policy directives for the party organisation. The apex of this pyramid was the Working Committee (WC), consisting of the party president and 20 members of the AICC (7 elected and 13 appointed by the President). Colloquially referred to as the “High Command”⁷⁶, the WC generally allowed a level of autonomy for party organisations at the lower levels to determine their own affairs, concerning itself more with the daily demands of co-ordinating a vast party machinery, debating policy issues and engaging with government.⁷⁷

As each state consisted of its own regional, ethnic, caste and linguistic associations, Congress had to attract local constituents and appeal to issues relevant to their particular experience. This was made possible by the mirroring of the party structure with the federal divisions of the system of government⁷⁸, which were demarcated according to language (e.g. the state of Maharashtra for Marathi speakers) or geo-political concentrations (such as the Punjab which has a majority of Sikhs, and proliferation of Punjabi speakers). By allocating state governmental positions and distributing rewards to ‘local bosses’, the central leadership could, in turn, depend on the consistent delivery of these voter banks come election time. This enabled

⁷⁶ Palmer. “The Indian Political System”, p.214

⁷⁷ Kochanek. “The Congress Party of India”, pp.156 - 158

⁷⁸ Kothari. “The Congress System Revisited”, p.1044

Congress to maintain its national dominance at the Centre in New Delhi whilst leaving regional issues to the party leaders in that area.⁷⁹⁺⁸⁰

In return, state Congressmen depended on a unified leadership at the top, the so-called “High Command”, or WC, that not only distributed patronage and favours, but also arbitrated between internal disputes as they arose, intervening to maintain party unity when parochial politics became too divisive. Weiner describes this equilibrium of power in the Congress apparatus not as a means of suppressing conflict, but rather as a method of accommodation and adaptability; the key to the success of Congress over the years⁸¹:

While the existence of a state and national leadership committed to a unified party organisation is a crucial factor, the essential reason that the Congress party is cohesive ... is not because there is little conflict within it but because there are legitimised and institutionalised roles and procedures for the handling of conflict.⁸²

This acceptance of conflict allowed for the upward mobility of Congress members, enabling lower ranking members to “challenge” rivals for the leadership of a district or state as well as contest for positions in the tier above, including those of the high command itself.⁸³ In this way competition allowed for the promotion of winners and the exit of losers, but kept these competitive tendencies contained by not allowing factions to obliterate one another and jeopardise the party’s dominance at whichever level.⁸⁴ In this way, Congress was able to maintain its consensual authority and neutralise cleavages. It succeeded in doing so without stifling the emergence of fresh

⁷⁹ Weiner, M.: “Party Building in a New Nation”, p.479

⁸⁰ Pye, Lucian: “Why One-Party Dominant Systems Decline” in Varshney, A. (ed.) *India and the Politics of Developing Countries: Essays in memory of Myron Weiner*. (2004), p. 55

⁸¹ Weiner. “Party Building in a New Nation” p.480

⁸² Ibid. p.479

⁸³ Jacob, p.2

⁸⁴ Ibid.

ideas and groups into the system, nor placing a lid on the competitive instinct of its members.⁸⁵

3.3. Organisational vs. Governmental Wings

In addition to the vertical diffusion of power that existed between the national, state and district levels was the horizontal separation between those Congressmen who only served in the party organisation and those who were both party members and elected officials of state.⁸⁶ However, this was a permeable divide, and as the party evolved these two 'wings' exchanged members as new factions gained ascendancy and fresh representatives were elected. One of the positive consequences of this tendency was for the organisational wing to act as a check on the bearers of state office. In this way, sections of the party served to articulate an oppositional voice in the political discourse:

Indeed the organisational wing of the party does act in a manner traditionally associated with opposition parties: its legislative members make use of the question-hour to criticise the government; it publicises its dissatisfaction with government in the press; it attempts to win a majority for itself in the legislature; and it canvasses extensively during the elections to the AICC, the Pradesh Election Committees, and the Working Committee.⁸⁷

In the first party system one of the key divisions of power at the state level was a provision in the Congress constitution that forbade the same individual to hold the positions of chief minister (executive head of the state) and Pradesh Congress Committee president (provincial organisation leader) at the same time.⁸⁸ This

⁸⁵ Graves, D.: "Political Mobilization in India: The First Party System" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 16, No. 9, (Sep., 1976), p. 867

⁸⁶ Morris-Jones, pp. 110-11

⁸⁷ Franda, Marcus: "The Organisational Development of India's Congress Party" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (Autumn, 1962), p. 251

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 253

prevented the ministry from controlling the party machinery in the state, creating two centres of influence, with each wing regulating the other and limiting the concentration of executive power. Further strength was added to the party organisation, as the president of the PCC or DCC would be in charge of the collection of campaign funds for elections and general party finances, thus increasing the dependency of the members in the ministries on the state party.⁸⁹

Pandit Nehru on the other hand, resisted this tendency and always took care to maintain the separation between party and government. He insisted that the parliament, or Lok Sabha, was the primary source of decision-making power in the country, and not the party.⁹⁰ "The party might lay down general policy, but it was up to the legislative wing to decide on the timing, the priorities, and the pace in carrying out those policies."⁹¹ Nehru argued that making the Prime Minister accountable to the party organisation would "reduce the democracy to a mockery."⁹² To emphasise the need for separation, he resigned from the Congress presidency after assuming the position of Prime Minister, whilst gradually increasing the power of the PM and his cabinet in the execution of major decisions. Later, however, Nehru was to again occupy the position of party president from 1951-54, in an effort to check the assertiveness of the party organisation after his acrimonious confrontations with former Congress presidents, Acharya Kripalani and Purushottamdas Tandon.⁹³ These predecessors sought a robust role for the Working Committee, involving its members in policy questions such as economic planning and foreign affairs in a type of shadow

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Morris-Jones, p.128

⁹¹ Kochanek, S.A.: "The Indian National Congress: The Distribution of Power Between Party and Government" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.25, No.4. (Aug.,1966), p. 695

⁹² Ibid., p. 682

⁹³ Ibid., p. 683 & 689

cabinet.⁹⁴ Nehru deeply resented what he perceived as the overstepping of the party organisation's mandate. Therefore, by occupying the dual positions of PM and party president he was able to quell the rising assertiveness of the organisation by putting more power in the hands of cabinet, and relegating the WC to internal party affairs only.⁹⁵

Although the party organisation was mostly subordinated to the authority of the ministries, it made an essential contribution to the consensus-seeking function of the system. The "regulatory thermostat" that was discussed earlier (regarding the opposition parties' ability to pressurise factions within the Congress) also applied to the dynamic between the organisation and government wings of the dominant party.⁹⁶ The different elements across the party/ministerial divide were enabled to express contrary views and compete for control. In this way the party organisation served as a vital conduit linking the government with society, responding to emerging pressures from below, and adopting specific causes as their own in order to challenge the government. This gave the party apparatus an important intermediary role - and some clout. Ultimately however, Kothari argues that the division of power was not evenly distributed between the two wings:

The role of the organisational wing of the Congress is, no doubt, vital both for establishing lines of communication and mediation between government and society and for the politicisation of social differentiations and cleavages. But it has to be always borne in mind that the struggle for power *within* the Congress is for entree [sic] into the seats of government and only at points of major crises, the other way around.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Palmer. "The Indian Political System" p.215

⁹⁵ Kochanek. "The Indian National Congress: The Distribution of Power Between Party and Government". p. 682

⁹⁶ Kothari. "The Congress System Revisited". p.1044

⁹⁷ Ibid.

The centre of power was usually in the hands of the bearer of office, but occasionally, as Kothari alludes to above, there reached a point of crisis or stalemate between party and ministry whereby the usual integrative function of the Congress system broke down.⁹⁸ When such an impasse became prohibitive to the regular functioning of government, the direct intervention of the High Command in the dispute would usually tip the balance of power towards the party organisation, which “[acquired] ascendancy and [assumed] the task of re-establishing the cohesion of the system and its consensus.”⁹⁹ However, this was always a temporary phase. Once the functional co-habitation of the system returned, the locus of power would invariably shift back towards the governmental wing. This was repeated both at national and state levels, and formed part of the ‘thermostatic’ mechanism of the Congress System.

A better understanding of party/ministerial division can be gained by looking at the historical origins of the Congress as an organisation whose collective *raison d’être* was the defeat of the colonial government. This gave the movement a shared objective and instilled it with a natural suspicion of ministerial power. Even though Congress participated in government institutions before Independence, this participation was of a nominal kind, and incumbents were always subservient to the determinations of the party on issues of policy and their dealings with the British Raj. However, after self-government was won the agitational and activist traditions of the Congress began to recede and the internal conflicts and contradictions of being in power grew. This steadily reduced the ability of the party organisation to determine how the executive exercised its authority.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

This shift also revealed the contradictory tendencies of the party membership. As Morris-Jones puts it, by the time of the death of Nehru in 1964 the internal argument of the Congress had changed. It had gone from a “band of self-sacrificing devotees of a cause” to a “collection for convenience, an aggregate for advantage.”¹⁰⁰ No longer did its members differ in terms of ideology or political principle, but rather on personal rivalries and factional spats. Members were united only by their mutual desire to acquire power, and the Congress party provided the perfect platform to realise these ambitions.

3.4. Towards an Understanding of Congress Decline

The extraordinary thing about the Congress experience is that primarily due to the constituency nature of the electoral system the Congress was able to convert slim electoral majorities into large majorities of seats in the legislature. Mendelsohn (1978) reminds us that in the three parliamentary elections of 1952, 1957, and 1962, Congress was unable to get more than 50% of the vote, receiving only 45-48% of the total. It shows that it is entirely possible for a candidate in a district to receive a minority of the total vote, but with a plurality of votes ensuring his victory.¹⁰¹ The first ‘fallout’ elections of 1967 show a more marked reduction to 41% of the total - hardly grounds to claim an overwhelming consensus.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Morris-Jones “The Indian Congress Party: A Dilemma of Dominance” pp. 110-11

¹⁰¹ A prime example of this tendency was in the 1951 – 52 elections. Here the Congress won 45% of the votes but gained 364 seats in the Lok Sabha. This number constituted 74% of the total seats. Compare this to the 10.5% of the votes gained by the socialist parties, whose tally translated into a meager 12 parliamentary seats: only 2.5% of the total seats. Park, “India’s Political System”, p.63

¹⁰² Mendelsohn, Oliver: “The Collapse of the Indian National Congress” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 51, No. 1, (Spring, 1978), p. 45

Here the *latency factor* of Kothari's has some credence when noting that Congress enjoyed a relatively fragile hold on power when one considers the narrow electoral outcomes. The fragmentation of the opposition was key to Congress success.¹⁰³ However, if the opposition were to consolidate this could pose a credible threat to Congress dominance, as collectively the opposition received more votes. Congress was able to withstand these threats and exploit its systemic advantage to ensure dominance over the long term. But how did it manage the competing tendencies within its broad and heterogeneous organisation over such a long period?

The answer is it didn't. The chapters that follow reveal how the processes described above - of interest aggregation, equilibria of power, and consensus-making mechanisms - were not inherent to the system, but an adaptive function of necessity. Their presence was borne out of the pragmatism needed to manage a party consisting of deeply disparate interests operating within a diverse social base. As we move into the decade in question, we find that these processes are over-ridden by the Prime Minister's secretariat for the expediency of short-term control. When this was done, the system that kept Congress in power in the various states was gradually lost as it isolated local leaders and destroyed the dependency of the national government on the states. As will be shown, this contributed irreversibly to Congress' decline.

¹⁰³ Hanson, A.H. & Douglas, J.: "India's Democracy" *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*, 1972, p. 75

4. THE 1967 ELECTIONS & THE LOSS OF THE FIRST STATES

- 4.1. A Watershed Year
- 4.2. Consensus Leadership & the Role of 'The Syndicate'
- 4.3. The Rise of Indira Gandhi
- 4.4. Changing Regional Politics in India
- 4.5. Assessing the Aftermath

4.1. A Watershed Year

1967 was an important year in Indian politics for several reasons. Here was a national- and state-level election in which Congress dominance began to be seriously challenged. For the first time in post-Independence history the party lost power at the provincial level with defeats in at least half the states. This ended the aura of unassailability that the Congress had acquired thus far and marked the beginning of the assertion of state sovereignty against the monopoly of control by the Centre. In parliament, the Congress majority was reduced to 25 seats with the loss of nearly 60 seats (ultimately winning only 297 of the 545-seat Lok Sabha).¹⁰⁴ Despite holding the Centre, these results represented a resounding humiliation for the Congress government. This chapter will explore why these states were lost, the topography of the political landscape at the time, and the impact that these losses had on the development of the Congress henceforth. Whether this period signals a sharp turn in the fortunes of the organisation or merely a bump in a long road of dominance will be investigated.

¹⁰⁴ Corbridge, S & Harris, J.: "Reinventing India – Liberalization, Hindu Nationalism and Popular Democracy" (2000), p.71

The Fourth General Elections of the Republic of India took place between 15th and 21st February 1967. The elections were noteworthy in that they were the first contested by Indira Gandhi who had assumed the position of Congress President after the succession process that followed the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri in 1966. The ascension of Mrs. Gandhi to the leadership of the Congress was due in large part to the influence of a factional grouping within the High Command known as 'The Syndicate'. Consisting of several non-Hindi-speaking state leaders, the Syndicate had come to control the political process at the highest level by ruling through consensus, filling the vacuum left after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru¹⁰⁵ (The role of the Syndicate and Mrs. Gandhi's rise to power will be discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3 respectively).

