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Dominance with a Difference : Strains and Challenges

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After an interval between 1967 and 1971, there has been a re-emergence of one party dominance, though this does not quite amount to the restoration of the old familiar model. This new version of one party dominance faces several strains and challenges arising mainly from failures in competitive mechanics, in economic performance and in party-building. Given these problems, and in view of the changed national context and goals, how long will this system remain functional for Indian politics?

FORMULATION of conceptual frames for comprehension and analysis of various political phenomena is the function of political theory. The Indian party system has posed a challenge for such a task of conceptualisation. There was a lag of more than fifteen years between the emergence of one party dominance and that of the conceptual understanding of it. No sooner did the theory of the one party dominance system give some sure and confident touch to the study of party politics, than the system itself was thrown into the throes of disintegration. The interlude of 1967-1971 created new strains and challenges to the task of conceptual innovation. The emergent situation was too fluid, uncertain, and 'new' to permit comfort and confidence to political analysts.

In this situation, the restoration of the one party dominance system after the elections of 1971 was a welcome relief. It meant the return of the party system that was familiar and well understood; hence it restored the feeling of confidence and sure grip on understanding and analysing party politics.

This very feeling of familiarity and confidence has, however, proved dysfunctional to greater efforts at conceptualising the second phase of the one party dominance system. No doubt the new system has a large measure of continuity with the old; but there are also significant differences, that may modify considerably many early formulations about the system. Further, the context and goals of the system are also somewhat different. Thus significant differences in context, goals, institutional rubrics and attitudinal orientations render further efforts at conceptualising the new situation imperative.

The present paper aims at formulating some observations and relating them in a coherent frame, that may provide a starting point as well as a stimulant for further and wider academic discussion on the subject.

I

It was in the early sixties, that the theory of the one party dominance

system was evolved. Rajni Kothari and W H Morris-Jones made seminal contributions in this direction.¹ The new conceptual frame attempted to overcome the inadequacy of the conventional typology of parties based solely on their number. The Indian case fitted neither into the category of a one party system nor into that of a multi-party system. Hence the new theory took into account the number of parties as well as their relative strength.

The one party dominance system admirably accounts for the monopolistic dominance of one party as well as the openness of the polity due to intra-party factional competition and 'latent potency' of the opposition groups. The ethos of the national liberation struggle, the role of the Congress Party therein, its resultant identification with the nation and unchallengeable legitimacy, its open-umbrella character, its power-patronage after independence, its expanding social base due to social co-option and factional competition — all these factors were responsible for the growth of the Congress into a dominant party, reflecting a national consensus. At the same time, factional competition within the dominant party kept the polity open. Only, the political competition had become an intra-party process instead of inter-party process. Further, links between the Congress factions and like-minded opposition groups gave a sense of efficacy as well as political potency to opposition groups.

The main features of the one party dominance system may be summed up as under:

- i) A party of consensus, that attempts to accommodate all shades of political opinion and interests and thereby maintains political dominance.
- ii) Intra-party factional competition, that keeps the party "open and democratic", widens the base of the party by bringing in more and more groups for maintaining factional edge, and yet is contained within the party frame.
- iii) Parties of pressure, that are marginal yet enjoy influence due to the nebulous and loose structure of the dominant party, its ideological ambiguity permitting a pull here or a

push there, and links of opposition groups with like-minded Congress factions.

In essence, the dynamism of the one party dominance system rests upon controlled factional competition within the dominant party. Such a system requires certain preconditions for its success:²

- i) Top leadership should be factionless and independent of other factions in the party so as to provide a unified focus of control, discipline and arbitration. If the top leaders get factionalised, the system comes under great strain.
- ii) Legislative majorities should be massive to facilitate the disciplining of dissident groups as well as to discourage their ambition and audacity.
- iii) Tolerance of factions and factional competition should be high so that factions are not forced to quit the party. As in any balancing game, annihilation of actors should be avoided, even though their defeat is permissible.
- iv) Ideological ambiguity is necessary to maintain "the consensus character" of the dominant party. The ideological frame should be loose and vague enough to accommodate various groups of national life.

These pre-conditions are critical for the survival of the system. It was the erosion of these pre-conditions, (particularly the first and third),³ that led to the decline of Congress dominance during 1963-1967.

II

The catalytic events of 1969, the emergence of the towering leadership of Indira Gandhi, and her landslide victories in the parliamentary and assembly elections (1971 and 1972) led to the restoration of the one party dominance system after an interlude of four years (1967-1971).

