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Shake things up a little bit

US-type primaries to choose a potential prime ministerial candidate for the Congress in the coming polls is a good idea

I had just turned my column for this month when I saw the headline Rahul eyes US-style primaries to pick 'right' Congress candidates (Hindustan Times, January 13). I had been scooped. It turns out however that Rahul Gandhi was interested in primaries to select candidates for seats in Parliament, while I was more interested in whom the Congress would pick for the big job. In Rahul Gandhi the Congress has a leader, who, very unusually for India, at least for the time being, genuinely does not want to be in power. While I respect that, I worry that many of his partymen, whose political commitments tend to be linked to the spoils of power, may not. If they get too pessimistic about the party's chances under Rahul Gandhi's leadership, I fear they will not wait long to abandon ship.



It is rare that a party has an unchallenged leader who does not want to be nominated, which offers the great advantage that he can impose the primary on the party without worrying about what it means for his own prospects

To make matters worse, it does not seem likely that he will be projected as the party's prime ministerial candidate for the coming season. But he will lead the party because he clearly has the greatest visibility

among Congress leaders and gets the strongest numbers in opinion polls. However, opening up the prime minister's job at this point risks unleashing a civil war within the party that it can ill-afford — the current equilibrium in the Congress derives its stability from the fact that the top job is not up for grabs, which diffuses a lot of the tension among the grandees.

I was holding forth on all of this to a non-Indian friend who has lived and worked in India for many years, when she said, "why not have a primary?" I thought that this was definitely worth writing about (I didn't know then that Rahul Gandhi is already thinking along these lines). In the United States, parties hold elections to select their candidates to run against the other party's candidate, both for the presidency and for senate seats (and actually for many other jobs). The Congress could do the same.

To organise a primary all Sonia Gandhi would have to do is to announce that on a particular day in early March (tying it to Holi, with its theme of cleansing and renewal, would be nice, but maybe March 17 is a tad too late) the Congress will hold an election to select its prime ministerial candidate. Every district will have at least one polling station and some effort will be made to ensure that no one has to travel more than 50 km to vote. Anyone who has a voter ID — not just Congress members, unlike in the primaries Rahul Gandhi is proposing — will be able to vote.

Potential candidates will be allowed to self nominate, but a committee chaired by Sonia Gandhi with Rahul Gandhi, Manmohan Singh and other party leaders who have no interest in being the prime minister, will get to vet them and make sure that a relatively small number (10 or 15?) of serious and more or less electable candidates remain on the ballot (may be the list should include people from the UPA as a whole and not just the Congress, to expand the list of electable people). To allow candidates to get their names out, the party will fund a full page ad in several of the leading newspapers in each district with statements by each of the candidates as well as a short TV spot by each of them on one or more of the leading channels. District Congress committees will be encouraged to organise visits and debates between the candidates, which could be televised. There will be strict code of conduct — any evidence of seriously bad-mouthing other candidates (as against reasonable criticism) would lead to cancellation of the nomination.

What would all of this achieve? First, and perhaps most importantly, it will change the image of the party — it will go from the stodgiest to the coolest — the one party that really cares about what people think. Second, it will get the man in the street invested in the future of the party. A part of the Congress' image problem is that it feels remote — its inner life seems to play out behind closed doors somewhere in the cool shades of Lutyens' Delhi: the public just gets to hear the results. A sense of openness and an invitation to help in the decisions will create identification. This is why it is so important that non-supporters be able to vote (in the United States, where they are common, these are called open primaries). Third, it will energise the local party organisation, which seems rather dispirited, at this point. The task of organising the primaries and explaining to the public the idea behind the primaries and why they should participate in them, is a wonderful way to get party members excited about the political process and their role in it. Fourth, it is a great way to start the campaign. Every announcement of the primary will serve as advertising for the party and its new way of thinking. Fifth, it very substantially reduces the risk of civil war, since every relevant person will presumably have a chance to compete and win the nomination.

Finally, but here I am less optimistic just because time is short and the current top leaders start from huge advantage in terms of name recognition, it might throw out an unexpected and genuinely attractive winner. But even if it does not, the process of competing and winning, which the media will lap up, will give the winner legitimacy and a name recognition that he would not have otherwise.



It is rare that a party has an unchallenged leader who does not want to be nominated, which offers the great advantage that he can impose the primary on the party without worrying about what it means for his own prospects. The Congress can turn its problem into an opportunity.

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