The most significant occurrence of 1967 – an *annus horribilis* for Congress – was the strong issue-orientation of the elections. The national mood in the mid-1960s was negatively affected by a combination of failings, most of which were economic. Food shortages, rising prices, huge disparities of wealth and the devaluation of the rupee all contributed to widespread discontent with the way the country was being run.¹⁰⁶ 1966 in particular was understood to be “the worst since Independence” with widespread public agitations, *bandhs* and strikes occurring throughout the country.¹⁰⁷ These grievances were directed against the ruling party and a critical evaluation of the government's performance by voters resulted in losses in several key states.¹⁰⁸ The

¹⁰⁵ Hanson, & Douglas, p.76

¹⁰⁶ Frankel, Francine, R.: “Crisis of Political Stability” in *India's Political Economy 1947 – 2004: The Gradual Revolution* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press. (2005), p.341

¹⁰⁷ Palmer, N.D.: “India's Fourth General Election” *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No. 5, (May, 1967), p. 277

¹⁰⁸ Sheth, D.L.: “The Crisis of Political Authority” in Vora, R & Palshikar, S. (eds): *Indian Democracy*, Sage Publications (2004) p. 58

widespread hardship had contributed to a psychological malaise among the electorate altering voting patterns away from the Congress.¹⁰⁹

The election saw the highest ever turnout of voters with 61% of the electorate casting their ballots. Compared with the previous general elections of 45% in 1951, 46.6% in 1957 and 55.4% in 1962, this was a dramatic increase.¹¹⁰ Another change was the entry of millions of new ballots into the boxes, with 35 million more voters participating than the previous election in 1962.¹¹¹ The post-Independence population explosion meant a higher proportion of younger voters took part in the polls. Half of the electorate of 250 million were under the age of 35 and this demographic fluctuation surely impacted on the outcome of the election.¹¹² The new generation was not as steeped in the Congress liberation mythology; having only known it as a party of governance. They were thus hungry for change.

In eight states in the Union, change is what they got. Voters ousted Congress governments in Bihar, the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bengal, Orissa, Rajasthan, Madras and Kerala. Madras was an especially sobering result for the once almighty Congress, being completely outrun by the Tamil nationalist Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam¹¹³ (DMK) and its allies. Congress received a paltry 49 seats in a state assembly of 234, with their rivals claiming 138. Kerala ushered in the Communist-led United Front, with the Communist Party of India (Marxist) winning the most seats.

¹⁰⁹ Palmer, "The Indian Political System", p. 260

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Wallace, Paul: "India: The Dispersion of Political Power" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 8, No. 2, A Survey of Asia in 1967: Part II, (Feb., 1968), p. 88

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Translated into English this reads as the "Dravidian Progressive Federation"

Congress received only 9 out of 133 seats in this state. A similar left-leaning United Front was also victorious in Bengal.

These results predate many of the developments that would later emerge to challenge Congress's claim to be the sole party of governance at the all-India level. As Kothari explains, the losses revealed the institutional vacuum that existed after the departure of Nehru, and the growing inability of Congress to balance the competing forces within its organisation:

The election itself provided the conditions for the fission of the party and the frustration of the consensus-maintaining mechanisms which had served the party so well and for so long. The ultimate arbiter, an overpowering Prime Minister, in the image of a Nehru, had not been replaced nor had an institutional mechanism been developed to serve this vital function. The customary mechanisms and attitudes for achieving consensus on critical intra-party issues had been eroded in the succession fights after the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri. There was an acceptance of open conflict. State level conflicts became germane to national political conflicts with the expansion of the power of state level leaders in the succession and policy crises after the death of Nehru. The actuality of defeat in 1967 established a national precedent. Opposition parties can win and non-Congress governments can rule.¹¹⁴

4.2. Collective Leadership & the Role of 'The Syndicate'

Before assessing the implications of the 1967 election it is necessary to examine the political context of the preceding years. Following the death of Nehru in 1964, the Congress Party was tasked with the problem of succession. Nehru's dual position as party leader and head of state enabled him to keep a lid on the contestations between the Congress organisational and ministerial wings. His towering personality ensured he could step in to alleviate intra-party spats where and when they arose. However,

¹¹⁴ Kothari, "Continuity and Change in India's Party System", p. 947

Nehru was also capable of deferring to chief ministers and mostly left the administration of the various states to his subordinates in government. During his time, Congress was headed by a strong High Command that was able to distribute leaders and resources through the party branches as well as actively participate in formulating policy.¹¹⁵ But by 1967 this mediatory role had deteriorated, a fact reflected in the poor showing in many of the states. In this instance, factionalism had compromised the Congress rather than added to the vigour of its internal debate, in the tradition of old.¹¹⁶

Despite the historical nation-building legacy of Congress since Independence, the last three years of Nehru's tenure were characterized by some crucial failures in national leadership. A particular disappointment occurred in the area of foreign affairs. The gains of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) were squandered when the Chinese invaded the northern Himalayan territories in a small, but bloody border dispute in 1962.¹¹⁷ The military defeat meted out by a supposedly non-aggressive neighbour was an embarrassment for the government and a personal blow for the Prime Minister. In addition, the fourth Five Year Plan had stalled, and the Planning Commission responsible for its implementation had become moribund.¹¹⁸ The high public expenditure of the plans created a spiralling financial crisis, inducing the Bretton Woods institutions to force a devaluation of the rupee, much to India's chagrin. Chronic food shortages necessitated foreign food aid from the United States and a revision in agricultural policy. This prompted the commercialisation programme

¹¹⁵ Jacob, p.13

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Stein, Burton: *A History of India* Oxford University Press, New Delhi (1998) pp. 405-7

¹¹⁸ Corbridge & Harris, p.70

known as the 'Green Revolution'¹¹⁹, which was at odds with the quasi-Socialist state-driven development model of which Nehru was so intimately a part.¹²⁰ Nehru's passing in many ways represented the end of many of his ideals – non-alignment, '3rd Way' centrally controlled industrial expansion, and a unifying secular ideology.

It was in this context that a grouping colloquially known as the 'Syndicate' would emerge as the principal players in Indian political life. A gerontocratic cabal of Chief Ministers, most of whom originated from the Southern states, the Syndicate's power resided in the organisational structures of the party. Contemporaries of Nehru and Gandhi, the body was headed by Kamaraj from Madras, Atulya Ghosh from West Bengal, Nijalingappa of Karnataka, Sanjiva Reddy from Andhra and S.K. Patil who hailed from Bombay state.¹²¹ For many years the Syndicate would play a major role as kingmakers, ruling through collective decree and choosing leaders who were pliable to their will.¹²²

The Syndicate met shortly after the death of Pandit Nehru to decide on the question of succession. One of the principal challengers in the Congress organisation was Morarji Desai, a veteran of the movement. A social conservative and a stalwart of the struggle, Desai was a strong contender for the post. However, the Syndicate stymied his candidacy as he was deemed to be too "rigid, doctrinaire and right-wing."¹²³

¹¹⁹ Singh, M.P.: "The Crisis of the Indian State: From Quiet Developmentalism to Noisy Democracy" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 30, No. 8. (Aug., 1990), p. 813.

¹²⁰ According to Blair: "The 'decade of development' of the 1960s saw the Green Revolution increase wheat production in India by two-and-a-half times, and total food production went up by a factor of 25 percent, but this growth had little effect on welfare, for little of it went into the hands of the poor."

Blair, H.W.: "Mrs Gandhi's Emergency, The Indian Elections of 1977, Pluralism and Marxism: Problems with Paradigms" *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2. (1980), pp. 237-271

¹²¹ Corbridge, & Harris, p.70

¹²² Hardgrave, R.: "The Congress in India – Crisis and Split" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No.3, (Mar.,1970), pp.256-262.

¹²³ Frank, Katherine: *Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi* Harper Collins (2002), p.270

The person upon whom the Syndicate's trust would eventually fall was the demure Lal Bahadur Shastri. Shastri had neither a strong base of support, nor any high level of opposition against him, but he was successful in serving the need for continuity that the Syndicate required. His style in dealing with inter- and intra-party conflicts did not differ radically to Nehru's; nor did his economic outlook, which was similarly Social Democratic. But Shastri did not have his predecessor's natural charisma, and had to rely more heavily on the Congress High Command and the Grand Council of party bosses for major decisions.¹²⁴ Apart from easing the transition from Nehru, Shastri's *coup de grace* was the resolution of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. However, his incumbency was notable for its brevity and he was no more than the steward of an uncertain interregnum.¹²⁵ He died suddenly in January 1966, the night after brokering a ceasefire with the Pakistanis in Tashkent.¹²⁶

4.3. The Rise of Indira Gandhi

With the passing of Shastri, the Syndicate was forced to cast about for a new leader, one who would be compliant to its directives, plus some have some degree of charismatic authority. With Desai once again staking his claim, Indira Gandhi (then the Minister of Information and Broadcasting) eventually secured the nomination as leader of the Congress Party in Parliament. This was done at the behest of the Syndicate, who in the absence of a suitable mediator-arbitrator, settled for Mrs.

¹²⁴ Dua, Bhagwan D.: "Presidential Rule in India: A Study in Crisis Politics" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 19, No. 6, (Jun., 1979), p. 621

¹²⁵ Brass, Paul: *The New Cambridge History of India – IV.1 – The Politics of India Since Independence*, 2nd ed. Cambridge University Press (1990), p.38

¹²⁶ Tashkent is in Uzbekistan, which was then part of the Soviet Union.

Gandhi in what was widely seen as a provisional arrangement.¹²⁷ A key advantage that Mrs. Gandhi had for the Congress was her proximity to her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, his legacy in death unmatched by the reality of his tenure in office.¹²⁸ The allure of his daughter as the inheritor of a ruling familial dynasty was a strong motivation for her promotion to head of state. At that stage, Indira Gandhi was popular with the electorate and seen to have support throughout the party, but without an identifiable base of power to call her own. 'Indira', as she was affectionately known, was a useful figurehead to ensure the party elders could lead by proxy.¹²⁹

The ascension of Indira Gandhi would, in time, have far greater significance than the old party men would realise. As the years unfolded, Mrs. Gandhi's ideological coherence became more pronounced, and the ability of the Syndicate to exert its will over the Prime Minister shrank and attenuated over time. The struggle between Indira and her makers was indicative of a larger tension within the party:

The events leading to the "second succession" as described above signify no more than the beginning of certain major shifts in the institutional balance of the political system in India. The conflict for power within the Congress and the increasing influence of one level of party struggle on another symbolize more than a mere struggle between personalities; they raise basic issues regarding institutional relationships between party organisation, government, Parliament and state governments and party units.¹³⁰

Assuming the premiership in 1966, the elections early the following year were a premature test for the 49-year-old Mrs. Gandhi. The poor showing of the Congress at

¹²⁷ Lele, J. "Understanding Indian Politics: Are We Asking the Right Questions?" in Vora, R. & Pulshikar, S. (eds.) *Indian Democracy*, Sage Publications (2004), p.181

¹²⁸ Although Indira bore the name of 'Gandhi' she had no relation to the Mahatma Gandhi. Her marriage to Congressman Feroze Gandhi (also unrelated) is the origin of the name.

¹²⁹ Bjorkman, J.W: *India: Party Personality and Dynasty* Basil Blackwell Publishing (1987), p.60

¹³⁰ Kothari, R.: "India: The Congress System on Trial" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 7, No. 2, A Survey of Asia in 1966: Part II. (Feb., 1967), p.85

the polls led many to dismiss her as a bit player. This, as it turned out, was a disingenuous perception. More on this in Chapter 5.

4.4. Changing Regional Dynamics in India

One of the most noteworthy outcomes of the 1967 general elections (in addition to the strong issue orientation) was the regional bent of the voting. The awakening of new provincial movements - and the chaotic governments they formed - had a considerable impact on the Indian party system.

Madsen (1967) tells us that the strength of regional loyalties often trumped national patriotism. Observing a user survey from 1967, he notes that,

fully two-thirds of the respondents agreed with the proffered statement that one should be loyal to one's own region first, and then to India! Moreover, even a most cursory examination of the many and varied forms of what is being called here "the opposition" to Congress will reveal the very great importance of region in their support base.¹³¹

The heterogeneous nature of Indian society meant that many social cleavages existed in the different regions. These divisions often combined, and included strains between socialism and conservatism, secularism and communalism, tradition and modernity and national versus regional allegiances.¹³² This period also experienced an increase of the so-called "anti-system" movements, such as the Maoist insurgents in the outlying eastern territories. (The 'Naxalite' movement is so named after the violent seizure of land by a peasant uprising in Naxalbari in 1967. The narrow strip along the West

¹³¹ Madsen, D.: "Solid Congress Support in 1967: A Statistical Inquiry" (1970) p.1009

¹³² Brass, "Coalition Politics in North India" p. 1177

Bengal and East Pakistan¹³³ border is to this day a source of intense violent struggle between the guerrillas and the government).¹³⁴⁺¹³⁵

Communalism became an increasingly prominent force during these elections. For example, the Jan Sangh, a Hindu chauvinist organisation, aggressively advocated a ban on cattle slaughter. Many protests and public acts of violence surrounded the promotion of this cause, including an attack by a marauding band of naked *sadhus* - bearing tridents and spears - who laid siege to Parliament House.¹³⁶ Bombay state (now Maharashtra) witnessed the assertion of local identity politics along linguistic and ethnic grounds, with the Shiv Sena (meaning "Shivaji's Army") basing its political programme on hostility to migrants, particularly South Indians, as well as non-Marathi speakers and Muslims.¹³⁷⁺¹³⁸ This xenophobic 'othering' was in direct contrast to the official secularism espoused by the Congress and its tolerance of all creeds.

Linguistic associations took on a deeper significance during this time. In Madras (renamed Tamil Nadu in 1967) the DMK was particularly good at fostering anti-Congress sentiment through their resistance to Central interference on state language policies. The implementation of Hindi as a national language was a particularly despised proposal, as it would have displaced English as the *lingua franca* of the country.¹³⁹ Had such a law been implemented it would have prevented non-Hindi-

¹³³ Following the 1971 war of secession with West Pakistan the area formerly known as East Pakistan is today called Bangladesh.