The second phase of one party dominance naturally has much in common with the first phase. Particularly, the emergence of Indira Gandhi's leadership and its unchallengeable sway has provided the party the much-needed top leadership which is factionless as well as independent and autonomous of other factions. Moreover, the party has attracted variegated and wide-ranging

groups and interests into its fold; therefore it has maintained its "open-umbrella" character. The Congress has also regained its massive legislative majorities, that are necessary for both dominance and discipline. Thus many features of the first phase find continuity in the second phase. Despite such a large measure of continuity, however, there are some notable differences in the second phase of the one party dominance system.⁴ It is possible that these differences can be characterised as those of nuance and emphasis; however, it is submitted here that they constitute significant modifications of the first phase of one party dominance.

First, the context or the operational environment of the one party dominance system has changed. The 1967 election indicated a break from the pattern of group-votes and vote-banks, that have been the features of personalised factions and their autonomy from larger political concerns. Voters have become more critical and individualised. Vote-banks and boss-structure have nearly collapsed and direct appeal to voters has been effectively made. Moreover, aspirations of the voters have been heightened and their expectations are rising rapidly.⁵ Add to this the fact that the base of legitimacy and loyalty has changed from past history to future performance. During the first phase, the Congress could maintain its legitimacy and loyalty on the strength of its historical role in the liberation movement. The criterion of performance was not so critical. This situation has changed and during the second phase Congress will largely depend on its performance. Thus, the increased criticality and individualisation of voters, the rising level of their expectations, and the changed base of Congress legitimacy have brought about significant changes in the one party dominance system.⁶

Secondly, the goals of the party system in the two phases are different. Party models can be evaluated in view of their functionality for the goals set for the particular model. It may be noted that earlier theoretical formulations about the one party dominance system did not emphasise this organic link between the party system and its goals adequately or explicitly. However, it can be stated that during the first phase the goals of the Congress system were stability, and consensus-building.⁷ The party system was oriented to conflict-avoidance and group-accommodation even at the cost of ideological coherence and effectiveness.

Fourthly, legitimacy and tolerance of factional competition have been reduced greatly. The Congress system has been characterised as a system of "controlled intra-party competition". Will there be more control and less competition in the new situation? Indira Gandhi has so far been less indulgent towards factional competition. Her tirade against Syndicate politics and boss-structure have delegitimised the bases of factional structure as obtained during the first phase of the system. Hence the factions may have to be less personalised and more issue-oriented. Further, the autonomy of the factional power game has been reduced due to increasing penetration of national politics into state and local politics. Similarly, the growing individualisation of voters and rejection of vote-banks and boss-structure have undermined the autonomy and insulation of factional politics. Thus the autonomy of the factional politics.

But in the second phase of performance. In the second phase of performance, the goal of performance has become more salient and critical. This is not to suggest that these sets of goals were peculiar to the respective phases only, they are present in both phases. However, the degree of salience-difference of these goals in the respective phases constitutes a qualitative change. This difference in goals of the party system may make some of the features of the first phase dysfunctional to the second phase and vice versa.

Thirdly, the consensus nature of the dominant party is under strains. Increasing emphasis on cohesiveness and ideological clarity may undermine the requirements of consensus. The choice before the dominant party is either to develop as a clearcut and cohesive party wedded to a definite programme or to continue as a consensus party with all its deadweight and compromises. The party may try to evolve a *via media*, but the strains of these two alternatives will have to be faced increasingly. Moreover, due to "growing radicalisation and populist ethos", the party may not remain a congenial home for many right of the centre groups for long. Thus the party has to evolve a cohesive structure and articulate programme, if it wants to ensure effective performance. But in this it faces the risk of narrowing its support base.⁸ On the other hand, if the party tries to maintain its consensus or open umbrella character, it may have to compromise on performance. Thus the nature of the dominant party in the second phase of the Congress system is likely to be somewhat different from that in the first phase.

Fifthly, the style of the top leadership appears to be significantly different in the second phase of the Congress system. The leadership of Indira Gandhi is quite different from that of Nehru or Shastri. Nehru had his charisma and power-base independent of party; yet he tolerated and worked through the various boss-structures in the party. He was tolerant of the factional nature of the party and was more eager to arrive at a consensus on any issue. In contrast, the leadership style of Indira Gandhi is informed by her intolerance of boss-structures and factional fights, her tendency to push an issue even at the risk of division, greater reliance on the pulpit ethos and techniques than on the instrumentality of the party, and increased ideological articulation and performance. To Indira Gandhi, consensus and conflict-avoidance is far less salient. She would not hesitate to bring about a divisive confrontation, if needed for goal-achievement. Indira Gandhi is far less dependent on the party than her predecessors. All these differences in the leadership style have added a new dimension to the working of the Congress system.