¹³⁴ Wallace, Paul: "India: The Leadership Crisis" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 9, No. 2, A Survey of Asia in 1968: Part II. (Feb., 1969), p. 85

¹³⁵ Singh, M.P., "The Crisis of the Indian State", p. 816

¹³⁶ Palmer, "India's Fourth General Election" p. 279

¹³⁷ Frankel, "Crisis of Political Stability", p.370

¹³⁸ Brass, "The Politics of India Since Independence", p.94

¹³⁹ Frankel, "Crisis of Political Stability", p.341

speaking Dravidians from taking national government jobs, among other restrictions. By resisting such measures, the DMK played to the fears and ambitions of a national minority ambivalent about its role in the broader Indian society. In this way, these parties “[combined] promises of protection for economic interests with promotion of the socio-cultural aspiration of threatened groups.”¹⁴⁰ By fusing populist techniques with parochial demands, regional parties such as the DMK were able to successfully challenge Congress for control of state ministries.¹⁴¹

An entirely new phenomenon was the proliferation of defections that plagued the Congress party’s rank and file. One of the methods to facilitate conciliation and accommodation within the ‘Congress System’ was the promotion of a strong Centre with equally strong governments in the states. However, the fallout of 1967 was that national and regional Congress structures became ever more bifurcated.¹⁴² In the years following the elections, between March 1967 and March 1970, there were 1827 defections out of 3487 seats.¹⁴³ This number of members crossing the floor was unprecedented. To make matters worse, there were comparatively fewer defections from opposition parties towards Congress.¹⁴⁴ The fickle tide of ‘switchers’ reflected an inability of the Congress organisation to keep its members in check.¹⁴⁵ This was not only due to ill discipline, but revealed the failure of the party to allow for the natural expression of dissent and the resolution of conflict between members of duelling factions. As a result, competition for legislative seats meant that opponents

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Corbridge, & Harris, p.71

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Eldersveld, Samuel J.: “The 1967 Indian Election: Patterns of Party Regularity and Defection” Asian Survey, Vol.10, No.11, Elections and Party Politics in India: A Symposium, (Nov., 1970), p.1019

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

within Congress would sabotage the efforts of their rivals to win incumbency - to the overall detriment of the party.¹⁴⁶

However, these were Pyrrhic victories for the opposition. The governments formed in the opposition-run states were in most cases a patchwork coalition of divergent interests. The coming-and-going of defectors would tear coalitions apart as quickly as they had been formed and there was a high degree of volatility at the state level. In order to defeat Congress, once principled opposition leaders sank to new lows for the chance to gain legislative seats. Lele (2004) explains some of the new problems:

One common theme... was that of an imminent or desirable polarization of politics, away from the so-called Nehruvian consensus. However, it seemed clear that, although the traditional mechanisms of competition management within the Congress had been weakened after the deaths of Nehru and Shastri and were further fractured by the results of the 1967 elections, heterogeneous coalitions of smaller opposition parties, including the new and temporary creations of the Congress dissidents, did not have the capacity to successfully contain elite competition and to restore stability.¹⁴⁷

Instability in the state ministries resulted in a special order known as President's Rule being enacted in five states. President's Rule was a constitutional provision only instituted during periods of severe crisis, such as mass civil disorder or the breakdown of state government. It involved the suspension of the state assemblies and the removal of the chief minister. Sovereignty would cease to be local and shift to the national government, with a governor employed to oversee the administration of the state until such time as order was restored.¹⁴⁸ In this instance, the rapid turnover rate of Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA's) from one party to another necessitated intervention by the Centre. The states in which this took effect were

¹⁴⁶ Lele, p.181

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p.183

¹⁴⁸ Wallace, "India: The Dispersion of Political Power", p.80

Haryana, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Bihar.¹⁴⁹ Haryana was the most acute example of such instability and defections. As such, the mass switching between parties by legislators and the unravelling of state governments was popularly termed "Doing a Haryana".¹⁵⁰ In this case the intervention was clearly justified with prolonged periods of interregnum crippling India's newest state. However, this also reflected the growing tendency of New Delhi to override domestic governments and the discordant relationship between India's federal structures and its unitary compulsions.

4.5. Assessing the Aftermath

For Congress, the results of the election were disappointing. Although the total vote for the party went down by only 4%, it had a marked affect on its overall seat tally, representing over 21% drop in number of seats and a significant reduction of its national majority.¹⁵¹ Syndicate members sustained heavy personal loses in the key constituencies of their home provinces. S.K. Patil, the Railways Minister and Chief Minister of Bombay, went down. So too did Atulya Ghosh, who lost in Bengal. The most surprising rejection however, was that of Kamaraj, who was voted out in Madras.¹⁵² The popular disaffection with Congress at this point was palpable; due in large part to the injection of young voters into the electorate.

¹⁴⁹ Singh, L.P.: "Political Development or Political Decay in India?" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 1. (Spring, 1971), p.69

¹⁵⁰ Wallace, "India: The Dispersion of Political Power", p.80

¹⁵¹ Frankel, "Crisis of Political Stability", p.355

¹⁵² Palmer, "India's Fourth General Election", p. 283

Overall, three key developments came out of the election process. The first was a new perception by the opposition parties that Congress dominance could be undone. The so-called “cracks in the monolith” were beginning to show. The second was the notable issue-orientation that Indian politics had taken, as opposed to the uncritical affirmations of the dominant order that characterized the previous polls. The third was the prelude to the disintegration crisis that would grip the Congress, culminating in the split in 1969. This took the form of a decrease in party loyalty and the inability of the mediatory mechanisms within Congress to ameliorate conflict between members of competing factions.¹⁵³ It is this fragmentary tendency that is the focus of Chapter 5.

¹⁵³ Spieß, n19, p.9

5. THE DOMINANT PARTY SPLITS: THE CRISIS OF 1969

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">5.1. Polarising Tendencies5.2. Things Fall Apart in Bangalore5.3. An Ideological Split?5.4. The Congress (R) in Power |
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5.1. Polarising Tendencies

November 1969 saw a four-month period of intense intra-party conflict culminating in a split in the Congress party, the first of its kind since Independence.¹⁵⁴ By this stage Congress was in a condition of institutional breakdown with the split mirroring the factions that has emerged after the ascendancy of Indira Gandhi. This section will seek to explain what precipitated the crisis, the composition of the factions that developed thereafter, as well as the ideological poles around which different Congressmen were able to cohere.

As discussed in previous chapters, the longevity of the Congress prior to 1969 was based on its ability to assimilate divergent interests and to foster a culture of consensus. It did so by drawing on a wide range of ideologies, and accommodating various ethnic, linguistic and regional groups in its ranks.¹⁵⁵ This consensus model was now officially broken with the Congress splitting along ideology and factional loyalties into two groups: the Indira-led Congress (R) and the breakaway Congress (O). These groups roughly corresponded with the ministerial/organisational divide,

¹⁵⁴ Hardgrave, R.: "The Congress in India – Crisis and Split" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No.3. (Mar.,1970). p.256

¹⁵⁵ Davey, H.: "Polarization and Consensus in Indian Party Politics" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 12, No. 8. (Aug., 1972), pp. 701-716.

although not entirely so.¹⁵⁶ The eventual success of the Congress (R) faction and its ability to govern will be assessed in the final section.

5.2. Things Fall Apart in Bangalore

Immediately after the losses of the 1967 elections, the tensions between Indira Gandhi and the Syndicate intensified.¹⁵⁷ The organisational wing of the party emerged from the election severely weakened, with many of the Syndicate members voted out of their constituencies. Kamaraj himself was particularly damaged after the Congress defeat in Tamil Nadu.¹⁵⁸ As the Congress president and arbiter between the two wings of the party, the loss of his seat in the Lok Sabha reduced his capacity to mediate in the rifts that would later emerge.

After 1967, Mrs. Gandhi began to assert her independence from the Syndicate through subtle acts of defiance. This was exemplified after the election when she unilaterally drew up her cabinet without consulting Kamaraj.¹⁵⁹ Rejecting the provisional arrangement the Syndicate had set out for her, she again asserted her autonomy when she nominated Zakir Hussain for President of the Republic. By doing so, Indira openly defied the wishes of Kamaraj and the party organisation for its own candidate, and as early as August 1968 it became known that the Syndicate wished to see her removed.¹⁶⁰ The presidential nomination would reappear later as a divisive issue in the party following the death of Hussain in office and would come to dominate the

¹⁵⁶ Hardgrave, p.256

¹⁵⁷ Frankel, Francine, R.: "The Congress Split and the Radicalization of Indian Politics" in *India's Political Economy 1947 – 2004: The Gradual Revolution* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2005. p.390

¹⁵⁸ Frank, p.305

¹⁵⁹ Frankel, "The Congress Split", p.391

¹⁶⁰ Singh, L.P., p.73

All-India Congress Committee meeting in Bangalore in July 1969. The conference was a seminal event in the history of the party and the beginning of the unravelling process.¹⁶¹

Prior to the conference, there were already fragmentary tendencies developing within the party. With parliamentary elections scheduled for 1972, Indira Gandhi sought to increase the power of the Prime Minister's office against the Syndicate, whose base of support lay in the party organisation structures.¹⁶² One of Mrs. Gandhi's strategies was to play to the perception of the Syndicate as rightward leaning and position herself as ideologically more progressive. Indira was indeed closer to certain socialist-minded groups, and prominent leftist Congressmen such as her political advisor P.N. Haksar had much influence on her thinking. But her main strategy was to align herself with the so-called 'Young Turks', an emerging group within the Congress organisation who sought to revitalize moribund collectives such as the Congress Forum for Socialist Action in order to sway policy making initiatives towards socialism.¹⁶³ To do this they sought to challenge the "vested interests" that persisted within the governing old guard of the party whose dependency on landed elites and big business they saw as hampering India's economic emancipation.¹⁶⁴ Indira's courting of these groups earlier in the year was an effort to bolster support against the imminent threat of expulsion posed by the Syndicate.

Most indicative of the leftward shift in Indian politics was the declaration of the Ten Point Plan at the Working Committee meeting held shortly after the elections in May

¹⁶¹ Hardgrave, p.257

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Frankel, "The Congress Split", p.401

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p.404

1967.¹⁶⁵ A programme of action for the Congress government, the most important of the points was the provision for government control of banking institutions and insurance, the curbing of monopolies, and state control of food grain exports.¹⁶⁶ Among other rural works and collectivisation programmes were the expansion of the public distribution of food grains and the abolition of the "Privy Purses". The purses were financial privileges afforded to the rulers of the Princely States, a legacy of the colonial era in Rajasthan, Karnataka and other states, who were subsidized with state financial assistance as an incentive to join the Indian Union. Decades later, these handouts came under serious attack and were the first victims of the socialist turn within the party.¹⁶⁷

The ideological bent of the divisions between the ministerial and organisational wings came to the fore in a public spat over government economic policy at the All-India Congress Committee meeting held in the southern city of Bangalore in 1969. The Prime Minister sent a note to the Working Committee outlining "some stray thoughts" - a euphemism for strong measures to be taken to increase state involvement in key sectors of the economy.¹⁶⁸ These included nationalizing the banks, reforming legislation around access to land, as well as placing "ceilings on urban income and property, and curbs on industrial monopolies."¹⁶⁹ One of the main issues was of the role of public enterprises, and a policy debate ensued between Indira and new party President and Syndicate front man Nijalingappa over the role of state driven industry with Indira arguing for "more and more" investment.¹⁷⁰ Nijalingappa in a strongly

¹⁶⁵ Kochanek. "The Congress Party of India: The Dynamics of One-Party Democracy", pp.417 - 419

¹⁶⁶ Frank, p.307

¹⁶⁷ Frankel. "The Congress Split", p.397

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p.418

¹⁶⁹ Hardgrave, p.257

¹⁷⁰ Frankel. "The Congress Split", p.403

worded President's address came out for an increase in market-led growth and a streamlined public sector.¹⁷¹ Despite their agreement on the fundamental aims of the Ten-Point Programme, the clash would precipitate a long-term antagonism between the two leaders.

Members of the Syndicate were not ideologically as one, and the public enterprises issue was met with mixed responses from the group. For instance, conservative members such as S.K. Patil and Nijalingappa along with Morarji Desai opposed the measure.¹⁷² However, there were also sympathetic elements such as Kamaraj himself, and Home Minister Y.B. Chavan. Chavan would push for the nationalization programme as a means to broker peace between the warring factions, and the concession was made to Indira Gandhi on the eve of the presidential nomination.¹⁷³⁺¹⁷⁴

The contestations within the party came to a head with the need to fill the vacancy of the President of India after the death of Hussain early in the year. Although not holding an executive position, the president serves as the constitutional head of government and has the power to act as a check on the PM. A complicit candidate therefore would have enhanced Indira's resistance against the attacks of Kamaraj and Desai.¹⁷⁵ The Syndicate put forward Sanjiva Reddy, the speaker of the Lok Sabha, as

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Desai, the old contender, had been included in the cabinet with the dual portfolio of Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister in an effort to broker unity at the Centre. However, it was widely interpreted as a calculated move by the Syndicate to "keep an eye on Indira Gandhi" and to prevent her from consolidating her power against the party leadership. This, as Desai wryly noted, was an "irony of fate" given that the Syndicate had promoted Indira in an effort to keep him out of power.

[Ibid., p.392]

¹⁷³ Hardgrave, p.257

¹⁷⁴ Singh, M.P.: "Split in a Predominant Party: The Indian National Congress in 1969" Abhinav Publications, p.3

¹⁷⁵ Frankel, "The Congress Split", p. 310

their nominee. The Prime Minister's preferred candidate was the Acting President, V.V.Giri.¹⁷⁶ Initially Indira was forced to compromise by supporting the candidacy of Jagjivan Ram, the Minister for Food and Agriculture, but the lack of support for him by the Syndicate meant his candidacy quickly withered. However, a sudden development saw Giri drop out of his position as acting president to run as an independent, circumventing the need for the approval of the party bosses. Giri then embarked on an energetic campaign with the Socialist Forum as his backers, and made overtures to both Communist parties and the United Fronts in Kerala and W. Bengal. The DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Muslim League also supported his nomination.¹⁷⁷

In response, a whip was issued for the Congress Party in Parliament (CPP) to vote for Reddy in the election. The whip was publicly defied by parliamentarians of the Indira faction, whose support lay with Giri. Socialist Forum members became, in Frankel's words, "the storm troopers of the Giri nomination"¹⁷⁸ and Giri won by the slightest of margins.

The election of the new president was a triumph and was soon followed by the firing by Mrs. Gandhi of Morarji Desai from his position as Finance Minister (prompting him also to resign his other cabinet post as Deputy Prime Minister in protest).¹⁷⁹ Combined with the nationalization of fourteen banks and the success of V.V. Giri, this was an enormously popular victory for Indira Gandhi. Desai was seen as a block to

¹⁷⁶ Hardgrave, p.257

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Frankel, "The Congress Split", p.424

¹⁷⁹ Frank, p.315

Mrs. Gandhi's socialist ambitions and his exit endeared her to the masses who saw her as an avatar of the poor.¹⁸⁰

A decisive break came with the resignation of C. Subramaniam as president of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee. This was after being forced to step down after members of the PCC loyal to Kamaraj challenged Subramaniam's capacity to lead.¹⁸¹

The expulsion precipitated a counter attack by the AICC against President Nijalingappa. The body, most of whom supported Prime Minister Gandhi, accused him of bias in the leadership contest and launched a signature campaign against him.¹⁸² In retaliation, Nijalingappa removed both Subramaniam and Fakhruddin Ali

Ahmed from the Tamil Working Committee. On 1 November 1969 two separate Congress Working Committee meetings were held simultaneously in different parts of New Delhi, with Indira hosting her supporters in the prime ministerial offices.¹⁸³ The

show of dissent warranted a furious response from Nijalingappa who accused Gandhi of trying to tear the Congress apart by organizing a different AICC. It was, according to him, "an unpardonable act of gross indiscipline, a flagrant violation of the Constitution of the Congress calculated to disrupt the unity of the organisation".¹⁸⁴

The split was unfolding; the falcon could no longer hear the falconer.

Indira wrote a six-page open letter detailing her position and revealing her impressions of how the Congress organisation had failed during the crisis. In it she stated that the schisms were "not a mere clash of personalities", a "fight for power", or a "conflict between the Parliamentary and organisational wings" but rather

¹⁸⁰ Frankel. "The Congress Split", p.420

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p.425

¹⁸² Ibid., p.426

¹⁸³ Frank, p. 316

¹⁸⁴ Frankel. "The Congress Split", p.427

“between those who are for Socialism, for change and for the fullest internal democracy and debate in the organisation on the one hand, and those who are for the status quo, for conformism and for less than full discussion inside the Congress.”¹⁸⁵

As a punitive measure for hosting the rebel WC Indira Gandhi was tried *in absentia*, expelled from the party and removed from her position as leader of the Congress Party in Parliament (CPP).¹⁸⁶ However, the Syndicate did not manage to entice the majority of MPs to desert Indira (whose support lay in the ministerial wing) and effectively ejected themselves from the united Congress and out of power. When R.S. Singh filled the post of CPP leader, he became the Leader of the Opposition with the support of only 60 breakaway MPs under the new banner of the Indian National Congress (Organisation).¹⁸⁷ The members of the party aligned with Indira went under the new title of Indian National Congress (Requisitioned), so named after the ‘requisitioning’ of the new AICC,¹⁸⁸ which retained the bulk of the old membership (a total of 297 MPs, 220 of whom were from the Lok Sabha, the rest from the state assemblies).¹⁸⁹ The Congress (R) subsequently elected new leaders and formed a hasty alliance with the Communists to retain the majority in the parliament.

5.3. An Ideological Split?

Indira Gandhi's claim that the conflict within the party was between those who were for socialism and change against those who were for the status quo needs to be

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Frank, “Indira: The Life of Indira Nehru Gandhi”, p. 316

¹⁸⁷ Frankel, “The Congress Split”, p.428

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Frank, p. 317

examined closely. Was the core character of the Congress defined by these cleavages? Was the split precipitated by the open contestation of ideology, or was it merely the petty grievances of factions competing for power and patronage?

It is clear that the factional nature of the split was overlooked in an effort to apply an ideological prism to the conflict. Certain factors could lead an observer to believe that the split was indeed due to a left-right schism. The populist economic strategies employed by Mrs. Gandhi during the contest were contributing factors to this perception. Another was the closeness that the Congress (R) had to the Communist Party of India and the renaissance of the Congress Forum for Socialist Action.¹⁹⁰ In international relations, overtures were made towards the Soviet Union, initiated by the Forum.¹⁹¹

However, as Hampton Davey (1972) argues, the perceived Left-Right polarisation ignored the fact that the new Congress (R) had firmly established control over centrist politics.¹⁹² Its progressive image belied a deep attachment to the wealthy peasantry and big business, the bedrock of the old networks that had guaranteed Congress support for so long. Despite the bond forged with the Communists, Congress (R) ultimately rejected the politics of class struggle.¹⁹³ This was evident the following year (1970) with the quashing of the “Land Grab Movement” that had seized parts of the countryside (a *cause célèbre* of the CPI), as well as Congress’ reluctance to implement the land ceilings legislation.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹⁰ Vanderbok, W.G.: “Critical Elections, Contained Volatility and the Indian Electorate” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, (Feb., 1990), p. 174

¹⁹¹ Corbridge & Harris, pp.72-3

¹⁹² Davey, p. 702

¹⁹³ Corbridge, & Harris, pp.72-3

¹⁹⁴ Davey, p. 712

Although the old Congress was depicted as hostile to socio-economic reform, and were conservative in character and temperament, this did not reflect an ideological conservatism. The political philosophies of the Syndicate members were in fact incredibly heterogeneous with moderate Socialists like Kamaraj and dyed-in-the-wool conservatives such as S.K. Patil. The Syndicate, it seemed, was drawn together by a mutual dislike for Indira Gandhi.¹⁹⁵ The ruling Congress was similarly diverse in its members' ideological persuasions. The plurality of views within both parties suggests that the eventual split was due more to personal power contestations within the broader organisation rather than coherently disputed ideological battles.¹⁹⁶ It is clear that the radicals in the party offered Indira a way to preserve her power against the threats of the Syndicate, and she played to these groups' expectations.

It is apparent that the failure of the mediatory mechanism to deal with the clash led to the irretrievability of the split. Unfortunately, these failures were only compounded by the exit of the Congress (O), which took with it many skilled members and years of institutional memory. The departure of nearly 40% of the undivided party's organisational strength removed an important oversight function for the Requisitioned Congress.¹⁹⁷ In later years, as the central leadership became more dogmatic, the party organisation had been so deliberately underdeveloped that it was unable to assert itself. All forms of opposition now lay outside of the party, whereas in the past an agonistic culture had been inherent to the system.¹⁹⁸ Given the heavy reliance of the Congress System on party organisation and its ability to mobilize support from below,

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p.704

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p.711

¹⁹⁷ Frankel, "The Congress Split", p.429

¹⁹⁸ Frank, p.319

this would prove a fatal error for the Congress (R). The benefit for Indira of purging her enemies was far outweighed by the long-term cost of destroying the party apparatus.

5.4. The Congress (R) in Power

The victorious wing emerged from this maelstrom as a hostile force, tainted by the divisive politics of the previous two years. Primarily, this period saw an increase in the personalisation tactics of Indira Gandhi and the de-institutionalisation of decision-making structures. Frank describes the effect this had on regional politics, the most important locale of Congress dominance:

Indira also needed to extend her control to the states beyond New Delhi. Over the next few years, she tactically 'eased out' state leaders who had failed to support her against the Syndicate, including, in time, the Chief Ministers of Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. She then replaced them with her own people by 'nominating' candidates for chief minister who were then ratified in office by the dominant Congress legislative party. She made sure the candidates were men personally loyal to her but who lacked their own power bases.¹⁹⁹

In this context, personal loyalty was valued more highly than organisational loyalty in what Bjorkman (1987) labels the "rise of plebiscitary politics."²⁰⁰

The hangover of the split was that the idiom of politics had changed, the previous emphasis on conciliation and consensus giving way to a language of confrontation and conceit.²⁰¹ Marxist polemics became the preferred method of dealing with opposition parties critical of the new governing strategy.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Frank, p. 319

²⁰⁰ Bjorkman, p. 61

²⁰¹ Frankel, "The Congress Split", pp. 389-90

²⁰² Ibid, p. 432

As a result, even the appearance of political consensus that had established the Congress as a party of national unity was shattered. Political rhetoric emphasizing slogans of class struggle replaced the pragmatic language of accommodation. Compromise, once lauded as the expression of India's national genius in political life, was denounced as nothing more than collusion with the vested interests. Political action increasingly tended toward confrontation.²⁰³

The increased access Congress (R) enjoyed to the press and its control over the All-India Radio service would strengthen its ability to project a newly assertive ideological platform to the broader populace.²⁰⁴ Following the split an atmosphere of sectarianism and a suspicion of consensus prevailed. Mrs. Gandhi herself set the exclusionary tone when she said: "Our doors will be shut to those who are working against our policies, our way of thinking and our ideology. We have to close our door to such forces."²⁰⁵ Such was the prevailing mood in the new dominant party, emblematic of an attitudinal shift in governance that would only worsen as the new decade dawned.

²⁰³ Ibid., pp. 389-390

²⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 433

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

6. SLOUCHING TOWARDS DELHI: THE 1970S & THE EMERGENCY

- 6.1. A Tumultuous Decade
- 6.2. The 1971 Elections
 - i. *Indira Wave?*
- 6.3. Pressures From Within & Without
 - i. *Pressures from Within*
 - ii. *Pressures from Without*
- 6.4. The Emergency

“India is Indira, Indira is India”

- *D.K. Barooah (Congress President)*²⁰⁶

6.1. A Tumultuous Decade

In Chapter 6 the slide towards authoritarianism that characterized the first half of the 1970s will be discussed. This period is notable for two events: the elections of 1971, which saw a surge in popular support for the new Congress (R) under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, as well as the declaration of the State of Emergency in 1975. This chapter will critically evaluate the social and political conditions of the period, and examine the justifications that Mrs. Gandhi made in defence of her actions. The abuses of authority that were so widespread during the Emergency will be looked at, and some light will be shed on the effects that the suspension of civil liberties, press censorship, and the suppression of opposition parties had on the political culture of the period.

²⁰⁶ Corbridge & Harris. p.67

6.2. The 1971 Elections

In the run-up to the elections, the Congress (R) government for the first time faced an alliance of opposition parties, all with different regional associations and bases of support. The so-called “Grand Alliance” was made up of the Congress (O), Jan Sangh, Swatantra, and the Samukta Socialist Party (SSP).²⁰⁷ The Congress (R) in return formed its own centre-left coalition. However, this was not to be, as many had hoped, the arrival of a genuine two-party system in Indian politics.²⁰⁸ The Grand Alliance was disparaged by leading Congressman Asoka Mehta, as “neither grand nor much of an alliance”²⁰⁹ as it lacked ideological unity and was unable to build sustainable national support. Rather, the alliance chose to appeal to their constituent parts and combine in a spirited attack on Indira Gandhi as opposed to provide meaningful policy alternatives. Indeed, the personality of Mrs. Gandhi was the most cogent factor during the election period, reflected in the campaign slogan of the opposition coalition: *Indira Hatao* (Remove Indira).

The general election of 1971 was important for two reasons. Firstly, this was a mid term election that was held one year in advance of the original date. Furthermore, the elections were ‘de-linked’, meaning that the voting for the national and state assemblies was no longer to be held together.²¹⁰ This was clearly an attempt to “capitalise upon the national appeal of Indira Gandhi over her rivals in the Congress

²⁰⁷ Davey, p. 701

²⁰⁸ Joshi, & Desai, p. 1100.

²⁰⁹ Mehta, A.: “A Decade of Indian Politics 1966-77” S. Chand & Company, 1979, p.50

²¹⁰ Brass, “The Politics of India Since Independence.”, p.95

organisation and in state politics generally.”²¹¹ Since 1971, the standard practice has been to hold parliamentary and state legislative assembly elections separately.

The second occurrence of 1971 worth noting was the outcome. The schism in the Congress in 1969 had appeared to signal the decline of the dominant hegemony the party wielded. However, driven by the populist charisma of Indira Gandhi, the new Congress (R) scored a significant majority, receiving 43.64% of the vote, enabling it to capture 68% of the seats in the Lok Sabha.²¹² For those who had predicted the demise of the Congress, this was a major surprise. Why did the Congress do so well in these elections, and what were the significant turning points for the electorate from four years earlier?

i. Indira 'Wave'?

The victory of Congress (R) in 1971 is often attributed to the “Indira Wave” phenomenon. The enormous popularity of the Prime Minister is seen as the sole source of Congress success - rather than the usual efforts of party structures throughout the country to deliver the traditional voting blocs.²¹³ Using the populist slogan of “*Garibi Hatao*” (Abolish Poverty) to counter the personalised attacks of her opponents, Indira was able to reach over the heads of the party bosses and power brokers in the states and appeal to a broader national issue, a “total strategy” of a war against poverty.²¹⁴ Standing in her way were the “forces of reaction”, the Old Congress and its allies, which threatened to disrupt the democratic socialism

²¹¹ *ibid.*

²¹² Davey, p. 701

²¹³ Blair, p.243.