The above discussion attempts to pin-

point some significant differences in the two phases of the Congress system. Observations regarding these differences are, at the present stage, no more than hypotheses, submitted for further discussion and debate.

III

Thus the second phase of the Congress system presented a model of dominance with some differences. Such differences may lead to substantial modifications in the operational dynamics of the system. The new phase may pose problems that were not familiar or salient during the first phase of the Congress system. It is worthwhile to project the problems and strains that the system may face in future, in view of the significant differences in the two phases of the system.

Viewed thus, the major problems of the system can be put down as under:

- i) failure of competitive mechanics and its institutional rubrics
- ii) economic performance
- iii) party-building.

First, the new phase has witnessed the collapse of the competitive mechanism. During the first phase, factional competition within the Congress, small but vigorous opposition parties, and continuous linkages between the two provided a delicate balance mechanism that kept the system open and sensitive to outside pressures. Due to this resilience and sensitivity to outside pressures, the system was compared to a thermostat model, reacting to every change. In the second phase, the factional competition has lost legitimacy and efficacy, the opposition parties have collapsed, and the linkage between the Congress factions and opposition groups (except in the case of the Communist Party of India) has become a taboo. Thus the second phase misses the institutional prerequisites of the one party dominance system. This may threaten openness of the system and affect the resilience and the sensitivity of the thermostat model.

This hypothesis regarding dominance with attenuated competition may be debated. It is possible that on one side the lack of intra-party competition in the second phase may be overdone; and on the other side the degree of competitiveness during the first phase may be exaggerated. The precise degree of competitive openness in the system is subject to detailed study and research. However, it can be ascertained that the intra-party competitiveness in the system is much less now than before. It is also apparent that the degree of factional efficacy and factional tolerance is

very low.

In view of this situation, various scenarios of future development are possible: (i) The new system may develop a model of dominance without internal competition. Such a model of dominance without an intra-party competitive mechanism may develop new rules of the game and it may need fresh efforts to work out the operational dynamics of the new phase. Such a model will be more cohesive but less open. (ii) After some time, factional politics and opposition parties may revive and fill up the present institutional vacuum. If this happens, it will be the return of a very familiar model, requiring little effort at fresh conceptualisation. But even in such a case, the nature and bases of new factional politics are likely to be significantly different. (iii) If factional politics and opposition parties do not regain their previous potency, new forces like press, pressure groups or populist protest movements may become more vigorous and fill the vacuum.¹¹ Thus the competitive mechanism may break out of the structured arena of party politics into that of nebulous pressure groups or even anomie.

It would be worthwhile to discuss the possibilities of these alternative scenarios and work out their implications for the system. It is also possible that the resultant institutional frame may be a mix of all these three alternatives in various degree, but the real problem is to understand and predict its likely composition-mix and to evaluate its impact on political dynamics and style.

ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

The second major problem likely to be faced by the system is economic performance. As noted earlier, performance is a major goal as well as a legitimiser of the second phase of the Congress system. The success and legitimacy of the dominant party depend critically on economic performance as never before. Even the charisma of Indira Gandhi has been built up on the popular credibility regarding her image as "a mass-oriented leader, determined and capable of implementation". Thus economic performance is a far more critical factor during the second phase of the Congress system than it was during its first phase.

The real point of discussion would be, how far is the new system functional to the goal-achievement of economic performance or garibi hatao?

It is known that the goal of the first phase of the system was oriented more towards nation-building and consensus-building. The main justification for the

Congress dominance had been its role as a provider of institutional consensus as well as a builder of ideological consensus. Its achievement in this field has been remarkable during the first phase. But its record on economic performance has been somewhat tardy. It was its failure in economic performance during the early sixties that was one of the factors for its decline. Its emphasis on consensus proved somewhat dysfunctional to the clarity of programme and cohesiveness of the party needed for effective economic performance. The consensus nature of the dominant party proved dysfunctional to economic performance in three ways: (i) Formulation of a clear-cut programme has been a difficult, slow and at times a self-defeating process due to the needs of satisfying diverse and contradictory pressures of various groups within the party. As a result controversial but critical issues were either shelved or hedged with lots of compromises and ambiguities. (ii) Party leaders in government paid lip service to the programmes, but they were unenthusiastic about implementation. (iii) The party failed in the task of mass-mobilisation necessary for the success of the programme. So often the plans remained largely a bureaucratic affair, not enthralling or involving people in any significant way.

In view of this, how far will the new system be functional to the tasks of economic performance?¹² If the second phase does not differ significantly from the first phase in regard to its open umbrella and consensus character, will it be more successful in economic performance? How far will the emphasis on cohesive party as well as programmatic clarity and commitment be necessary for the success of the garibi hatao programme? Will not the very features of the system that were functional to its success in the first phase, prove dysfunctional during the second phase? Does the goal difference during the second phase require a different type of party?

Answers to these posers may depend on the validity of three assumptions: (i) A cohesive structure and programmatic commitment of the party are necessary for economic performance. It may be submitted that performance may be a consensual process and may not need the degree of cohesiveness and commitment that is assumed. The difference of the new phase of the Congress system may not lie in creating "new politics for new economics" but only in articulating new consensus (more to the left of the old one perhaps), that may be compatible with the old style of party politics. This point may be debated.

state leadership may be necessary to shift the power balance from state-bosses to the national leadership as well as to impose party discipline. But such a style has led to unsettling effects. The efforts to maintain centrally imposed state leaders may require increasing Central interference into the democratic process at the state level. Thus, proper party-building on healthy lines will require a decision regarding the proper place of state leaders in the Congress system.

(iv) Strains between the demands of the consensus party model and those of the cohesive party model have been referred to earlier. Requirements of the two models are quite different. The consensus model is largely elite-oriented and it has the merit of conflict avoidance and competitive openness. Keeping together a wide range of ideological and interest groups itself becomes a value. It ensures dominance but its price is a series of compromises and ideological ambiguity. On the other hand the cohesive party model may be divisive and intolerant of groups not committed to the ideological thrust of the party. By being divisive and intolerant, such a model may inevitably lead to the decline of dominance, but it may prove to be more effective and purposeful. This cohesive party model has also been characterised as the confrontation model. It is submitted here that the Congress party, under the leadership of Indira Gandhi, is slowly trying to move away from the consensus model to the confrontation model. Her personal leadership style is perhaps more akin to such a model. Her crusading spirit, impatience with sloth and slow pace, subtle use of class antagonism, tendency to push an issue even at the risk of division, and populist techniques, all indicate a new ethos of confrontation. The restoration of Congress dominance in 1971 and 1972 was due to the shift to the confrontation model. But after the landslide victories, Congress is perhaps trying to slide back to the consensus model. Perhaps it is trying to maximise the political gains of the former without losing the essential advantages of the latter. However, the strains between the two models may become more acute and compromise between the two may turn increasingly difficult.

These hypotheses regarding various aspects of party-building need to be critically examined. The likely nature and structure of the dominant party should be conceptualised and their operational dynamics worked out.

Thus the Congress system in its second phase is likely to face serious strains and problems regarding institutional vacuum, economic performance and party-build-

ing. The shape and nature of the new system will depend largely on how these issues are tackled.

IV

The above discussion indicated the significant differences between the two phases of the one party dominance system as well as the problems likely to be faced by the system as a result thereof. However, such a discussion also raises wider issues concerning the Indian political system.

First, in view of the changed context and goals of the system, how long will the one party dominance system remain functional to the Indian political system? A party system is after all a means to achieve the ends of a larger political system. With the shift of goals from nation-building to economic performance, may not the one-party dominance system become dated? It may prove too dilatory, loose and jumbled for the task of socio-economic transformation.

Secondly, the stability and survival of the Indian political system has been solely dependent on the continued dominance of the Congress party, which in turn depends on the charisma of one leader. From the point of view of institutional growth and differentiation, such a situation is, to say the least, not comforting. Vigorous institution-building, both on the part of the Congress and the opposition parties, is imperative to overcome such precarious dependence for political development on one party or one leader.

Thirdly, the greatest weakness of the one party dominance system has been the succession or alternation problem. The only alternative to the continued dominance of the Congress party has been political chaos and instability. In the past when the one party dominance system declined, as after 1967, it was followed by a period of uncertainty and instability, to escape which people have had to restore Congress dominance again. This scenario of dominance-decline-chaos-restoration may become a regular feature, throwing the system into the throes of uncertainty. Such a pattern, over a period of time, may prove to be demoralising.