²¹⁴ *ibid.*

represented by the new, more stridently ideological Congress (R).²¹⁵ In addition, the victory over Pakistan in the war for the liberation of Bangladesh fuelled the nationalist fervour of a resurgent India.²¹⁶ Combined with the attacks on the privy purses and the nationalization of the banks (discussed in Chapter 5) the victory contributed to the massive groundswell of support for Indira Gandhi's leadership. By promising to transform the economic make-up of the country, she single-handedly led the Congress (R) to victory.

The Indira Wave phenomenon is contentious. Several authors, among them, Vanderbok. (1990) insist that the "Indira Waves" were not solely the responsibility of Gandhi herself.²¹⁷ In order to properly understand this trend, one needs to look back to the elections of 1967. The surge in opposition support in 1967 was primarily due to the increased ability of these parties to entice new voters into the system, most of whom voted against the Congress (which led to the slump in Congress support as explained in Chapter 4). However, the ability of the opposition parties to retain these new voters was weak:

The near collapse and realignment of 1967 was no collapse at all. The Congress continued to get 24 percent of the electorate. Overall mobilization surged another 6 percent, however, and all of this increase went to the opposition parties. The supposed populist realignment of 1971, instead of being an Indira wave, saw the party mobilize 23 percent of the electorate, down 1 percent from four years earlier. Overall, however, mobilization dropped 6 percent, nearly all of it from the opposition ranks. The result was an apparent, but not real, Congress surge.²¹⁸

The large fluctuations in Congress and opposition support between the two elections fed the misperception that Mrs. Gandhi was the sole agent of her party's success.²¹⁹

²¹⁵ Vanderbok, p. 179

²¹⁶ Park, R.L.: "Political Crisis in India, 1975" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 11, (Nov., 1975), p. 1000

²¹⁷ Vanderbok, p. 173-194

²¹⁸ Vanderbok, pp. 176-7

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 177

Rather, the apparent surge for Congress in 1971 can be attributed to the ebb in support for a disorganised and clannish opposition that failed to get out the votes.

The ideological swing to the left, if it is to be cited as a valid explanation for the heightened Congress support, should be seen in light of the fact that opposition parties of both the right and left lost equally as badly to the Congress (R).²²⁰ This implies that Congress (R) did not win merely because it appealed to the left. Nor was it the case that centrist politics were dominant at the time; as illustrated by the relative successes of the parties of the extreme left (such as the CPI-M) and the extreme right (Jan Sangh).²²¹ Again, the explanation is that the hidebound opposition failed to persuade those disaffected with Congress rule to come out and vote - and to vote for them.

Given these facts, it is clear that the Congress victory was due less to the boldness of its leader than it was to the shortcomings of her opponents. A key failing in this regard was the Grand Alliance's continued vilification of Indira Gandhi herself, one of the few issues in the alliance on which there was agreement.²²² By doing so, the four parties focused their attention on her leadership and character and gave substance to the view that the Congress (R) was the only viable national party. The smearing and negative campaigning indirectly bolstered the image of the Congress. Under its charismatic leader Congress looked programmatically coherent and genuine in its claims to transform Indian society – juxtaposed with an opposition that could only conjure up slander and invective.²²³ One might assume that the multiregional and ideological heterogeneity of the Grand Alliance would have been able to project a

²²⁰ Heginbotham, S.J.: "The 1971 Revolution in Indian Voting Behavior" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 11, No. 12, The 1971 Indian Parliamentary Elections: A Symposium. (Dec., 1971) p. 1145

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Ibid., p. 1148

²²³ Ibid.

more holistic national image, one that cut across caste and linguistic loyalties, but this was not to be the case. Contra 1967, the parochial issues of individual states took on less importance. In addition, the unpredictable flurry of defections and failed provincial governments led many to doubt the regional parties' ability to hold office.²²⁴ The electorate's desire for strong national leadership swept the Congress to power with a renewed mandate.²²⁵ The decline in Congress dominance appeared to have been checked.

6.3. Pressures from Within and Without

i. Pressures from Within

Despite the triumph at the polls, the new ideological shift and the deep personalization of politics under Indira Gandhi had serious implications for the internal operation of the party organisation. As Joshi and Desai note, a marked change in the articulation of the goals of the system had taken place:

In the earlier Dominance model, consensus-making by accommodating various interests was itself a critical value; conflict avoidance and group-accommodation were preferred even at the cost of ideological coherence and effectiveness of performance. But in the new model economic performance was accorded high priority. Ideological thrust was more clear-cut and forceful with "Garibi Hatao" (Abolish Poverty) becoming a great mobilizing force... There was more stress on ideological coherence, more intolerance toward dissenters, and more determination to push ahead even at the risk of jeopardizing the party consensus.²²⁶

The assiduously crafted left-populist tone - so effective in energising voters and winning elections - was designed to break the dependence on the established agricultural elites (who occupied a position analogous to the *Kulaks* of Russia). In the

²²⁴ Joshi. & Desai. p. 1100

²²⁵ Heginbotham, p. 1152

²²⁶ Joshi. & Desai. p. 1101.

established system. landed farmers gave conditional support to the largely autonomous and powerful state bosses, returning the Congress (R) to power in 1971, but also obstructing reform of the inequitable rural economy. Centralizing power was the only way Indira Gandhi perceived that she could dismantle this relationship and initiate her "progressive" measures.²²⁷ In order to succeed in this, she attempted to divert the mobilisational capacity of the Congress (R) towards the radical student and youth groups that had assisted in her election campaign. These "now seemed appropriate as vehicles of patronage distribution to garner support for the otherwise unanchored new loyalists. Thus a countervailing structure of urban and rural support was attempted so that the strongholds of the older elite, in control of local power structures, could be infiltrated."²²⁸ However, by favouring these alternative networks (and increasing, for instance, the role of the PM's Secretariat²²⁹) she alienated state bosses through unilateral decision-making that "bypassed established modes of reconciling tension and conflict within the party system."²³⁰ Confrontation with these old associations was now favoured over consensus and intolerance and polarization grew.²³¹

In the new dominance model, the tradition of 'internal democracy' deteriorated rapidly. The marked attenuation of the competitive process was evident in Mrs. Gandhi's manipulation and suppression of local party bosses, as well as her intolerance for factions.²³² Fearing the emergence of potentially threatening bases of power, Gandhi went to great lengths to quash support for candidates who were not of

²²⁷ Graves, p. 875

²²⁸ Lele, p.186

²²⁹ Brass, "The Politics of India Since Independence," p.48

²³⁰ Graves, p. 875

²³¹ Joshi, & Desai, p. 1101

²³² Graves, p. 875

her own choosing. By appointing Chief Ministers and PCC presidents herself, these leaders became beholden to the Prime Minister, rather than their provincial legislatures or party units. The indirect result of this concentration of power was that,

the new Congress pyramid of command, instead of facilitating the emergence of a new, stable, and effective state leadership with a strong local base of support, was deliberately manipulating Congress factionalism to prevent a healthy consolidation of power in the states. The result was weak, ineffective, and inept leadership incapable of dealing with the mounting economic hardship of the population.²³³

Presently, Congress was run in a submissive and hierarchical fashion. A culture of sycophancy prevailed among its members who deferred to the directives of their superiors. Accordingly, Indira Gandhi gained short-term control over the operation of her party and its ideological trajectory. However, what she lost was far greater: the long-term sustainability of the party machine. This new political culture of capricious decision-making coupled with the weakening of institutions was, according to Kochanek, “unable to manage the tensions and cleavages of a heterogeneous party operating in a heterogeneous society, federally governed.” The top-down strategy of leadership was destined to fail because the central command was unable to manage the myriad challenges at the provincial and district level – the base was too broad for it to do so. Consequently, “a major crisis in the system followed.”²³⁴

Horizontal competition also suffered under the new dominance system. The ability of the party apparatus to challenge the executive arm of the government was maligned as anti-national and treasonous. No longer were dissenting voices considered a necessary feature of incumbency. Party building was neglected, and the organisational structures

²³³ Kochanek, S.A.: “Mrs. Gandhi’s Pyramid: The New Congress” (1976): in Hasan, Z.: *Parties and Party Politics in India*. Oxford University Press, (2002), p.96

²³⁴ Kochanek, “Mrs. Gandhi’s Pyramid: The New Congress”, p.89

that had for so long kept the government in check became subservient to the Prime Minister's office.²³⁵

ii. Pressures from Without

Outside of the party arena, several external forces were building against the Congress (R) that would contribute to the party's decline into authoritarian rule. The highfalutin promises of the 1971 elections aroused the expectations of the electorate vis-à-vis the ability of the Congress to deliver substantive change and alleviate poverty.²³⁶ In effect, Congress created much of its own trouble by disrupting the channels of communication with leaders in the states and stalling the distribution of resources and the implementation of policy reform as discussed above.

Following the elections of 1971, Indira Gandhi faced a legal challenge from her opponent in the Rae Bareilly parliamentary constituency in Uttar Pradesh. Indignant at his defeat, Mr. Raj Narain, a Socialist leader in the state, launched a case of corruption before the Allahabad court.²³⁷ After several years of testimonies and deliberations, the court finally pronounced on 12 June 1975 that Mrs. Gandhi had been found guilty on two counts of electoral malpractice, nullifying her victory. Both convictions concerned the inappropriate use of government civil servants in the national campaign, as well as in the Uttar Pradesh election.²³⁸ The judge of the case, Justice Sinha, although dismissing additional allegations of bribery, nevertheless declared Gandhi's election illegitimate under the Representation of the People Act of

²³⁵ Joshi. & Desai. p. 1101

²³⁶ Joshi. R.: "India 1974: Growing Political Crisis" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2. (Feb., 1975), p. 91

²³⁷ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975", p. 1002

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

1951 and ordered her immediate resignation from her seat in the Lok Sabha.²³⁹ She was therefore also required to vacate the office of the Prime Minister, plunging the country into political turmoil.

Despite her conviction, a recalcitrant Indira Gandhi refused to step down, preferring, on the advice of her legal council and cabinet ministers, to file an appeal in the Supreme Court.²⁴⁰ Meanwhile, a growing chorus of voices in civil society, the professions and the youth were calling for her abdication. However, with the Congress' fate so tightly bound to her own, and with no evident successor, Indira Gandhi chose to cling to power.²⁴¹ She received a modest concession from the Supreme Court when Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer granted her a 'conditional stay', which allowed her to continue as PM, but prevented her from voting in parliament or drawing a salary.²⁴²

To add to the party's woes, the day after Indira's conviction state elections in Gujarat produced a Congress (R) loss.²⁴³ The months preceding the elections witnessed a spontaneous uprising by students disillusioned with the ineptitude of the Congress government in the West Indian state.²⁴⁴ The student-led riots and civil unrest had eventually led to the dissolution of the state ministry and its legislative assembly. The chief minister Chimanbhai Patel was forced to resign, and President's Rule was

²³⁹ Palmer, Norman, D.: "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse" *Asian Survey*, Vol.16, No.2, A Survey of Asia in 1975: Part II. (Feb., 1976), p.96

²⁴⁰ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975" p. 1003

²⁴¹ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse" p.99

²⁴² For a personal account of the decision see an article by the judge himself:

Iyer, V.R.K.: Emergency – Darkest Hour in India's Judicial History" *Indian Express*, 27 June, 2000

²⁴³ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975", p. 1003

²⁴⁴ A detailed appraisal of the civil unrest of early 1974 is provided by

Wood, John: "Extra-Parliamentary Opposition in India: An Analysis of Populist Agitations in Gujarat and Bihar" *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 48, No. 3. (Autumn, 1975), pp. 313-334.

implemented.²⁴⁵ In order to prolong the President's Rule ordinance and side-step the need for fresh elections, Mrs. Gandhi avoided reconstituting the government by citing the continued bloodshed that had gripped the state for ten weeks - and the loss of 103 lives - as sufficient grounds for postponement. But she was forced to continue with the vote when Congress (R) MPs and their families were physically intimidated and Morarji Desai threatened a "fast unto death" if the election was not held.²⁴⁶ Despite vigorous campaigning by Indira on behalf of her party, Congress went down by 12 seats (receiving only 75 seats in an assembly of 182) to the opposition coalition, the People's Front (*Janata Morcha*).²⁴⁷ The Gujarat uprising was a "political watershed" according to Frankel as "[it] marked the collapse of shared consensus on legitimate methods of conflict resolution between the government and opposition groups."²⁴⁸

Although barely noticed amidst the furore over the PM's legal troubles, the electoral defeat in Gujarat reflected the growing dissatisfaction with the government at all levels of administration.²⁴⁹ Such was the proliferation of corrupt officials, black money, and the "growing insensitivity on the part of the operators of the system to the mounting hardships of the people and their scant regard for the rules of the democratic game."²⁵⁰ The new form of dominance was akin to an upside-down pyramid balancing on its tip. Unlike the old Congress pyramid with its broad base of ideologies and factions dispersed throughout the party structure, Congress' power now hinged solely on the legitimacy of its central leadership. When the tip was threatened the

²⁴⁵ Frankel, Francine: "Impasse" in *India's Political Economy 1947 - 2004: The Gradual Revolution* 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 524-7

²⁴⁶ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975", p. 1003

²⁴⁷ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse", p.98

²⁴⁸ Frankel, "Impasse", pp. 524-7

²⁴⁹ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975", p. 1003

²⁵⁰ Joshi, p. 91

pyramid became unstable and the dependent party organisation was incapable of correcting the imbalance. Collapse was imminent.

Congress was to face a relentless challenge in the form of the "JP Movement". The title invoked the name of Jayaprakash Narayan, who led the campaign. One of the most revered figures in Indian public life, "JP" was a Gandhian socialist (*sarvodaya*), an advocate of non-violent revolution and a veteran of the liberation struggle. The 72-year-old was seen as a man of unassailable moral integrity and his return to active political life to oppose the Congress government after many years in self-imposed isolation had a palpable effect on popular attitudes towards Indira's maladministration.²⁵¹ In his native state of Bihar, mass protests and an often violent student uprising had gripped the state (buoyed by the events in Gujarat earlier in the year). Although condemning the violence, Narayan made overtures to the student leadership and began building support in late 1974. His call to reform the educational and electoral systems and to overhaul the bureaucratic strangulation of an incompetent political order in one of India's poorest regions was well received.²⁵² He vowed a "struggle against the very system which has compelled almost everybody to go corrupt."²⁵³

JP's radical proposals for "total revolution" soon expanded into a generalised denunciation of the Congress (R) administration, calling for the dissolution of the state assembly and the resignation of the ministry.²⁵⁴ Disparaged by the Congress leadership, the increasingly national movement was able to make substantial gains by

²⁵¹ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse", p.97

²⁵² Wood, p. 321

²⁵³ *The Statesman*, April 10, 1974 cited in Frankel, "Impasse", p. 528

²⁵⁴ Joshi, R.: "India 1974: Growing Political Crisis" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2. (Feb., 1975), p. 89

drawing on disparate elements such as the Hindu conservatives the RSS, Jana Sangh and Anand Marg, as well as left radicals the CPI (M) and several Naxalite groups.²⁵⁵

Adding to the government's woes was the call for a general strike of 1.7 million railway workers by the All-India Railwaymen's Federation (AARF). The strike pressured for greater increases in wages, annual bonuses and subsidisation of essential commodities, beyond the capacity of an already strained fiscus.²⁵⁶ The strike was met by the central government as a direct political challenge and citing the Defence of India rules (DIR), it was declared illegal. Under the preventative detention clause of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA) the leader of the union, George Fernandes, was arrested along with hundreds of other union members. After 20 days the strike was crushed, with over 20 000 workers behind bars.²⁵⁷ Following this, the breakdown in conflict resolution and the contempt for due process was spectacularly displayed with the assassination of L.N. Mishra, the Railways Minister, in a bomb blast at a train platform in Samastipur, Bihar, in January 1975 (killing several bystanders). The assassination was the first of its kind against a national minister since the birth of the Republic.²⁵⁸

Mass action continued for many months under the leadership of JP Narayan, culminating in a march of over a hundred thousand people to Parliament House in Delhi on 6 March 1975 whereupon a "Charter of Demands" was delivered to the government.²⁵⁹ The organisational power of the movement and its ability to mobilize popular sentiment against the Congress was on display in Gujarat. Here key alliances

²⁵⁵ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse", p.96

²⁵⁶ Frankel, "Impasse", p. 529

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 530

²⁵⁸ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse", p. 99

²⁵⁹ Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse" p.97

were made with opposition groups and the insurgent student organisations to defeat the ruling party at the provincial polls in June.

The protests intensified throughout that month, peaking during the “double shock” of the court ruling and the Gujarat elections. The tipping point of the political crisis was at hand, and it was a mere two weeks after the June 12th High Court ruling that Indira Gandhi took decisive action. Speaking publicly at a protest rally, Narayan was overly vocal in his calls for Indira to resign, appealing to the police and the military to disobey the orders of an illegitimate Prime Minister. This was taken as an incitement of the armed forces to rebellion and a direct affront to the government. Unwittingly, JP’s civil disobedience campaign had lit the fuse of the Emergency.

6.4. The Emergency

On 26 July 1975, Indira Gandhi announced to the nation that a State of Emergency had been declared by President Fakhruddin 'Ali Ahmed, at her instigation. Under Article 352 of the Constitution the PM was entitled to suspend parliamentary government and declare emergency rule in the event of “a threat to the security of India by war, external aggression, or armed rebellion.”²⁶⁰ Indira cited the latter criterion to justify the imposition of the Emergency by defending the integrity of the nation against “disruptive forces”²⁶¹:

The President has proclaimed an emergency. This is nothing to panic about. I am sure you are conscious of the deep and widespread conspiracy which has been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India. In the name of democracy it

²⁶⁰ Tummala, K.K.: “The Indian Union and Emergency Powers” *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4, New Trends in Federalism, (Oct., 1996), p. 377

²⁶¹ Park, “Political Crisis in India, 1975” p. 1007

has been sought to negate the very functioning of democracy. . . . How can any government worth the name stand by and allow the country's stability to be imperilled?²⁶²

So began a period of bureaucratic authoritarian rule of an unprecedented nature. Immediate action was taken against opposition members, 200 of whom were arrested, along with dissidents within the Congress.²⁶³ Morarji Desai, JP Narayan, Asoka Mehta²⁶⁴, Raj Narain, Pilloo Mody, Jyotirmoy Basu, *et al* were jailed.²⁶⁵ In addition, the forthcoming elections of 1976 were postponed indefinitely, with several political groups being outlawed.²⁶⁶ The right of *habeas corpus* was removed and thousands of "insurgents" were arrested with little effort made to inform the public of the reasons for, or whereabouts of, their detention. Many other civil liberties were suspended, including the freedom of peaceful assembly and the right to life and property was treated loosely.²⁶⁷ The press were also prevented from issuing statements critical of the Prime Minister and her government, and foreign reporters were ordered to leave.²⁶⁸

Soon after the declaration, in July 1975 Indira Gandhi unveiled the Twenty-Point Programme. The programme set out a list of social changes that were to become the official justification and manifesto for the Congress during the Emergency to accelerate social change.²⁶⁹ The programme consisted of, *inter alia*, the abolition of

²⁶² Palmer, "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse", p.100

²⁶³ Klieman, A.S.: "Indira's India: Democracy and Crisis Government" p. 246

²⁶⁴ For a personal and most forthright testimony of this period, see:

Mehta, A.: "A Decade of Indian Politics 1966-77" S. Chand & Company, 1979

²⁶⁵ Palmer.: "India in 1975: Democracy in Eclipse". p.100

²⁶⁶ Graves, p. 864

²⁶⁷ Statement by the International Humanist and Ethical Union: "State of Emergency in India". 31 Dec. 1976.

²⁶⁸ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975". p. 996

²⁶⁹ Corbridge & Harris, p.86

bonded labour, the liquidation of rural indebtedness, income tax reform, as well as forceful prohibitions on illegal smuggling and land speculation.²⁷⁰

In a short time, the Emergency rulings succeeded in bringing about stability in the country. Civil servants, at risk of losing their jobs, were more punctual and efficient than ever before (amusingly, the increase in attendance led to a sudden lack of desk chairs at government bureaus).²⁷¹ Under the Emergency the proverbial trains ran on time. The universities were no longer hotbeds of unrest, industrial mass action ceased, and the administration of government improved. Illegal traders, smugglers and hoarders were punished and the black market was largely quashed.²⁷²

But the costs associated with these benefits were great. One of the most ambitious projects of the Emergency was that of family planning. The explosion of the Indian population had placed an enormous burden on the infrastructure and resources of the country. In April 1976, the National Population Policy was announced, which set a target of reducing the annual natality rate of 35 births per thousand people to 25 per thousand.²⁷³ To do this, the legal age of marriage was raised and money or goods (such as transistor radios) were offered as incentives for men to get sterilised. Indira Gandhi brushed aside accusations that the cost of the programme on people's individual liberty was too high. "We should not hesitate to take steps which might be described as drastic. Some personal rights have to be kept in abeyance", she said.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Park, "Political Crisis in India, 1975", p. 996

²⁷¹ Schlesinger, L.I.: "The Emergency in an Indian Village" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 17, No. 7, (Jul., 1977), p. 632

²⁷² Palmer, "India in 1976: The Politics of Depoliticization", p. 161

²⁷³ Palmer, "India in 1976: The Politics of Depoliticization", p. 173

²⁷⁴ Klieman, p. 255

The government eventually achieved its goals, performing over 7 million operations in 1976 alone.²⁷⁵

The administration of the programme was horribly crude, and civil servants, particularly those in the rural reaches of the country, often resorted to coercive measures to meet their quotas. There were widespread reports of round-ups of men who were forced to undergo the vasectomy²⁷⁶ (although these reports only appeared in the foreign, rather than the local media). The suppression of information did not do enough to stop the spread by word of mouth of the personal violations being exercised by the state. In turn, the capricious manner in which the project was executed led to many cases of violent resistance, which sometimes involved police shootings and fatalities.²⁷⁷

The sterilization campaign was a good example of the blatant disregard for civil liberties under the Emergency by trampling on the reproductive rights of the citizens for the good of the greater whole. The effect that 'family planning' had on the perception of the Congress government was manifestly negative. This was particularly so among Muslims and Untouchables as well as rural village dwellers who were most directly affected by the programme and its prejudiced administrators.²⁷⁸ Predictably,

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ "In October 1976, for instance, police in the northern city of Muzaffarnagar killed several dozen citizens protesting the sterilization program. Only after the end of emergency rule could the minister of health in the new government inform Parliament that 207 persons had died during or after vasectomy operations performed between July 1975 and March 1977."

Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Palmer

the wealthy and those well connected to the ruling party enjoyed a cloak of immunity from the humiliation of state intervention into the private realm.

Another disastrous initiative orchestrated under the Emergency was the “beautification” of the cities, mainly in the metropolitan areas of Delhi and Bombay.²⁷⁹ Beautification involved the planting of hundreds of thousands of trees – but also the mass removal of urban slums. The forced clearances of informal settlements were a tremendous upheaval to a number of the poor and disadvantaged that Mrs. Gandhi claimed as her key constituency.

The influence of Sanjay Gandhi, the Prime Minister’s son, was particularly insidious. His personal involvement in both the slum clearances as well as the sterilisations meant his notoriety grew rapidly. His closeness to his mother meant that he was the chief advisor and intermediary between the PM and her subordinates and he increasingly acted with contempt towards any constitutional limitations.²⁸⁰ His influence was so strong that he even managed to sideline the influential PM’s Secretariat making himself, an un-elected representative, responsible for major policy decisions.²⁸¹ Seen as an heir apparent in the Gandhi dynasty, one of Sanjay’s main successes was the building of the Congress Youth, of which he was the chairman. A mass-based movement, the Congress Youth would hold frequent rallies and draw crowds of hundreds of thousands, and were the chief celebrators of the Emergency. In

. “India in 1976: The Politics of Depoliticization”, p. 174

²⁷⁹ Known as Mumbai since 1995.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 165

²⁸¹ Brass. “The Politics of India Since Independence.”, p.48

many ways the youth movement supplanted the parent organisation in its mass support.²⁸²

The Emergency may be seen as the ultimate exercise in state power, but for the Congress, it was a desperate attempt to confront the decline in legitimacy that they faced in the country. Compounding these problems was the organisational ossification and the sectarian thinking that had jeopardised Congress' ability to substantively alter the lives of the poor. As Frankel observes:

Mrs. Gandhi's own credibility, and by extension, that of the democratic political process over which she presided, had become inextricably linked to promises for the implementation of radical economic reform through parliamentary means. Under the best of circumstances, these promises could not be easily reconciled. Under conditions of an organisational vacuum in the states and ideological polarisation at the Centre, both within the ruling party and between the government and the opposition, such pledges were impossible to redeem.²⁸³

Fortunately, the period of authoritarian rule was somewhat short-lived, only lasting 19 months. However, the effects of the Emergency were devastating, profoundly impacting on the collective consciousness of the citizenry. In the next chapter we examine how the Emergency came to an end and we will seek to understand the most critical of India's elections: those of 1977.

²⁸² Palmer, "India in 1976: The Politics of Depoliticization", p. 165

²⁸³ Frankel, "Crisis of Political Stability", p.490

7. END OF THE EMERGENCY & THE ELECTIONS OF 1977

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">7.1. The End of the Emergency7.2. The Janata Campaign & Victory7.3. Critically Evaluating the Congress Loss |
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“There are none so blind as those who will not see.”

- *Mahatma Gandhi*

1977 was an historic year in Indian politics and a dramatic *denouement* for the Congress party in office. This was the year in which the authoritarian experiment of the previous 19 months was put to an end and the long-awaited elections were held. For voters, a major decision was at hand: stick with the Congress party and validate the new oppressive measures for the sake of law, order and stability; or support the opposition in an anti-Congress alliance to re-assert the constitutional framework and the freedoms of expression, association, and equality before the law.

The result was staggering. In a moment of profound democratic expression voters rejected the Congress government and its high-handed rule for a new opportunity in the form of the Janata Party. The once mighty Congress, the party of liberation, of Nehru and Gandhi, the symbol of modern India for thirty years, was voted out of office. The precipitous decline of the dominant party had finally come to a head. But how had this come to pass?

What follows is an attempt to answer this simple question by looking first at the effects of the Emergency and how the feelings it aroused influenced the voting.

(Related to this is why the Congress, and Indira Gandhi in particular, chose to rescind the Emergency and host elections in the first place). The second task is to understand the make-up of the Janata Party, how they came to be the custodians of the anti-Congress sentiment that had been building for so long, and the forces that drove them to victory (section 6.2). Section 6.3 will look at the roots of the disdain shown towards Congress and how their loss came about.

7.1. The End of the Emergency

As 1976 was drawing to a close the Emergency was becoming routinised and the small achievements of the initial months - curbing criminality, eliminating inefficiency in the civil service and alleviating economic stagnation - were beginning to regress.²⁸⁴ Therefore elections had to be held early to maximise the gains of the Emergency.

Why would a party with such authoritarian leanings choose to expose itself to a potential loss of power by risking elections? Some possible explanations are apparent. Perhaps Mrs. Gandhi was trying to legitimise the Emergency through the ballot box; to justify the extreme measures that were needed to counter extreme threats. Another consideration is that the prominence of the Youth Congress had created intra-party contradictions that it was hoped would be overcome by giving prominent youth members an institutionalised role in the parent organisation.²⁸⁵ Likewise, there was the need to have Sanjay Gandhi elected as a member of parliament to enable him to

²⁸⁴ Narain, I.: "India 1977: From Promise to Disenchantment?" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (Feb., 1978), p. 106

²⁸⁵ Weiner, M.: "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India." *Asian Survey*, Vol.17, No.7, (Jul.,1977), p. 619

channel his support with the Youth Congress into official power.²⁸⁶ Harvests that year were healthy and there was a general decline in food prices, which may have led Gandhi and her officials to think that circumstances favoured calling an election.²⁸⁷ Added to this was the need to counter the mounting international criticism of the Emergency which was beginning to damage the perception of India abroad. Mostly however, there was a genuine belief by Indira Gandhi that the elections were in fact winnable; such was the level of sycophancy from the aides and ministers surrounding her.²⁸⁸ With dissent now seen as a direct challenge to leadership, those close to the prime minister were unwilling or unable to voice views that were at odds with her own, and the decision to hold elections went uncontested. None of those close to Mrs. Gandhi had constituencies that they could draw upon to channel feelings and grievances towards the prime minister, as she had hand-picked them all.

Although calls by the opposition for elections had continued for months, the decision to hold them was unexpected, and Indira gave little time – barely six weeks – to prepare for the contest.²⁸⁹ The strategy was to give a small allocation of time that would obstruct the opposition campaign. In preparation, opposition leaders were released from prison, and the draconian censorship laws on the press were lifted, allowing them to freely criticise.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Narain, p. 107

²⁸⁹ Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.", p. 620

²⁹⁰ Blair, p. 260

7.2. The Janata Campaign and Victory

Shortly after the elections were declared, four opposition parties announced that they would be running in an alliance known as the Janata Party. The alliance consisted of the Jan Sangh (the atavistic Hindu organisation), the Bharatiya Lok Dal (a regional party confined to the North) as well as the Socialists and the Congress (O). This was an unusual occurrence for Indian politics because the opposition had failed to successfully come together in the past. However, the threat of the Emergency becoming entrenched if the Congress were to win was enough to galvanise the disparate groups to act together. The short space of time before the elections also created a sense of urgency; that the opposition ought to act in concert or fail to remove Congress.²⁹¹

Apart from Narayan (who did not contest office) leading figures in the alliance included Morarji Desai, Indira's old rival, and leader of the Congress (O). An important defection occurred when Jagjivan Ram, a long-serving Indira ally and cabinet minister, resigned from his government post and left the Congress (R). He condemned the Emergency and publicly revealed that intra-party democracy had all but evaporated. Chief ministers, he said, were no longer chosen through the elected assemblies but through the PM's office, which was also now determining the appointment of party officials.²⁹² With the elections approaching, this was a significant loss for the Congress as Mr. Ram had a large following of people in Bihar,

²⁹¹ Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.", p. 615

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 620

his native state. Moreover, being a Harijan himself, he enjoyed much loyalty among Untouchable voters, of whom there were millions throughout the country.²⁹³

In the build-up to the elections the Janata campaign began to actively engage with the various disaffected groups who had suffered under the authoritarian climate. Janata had no unifying ideology save for the desire of all its members to see Congress removed from office and the Emergency revoked, and in this way it was an opportunistic alliance.²⁹⁴

On what basis did people vote? The election was billed as an issue-oriented election; a question of dictatorship versus democracy, or stability versus chaos. Narain (1978) on the other hand, argues that the election was not merely a contestation over abstract political values or issue-orientation.²⁹⁵ Rather, it showed the vituperative reaction that people had to the impositions on their personal freedom under the Emergency. The forced removals, the arrogance of the arbitrary power exercised by bureaucrats, and the violation of the sterilisation campaign were all keenly felt among the population. The direct effect on ordinary citizens showed the fragility of fundamental rights to shield against abuses of power, and the elections were a re-assertion of the value of these protections.

The Congress government was comprehensively rejected. Janata, allying with the Akali Dal,²⁹⁶ the Congress for Democracy (the breakaway group of Congress

²⁹³ Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India", p. 620

²⁹⁴ Joshi & Desai, p. 1103

²⁹⁵ Narain, I.: "India 1977: From Promise to Disenchantment?" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 18, No. 2, (Feb., 1978), p. 106

²⁹⁶ The Akali Dal is the principal political organisation of the Sikhs in the Punjab, where it has been instrumental in securing special protection for the Sikh religion and the Punjabi language.

dissidents under Jagjivan Ram) and the CPI (M) won a total of 328 out of 542 seats in the national assembly, exceeding the 153 seats gained by Congress by a large margin.²⁹⁷ In northern India in particular, the results were devastating. Congress won only 5 out of 290 seats in 8 of the main states in that region (compare this to the 192 they gained in 1971).²⁹⁸ Many observers of Indian politics hailed the result as a “virtually unprecedented restoration of a democratic system by popular vote and as a confirmation of the deep commitment of the Indian populace, rich and poor alike, to the values of democracy and parliamentarism.”²⁹⁹

Looking at the results, it is clear that the victory was not solely to do with the unified front offered by the alliance, but rather a tangible shift by voters away from the Congress. The margin of victory in certain areas was very high. Mrs. Gandhi lost her constituency by over 50 000 votes. George Fernandes, the trade unionist who campaigned from jail, won his constituency by 330 000 votes.³⁰⁰ Persecution of individuals like Fernandes could only have helped to bolster their credibility as fighters in a just struggle.

The success of the Congress (R) was so closely tied to the fortunes of its leader, and Indira’s rule so deeply personalised, that when her popularity began to wane, so too did her party’s. Despite embarking on an aggressive nationwide tour, Indira was incapable of campaigning everywhere. Sanjay took a different approach, limiting himself to his own constituency, but his charisma was not utilised outside of Uttar

See Brass, “The Politics of India Since Independence.”, p.92.

²⁹⁷ Weiner, “The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.”, p. 622

²⁹⁸ Blair, p. 260

²⁹⁹ Brass, P.: “Congress, the Lok Dal, and the Middle-Peasant Castes: An Analysis of the 1977 and 1980 Parliamentary Elections in Uttar Pradesh” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Spring, 1981), p. 6

³⁰⁰ Weiner, “The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.”, p. 623

Pradesh. Compared to the vast reach of the Janata leaders, the Congress (R) candidates could not match them in national campaigning.³⁰¹ With the local party structures practically defunct, Congress was reliant solely on the charismatic authority of their leader and her tested ability to draw votes. This time however, it was not enough.

Congress managed to salvage some support in the south, with large majorities in states such as Andhra Pradesh. This can be partially explained by JP Narayan's inability to penetrate the region and his focus on the northern belt. It may have been that the sterilisation units were less active in the south, and the sheer distance between Delhi and many of the southern states meant that the coercive measures of the Emergency were less keenly felt in these areas.³⁰² However, there were other reasons why Congress retained many of the southern states. Mendelsohn notes that many of the regional parties with which Janata was aligned in the south were experiencing declining popularity, such as the DMK in Tamil Nadu.³⁰³ The family planning disaster was not as pronounced in Orissa for instance.

Although Janata was successful in the urban areas it does not follow that they performed miserably in the countryside. Those who thought that the average peasant would not care for the abstract liberal principles that had been so steadily eroded since 1975 were mistaken. Many rural villages had first-hand experience of the arbitrary exercise of authority by malicious bureaucrats who had little care for accountability to

³⁰¹ Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.", p. 622

³⁰² Mendelsohn, p. 42

³⁰³ Ibid.

those they governed. These officials were also no longer beholden to the local elites who usually had jurisdiction over the civil service in these areas.³⁰⁴

Congress made some significant errors of judgement in the build-up to the election, one of the biggest being the arrest of JP Narayan. The perception of Narayan as a paragon of social justice and a steadfast democrat and Gandhian apostle fanned the flames of indignation at his arrest. This was particularly so in the northern countryside where he was most popular.³⁰⁵

Upon their victory, Janata immediately legislated for the dissolution of the Emergency and its restrictive measures by recalling parliament, lifting the censorship laws and releasing the last of the political prisoners.³⁰⁶ They also legislated for stricter controls to make imposing Emergencies more difficult in future. Janata's triumph was no less remarkable for the fact that it came from the ballot box, with no violence or sudden reversals by those in power. Morarji Desai was finally anointed Prime Minister fulfilling his life-long ambition. The restoration of constitutional democracy was at hand.

The Janata government would not last long. In power for barely two years, the alliance soon unravelled because of the petty rivalries of the three leaders who each strove to manipulate the others to their wishes. Despite its brevity, however, the Janata success had made one thing clear: the single party dominant system had come to an end.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 62

³⁰⁵ Weiner, "The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India.", p. 623

³⁰⁶ Brass, "Politics of India Since Independence", p.44

7.3. *Critically Evaluating the Congress Loss*

For scholars and journalists at the time, the loss in 1977 represented the end of the Congress System and the beginning of an ill defined two-party system.³⁰⁷ This assessment was correct insofar as it signalled the end of the single party dominant model with a core party of consensus operating in conjunction with peripheral parties of pressure. The ultimate threshold had been crossed: electoral defeat at the national level. However, this was not the beginning of a two party system; this would only come much later. The rapid unravelling of the Janata alliance meant that the factitious politics of the opposition would return, and so too would the Congress to office, albeit with new limits on its power. Following yet another split in the Congress (R) which in 1978 became the Congress (I) - for Indira - they were voted back into power. Indira Gandhi oversaw a corrupt and lacklustre administration until 1984 when she was assassinated at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards.³⁰⁸

After her death, Indira's other son, Rajiv Gandhi the apolitical commercial jet pilot was dragged into politics by a stale Congress party that could think of no better than to extend the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Rajiv went some way towards reviving the

³⁰⁷ Joshi & Desai, p. 1091

³⁰⁸ After the loss of the Punjab in 1977 to the Akali Dal, Congress (I) lent its support to a Sikh extremist organisation in an effort to outdo its rivals in the state. Under the charismatic young preacher Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale the organisation snowballed into a separatist movement advocating an independent Sikh state or 'Khalistan'. Typically Sikhism shirks fundamentalism, but Brindranwale's support grew as his tactics became more severe. These included assassinations of prominent Punjabi Congressmen as well as the murder of clean-shaven Sikhs and anti-Khalistan dissenters. After occupying the Golden Temple, the most cherished holy site of the religion, the separatists terrorised the city of Amritsar for months. As the situation escalated, Indira overplayed her hand by sending in the armed forces in what became known as "Operation Blue Star" - violating the complex and causing widespread damage. Brindranwale and his gunmen were killed, but so too were many innocent temple-goers. Underestimating the backlash against her, Indira kept her Sikh bodyguards as a show of faith. This would prove a fatal error of judgement as they would later turn on her with their own guns. Deepening the tragedy of Indira's death, widespread pogroms against Sikhs took place through the streets of Delhi, and thousands lost their lives in the sectarian violence. See Tharoor, Shashi; *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* Penguin (2000), p.36

agenda of the party but his highly technocratic administration would ultimately fall on its sword when the fraudulent arms procurement deal known as the “Bofors Scandal” revealed its susceptibility towards graft. Rajiv would lead the party until his own assassination in 1991 by Tamil extremists. So the Congress would govern for many years following the 1977 loss, only it would do so in a different environment and with repeated interruptions. Its opponents had changed and the expediency of electoral coalitions was now apparent. Moreover, the Congress no longer enjoyed a monopoly on the nation-building project.

The result in 1977 was no mere electoral defeat. It was first and foremost an emphatic rebuttal of authoritarian government. Secondly, it represented the failure of the old consensus and a departure of the Congress from its previous role as an agent of economic and political development, and host to a variety of cross cutting political persuasions and ideologies. By the 1970s, the emphasis on accommodation and developing a strong organisation to temper the power of the executive government was a thing of the past. As Mendelsohn points out, the organisational capacity of the Congress to serve all manner of interests in the polity had been severely undermined:

There is little doubt that by the mid-seventies Congress had become a tired and lazy organization. It had never been organized along cadre lines - it lacked a disciplined corps of full-time political workers spread throughout the country - but there were signs that its members and even leaders were less active in the pursuit of party goals than they once were.³⁰⁹

The most instructive lesson Mendelsohn reveals is that the rapid centralisation of power during the Emergency was fundamentally at odds with the liberal democratic

³⁰⁹ Mendelsohn, p. 52

framework upon which it was imposed.³¹⁰ The weakness of the organisational membership to stand up to its leaders at the top of the party hierarchy was worsened by the schisms in the party in the late Sixties and the ideological conformity imposed by Indira Gandhi's Socialist agenda. The Emergency fiasco also showed the fragility of democratic institutions, with key oversight issues such as the independence of the judiciary - and its ability to exert its authority over the executive branch - being actively compromised. In the face of enormous party and political pressure to toe the line of the national leadership, the legislative assemblies also failed to resist popular measures of reform. Just how these important protections became so enfeebled will be discussed in the concluding chapter, where we look at the institutional decay that took place in the Congress party over this ten year period and how each of these factors created a momentum that led inevitably to its relinquishing power.

³¹⁰ Ibid., p. 62

8. CONCLUSION: THE DYNAMICS OF DECLINE

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">8.1. Strains in the Political Economy8.2. The Collapse of the Congress System8.3. Concluding Remarks |
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“All political parties die at last of swallowing their own lies.”

- *Dr. John Arbuthnot*

The last ten years of Congress rule revealed an organisation in decay, with a leadership divorced from its constituency and increasingly incapable of solving the internal contradictions afflicting the party. Each of the previous chapters dealt with the different dynamics of dominant party rule and the specific stages in the Congress party's decline: the loss of the first state elections in 1967, the split in 1969, the tumult of the 1970s, the Emergency and its aftermath, as well as the rejection of Congress in 1977. As this timeframe shows, the decline of dominance in India was not brought about by a single event, but was part of a prolonged corrosion from within. Over time, the party became incapable of meeting new challenges from without. In this final chapter, the forces that combined to dislodge the Congress party from power will be examined with a view to understanding the long-term patterns responsible for its downfall. The decline will be explained in terms of the context of the Indian political economy and some general observations will be raised about dominant party rule in that country.

8.1. Strains in the Political Economy

By the late 1960s India's political economy was suffering from multiple crises and the state's ability to deliver essential goods and services was weakening. Improvements in developmental healthcare for children following independence through immunisation and nutritional programmes resulted in rapid population growth that quickly exceeded the critical mass.³¹¹ The population increase placed high demands on agricultural production, with many hundreds of millions of people in dire need of food and other essential commodities. Combined with the rapid growth of the population was the slowing of the economy in the early 1970s. Inflation of the cost of essential goods and food shortages (caused by endemic monsoon failures of 1971-2), interest rate hikes, and the global fallout from the oil crisis in 1973 all placed a major strain on the Indian economy.³¹²

As these economic pressures intensified, parallel developments occurred in the political realm. The promise to release people from the trappings of poverty got louder (*Garibi Hatao!*) as daily subsistence for most Indians became increasingly more difficult.³¹³ Part of the electoral strategy of the Congress party in 1971 was to capture the hostile sentiment that the population showed towards the established economic order.³¹⁴ However, when the economic crises worsened the gap between the pledges of the party and the delivery capacity of the state grew into an unbridgeable chasm. It was a classic example of a crisis of raised expectations from which the Congress could not recover.

³¹¹ Wallace, "India: The Dispersion of Political Power", p. 88

³¹² Frankel, "Crisis of Political Stability", p.341

³¹³ Joshi & Desai, p. 1101.

³¹⁴ Blair, p.243.

8.2. The Collapse of the 'Congress System'

The image of the Congress as the author of Independence and the custodian of the national project lost cogency as the Indian political economy destabilised. However, the loss of legitimacy and the weakened allegiance of the electorate to the values of the party were due as much to the absence of important functions within the dominant party. The vitality of the organisation was gone, but how had this come to be?

Congress' self-projection as the great centralist collective of the Nehru and Shastri years was replaced by Indira's new dogma of socialist class struggle. The system as it had operated in the past succeeded by relying on the close relationship between landed elites in the countryside and local party barons (combined with urban middle class and commercial industrial support in the cities). The system was essentially a patronage-distribution empire that enabled party elites to secure financial gain in exchange for the delivery of votes during elections. This was disguised under the rubric of social egalitarianism and left-leaning economic values, of non-alignment in the global conflict of ideologies, and secularism. Working against these grand ideals was a conservative *status quo* system that entrenched an inequitable pattern of resource distribution for over a generation.

The entry of Indira Gandhi saw a sustained attack on this system as she sought to play a direct activist role in addressing poverty and underdevelopment. By appealing to the electorate with her rousing rhetoric of social transformation and eliminating poverty, Indira ensured an electoral mandate by using her charismatic authority to generate support. Simultaneously, she sought to sideline the party barons and undermine the

system of patronage that entrenched the distribution of rewards. However, these interventions required strong centralisation, vesting all decision-making capacity in the office of the Prime Minister. The exit of the Congress (O) had left a weak party organisation that no longer provided the corrective function that it once did. What resulted was the supremacy of executive power over party autonomy. As many Congressmen stood to lose access to the benefits of state power Indira had to act unilaterally and with impunity to ensure her reforms were successful. The voice of the party was subjugated, and the country was ruled by executive decree.

However, the neglect of party building would turn out to be a crucial failure. By alienating the party bosses at the state and district level, Mrs. Gandhi successfully removed and isolated the networks that stood in the way of fundamental change (as well as potential rivals within the party organisation). However, what she attacked was necessary for the perpetuation of Congress rule. Loyalists replaced local power brokers (such as Chief Ministers and PCC presidents) but their dedication to radical transformation was less than their commitment to serving their political master in New Delhi. The cost of Indira's crusade was that the system atrophied, losing its ability to respond to emerging trends and interest groups at the level of the grass roots. This undermined the traditional relationship between the party and the constituency that it claimed to serve.

When Indira's bold promises remained unfulfilled, the piqued expectations of the electorate led to dissatisfaction with Congress rule. Where similar dissatisfaction had been tempered in the past by winning over key interest groups, now the systemic problems remained unchanged. The party was incapable of challenging the PM as she

had undermined their power by quashing dissent and placing cronies rather than local 'big men' (*bare admi*) in important positions. No longer were ambitious members able to climb the figurative ladder, as power emanated from the top of a fixed and unalterable hierarchy.

The shortsightedness of this new strategy lay in its over-reliance on a charismatic leadership to generate support. The success of the personalisation of politics hinged on the popularity of Indira Gandhi and her ability to appeal directly to voters to guarantee support come election time. However, by neglecting the organisational structures of the party the national leader became the repository for all the aspirations of the population. As a result, when the government failed to live up to its promises Indira's popularity ebbed. Charisma can be a potent device, but it cannot be institutionalised, and when the leader falls out of favour this is difficult to rectify.

The supremacy of Indira Gandhi also contributed towards a culture of sycophancy and fear among party members. This led to a breakdown of the communication channels that ensured new information percolated to the top and which kept the leadership informed of the popularity of policies or of their own shortcomings. Seen in this light, the obvious hostility to the family planning programme was not reaching Mrs. Gandhi and her coterie. The decision to hold elections in 1977 was surely supported by officials who were unwilling or unable to convey the level of dissatisfaction that many felt with Indira Gandhi's leadership.

That is not to say that Indira Gandhi was the only agent of Congress' decline. Would another leader have been able to prevent the disintegrative tendencies? It is conjecture

to speculate about this. However, one can interrogate the role of other actors. Hanson and Douglas place much responsibility on the role of the Syndicate, which created a hostile environment for Indira, who in turn reacted strongly:

Although [the Syndicate] played a useful role in securing the unopposed election of Shastri as Prime Minister, the virtually unconcealed factionalism it introduced into the central councils of the party had wrought havoc by the time of the 1967 elections... Thus even before the elections of 1967, the stage was set for the subsequent party split. That the split actually occurred when it did, however, must be attributed to various 'accidents', of which Mrs Gandhi's personality and ambitions were among the more important.³¹⁵

The above passage blames the Syndicate for introducing an "unconcealed factionalism" into the operation of the Congress machine. However, Hanson and Douglas are assuming that factionalism was absent prior to the coming together of the Syndicate, and that all forms of factionalism were detrimental to the health of the party. More accurately, the split was caused not by the introduction of factional conflict, but by its mismanagement. Factions were always present in the Congress System, but how these competing entities were accommodated was key. Kothari characterised the "elaborate network of factions" as adding to the strength of the party by providing an "inbuilt corrective" which "makes [the party] more representative, provides flexibility and sustains internal competition."³¹⁶ By internalising interparty competition at the intraparty level Congress was able to maintain its dominance and include interests that would otherwise have found expression in the opposition. (Remember too that opposition parties needed these factions as an entry point into the dominant party through the *margin of pressure*³¹⁷).

³¹⁵ Hanson & Douglas, p. 76

³¹⁶ Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India", pp. 1163-64

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 1162

Factions, however, were volatile forces and when the zero-sum conflicts of the late-Sixties culminated in a split Congress could no longer serve the function of internal competition that it once did. It ceased also to be representative and flexible and drove its former dependents into the arms of the opposition. Whether the Syndicate or the Indira faction caused this irretrievable breakdown is moot, but it was the conflict resolution mechanism that was broken.

The failures of Congress in office gave new elites an opportunity to emerge as agitators for the marginalized interests in the society. Jacob neatly describes this tendency: "Once Congress hegemony was undermined, it unravelled quickly – its voters shifted to newly viable niche parties and patronage-seeking voters had a greater menu of party options."³¹⁸ The growth of regional and communal political movements from the 1960s reflected an increased willingness by the opposition to ferment identity politics and to resist the inclusive national agenda that Congress represented. Ethnic and religious chauvinisms, organised within the boundaries of the parliamentary system, would grow exponentially from this point.

As was emphasised in Chapter 2, the role of the opposition in the dominant party system is crucial for how the dominant party exercises control. According to Nyable, the situation of left and right opposition parties as alternatives to the centrism of the dominant party confines their support to voters on the far ends of the political spectrum.³¹⁹ This results in a split vote that divides the opposition and keeps the dominant party in power.³²⁰ "Implicitly," Nyable reminds us "the end of dominance

³¹⁸ Jacob, p.2

³¹⁹ Nyable, p.4

³²⁰ Ibid.

could occur when the left and right succeed in allying against the centre."³²¹ Congress decline exhibited precisely this tendency. The polarisation that emerged after the Congress split made the unity of the opposition a more reasonable possibility. The lurch to the left by Congress was responsible for the Janata coalition coming together as an alliance that controlled the centre. The *latency factor* described by Kothari sees the opposition parties providing a continuous threat to the party of consensus that if it loses its consensual character it may suffer a loss of power.³²² This was indeed the case with the Congress, which sacrificed dialogue and cooperation with other groups in favour of a vociferous ideological course. However, this activated the latent potential of the opposition by enabling them to appeal to the groups that Congress had spurned. By trying to mobilise the poor base (only one part of the electorate) Congress lost the support of the middle classes, the professions, religious minorities and the backward castes, all of whom flocked to the opposition. The failures were now two-fold. The failure of delivery to defeat poverty was coupled with the failure of patronage to guarantee loyalty.

This section is titled 'The Collapse of the Congress System' which reflects an important aspect of the Indian experience during that time. The fact that the party of government lost power is, on its own, an unremarkable event. However, this was no ordinary loss. The decline of Congress was accompanied by a fundamental change in the party system that Congress had so closely sought to control over the years. No longer would the Congress be the central actor, but from here on would form part of an ensemble of competing interests. The steady rise of Hindu nationalism would come to be a considerable force in Indian politics, and the Bharatiya Janata Party's

³²¹ Ibid. p.4

³²² Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India", p.1162

challenge as an opposition party of some viability would lead it in 1998 to be the first single non-Congress party to hold office without the assistance of an alliance.³²³ The multi-party arrangement that would replace Congress dominance would have its problems. A fragmentary system, it put a premium on capturing power, and used provisional and inadequate alliances to do so.³²⁴ To form an administration required the support of other parties in slim majorities. When these parties became disgruntled with the administration of power they would withdraw their support, resulting in hung parliaments and impotent governments. The new system was still greatly influenced by the Congress party, but overall the loss in 1977 represented the end of the normative framework of dominance and no longer required Congress to perform its historical role.

8.3. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this work many explanations have been given for the Congress' descent from power. One of the primary causes of this fall was the personalisation of governance under Indira Gandhi, which led to the breakdown of the consensual strategies that had existed in the past. The relationship between the centre and the locality was vital for sustaining the dominant party's organisational strength, as it kept the system flexible to local demands. However, by centralising executive power under the person of Mrs. Gandhi the essential relationships between landed elites and party bosses in the states were discarded. Consequently, the base of support upon which the Congress pyramid rested was removed.

³²³ For an explanation of the evolution of the BJP from its early genesis as the Jana Sangh see: Jaffrelot, C.: "A Specific Party-building Strategy: The Jana Sangh and the RSS Network" in Hasan, Z. (ed): *Parties and Party Politics in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (2002), pp. 216 - 221

³²⁴ Corbridge & Harris, p.96

This led to the atrophy of party structures at all levels and the deterioration of the horizontal regulatory function between party and state. The earlier defeat of the Congress (O) faction was symptomatic of the failure of consensus, and its departure rendered the party organisation impotent in its efforts to hold the ministerial wing to account. The frustration of the competitive hierarchy, as well as the subsequent polarisation of the ideological trajectory is reflective of this trend, and the irruption of the Emergency illustrates the dangerous potential of run-away, unchecked executive power. Ultimately, the inability of the Congress to relieve its internal tensions and its failure to meet the needs of a plural society through federal decision-making severely undermined its legitimacy. Combined, these factors caused the party to lose its standing as a home for all; as a nationalist movement built on pragmatism and compromise. Seen in this light, the Congress was clearly the architect of its own demise.

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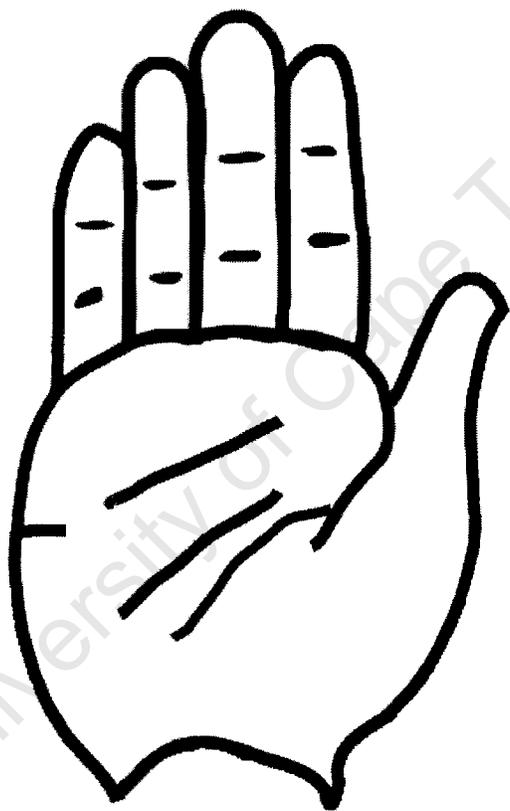
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