Fourthly, such a pattern of party politics may also create a legitimacy problem for the system. Under the present system, forty-five to fifty per cent of voters are denied any place in governance. Opposition parties, enjoying the support of almost half of the electorate, have to be satisfied with a permanent marginal role as pressure groups. Before 1967, such a situation was tolerated. But after a taste of power for a few years, it would now be difficult for

the opposition parties to revert to a marginal role. This may create widespread alienation and frustration on the part of non-Congress voters and parties, which may corrode the legitimacy of the system.¹²

Fifthly, the intra-party competition model as against the inter-party competition model suffers from some inadequacies. Intra-party factional competition is not stable and programme-oriented. The factional game served the democratic system only to the extent that it kept the dominant party open. Here also, its efficacy in the changing context is doubtful. Moreover, factional politics lacks predictability and is weak in representational function. Factions can fight or compromise at will, since they enjoy complete autonomy from the electorate. Their differences are not so openly debated or settled as in the case of inter-party competition. Hence the relative merits of intra-party competition model *vis-a-vis* the inter-party competition model will have to be constantly examined and evaluated.

Thus, as we have tried to show in this paper, the re-emergence of one party dominance after 1971 does not amount to the restoration of the old familiar model. It is a system of dominance with a difference. This new system is facing new strains and challenges and there is general uncertainty and fluidity regarding many dimensions of its future shape. Hence the conceptualisation of the new system is a challenging task that can no longer be postponed. This paper is offered as a modest effort in that direction.

[This paper has emerged out of the discussions at the Gujarat State Political Science Association Seminar in July 1972 and at the Summer Institute on Teaching and Research in Indian Politics in October 1972 held at Ahmedabad. We are grateful to the participants for their suggestions and comments.]

Notes

- 1 Rajni Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India", *Asian Survey*, Volume IV, Number 12, December 1964.
W H Morris-Jones, "Parliament and Dominant Party: Indian Experience", *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 17, Number 3, Summer, 1964.
- 2 For detailed discussion, see Rajni Kothari, "Nation-Making and Consensus: The Case of the Indian National Congress", a paper read at the International Science Association, Brussels, September 1967.
- 3 The Kamaraj Plan (1963) led to factionalisation of the top leadership. This was accentuated by two succession struggles for prime ministership in 1964 and 1966 as well as the scramble for tickets for the 1967 elections. Moreover, the hard-

- line policy of the Congress President, Kamraj, in forcing many dissident groups to leave the Congress militated against the requirement of national tolerance.
4. Iqbal Narain, "Democratic Interlude For Nation-Building: Fifth Lok Sabha Elections", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume VI, Number 18, September 18, 1971, pp 2023-28.
5. For more detailed discussion see: Rajni Kothari, "The Political Change of 1967", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume VI, Numbers 3, 4 and 5, January 1971, pp 245-7 and D. L. Sheil, "Political Development of Indian Electorate", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume V, Numbers 3, 4 and 5, January 1970, pp 143-8.
6. Francine R Frankel, "India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs", Princeton University Press, 1971, pp 211-214.
7. Myron Weiner, "The 1971 Elections and the Indian Party System", *Asian Survey*, Volume XI, Number 12, December 1971, pp 1163-4.
8. W. H. Morris-Jones observes that the 1971 elections led to the restoration of the pre-1967 party structure, but in another sense they strengthened the trends of electoral awareness and individuation set in motion by the 1967 elections. Thus the 1971 elections represented a reversal in regard to institutional structure but a continuity in regard to electoral attitudes. See his article: "India's Change — and Stability", *Asian Survey*, Volume XI, Number 8, August 1971, pp 739-40.
9. See footnote 2.
10. W. H. Morris-Jones, "The Indian Congress Party: A Dilemma of Domiance", *Modern Asian Studies*, Volume I, Number 2, 1967.
11. Some trends in this direction are discernible. First, some Indian language newspapers have been playing an oppositional role rather effectively. For example, *Sandesh*, a daily from Ahmedabad has been more effective in opposition than most opposition parties in Gujarat. Secondly, pressure groups are playing a more effective role recently. Most agitations of the past year or so have been launched by pressure groups like trade unions, students' associations, etc. Opposition parties have been pushed relatively into the background. However, these pressure groups are nebulous and one-issue oriented; so far they indicate no promise of developing into stable institutional structures. Thirdly, populist protest movements and agitations have erupted more frequently during recent months.
12. For detailed and lucid discussions
13. W. H. Morris-Jones, *op. cit.*, p 741.
14. Chanshyam Shah, "A Study of the Impact of Electoral Process on Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Gujarat", (Draft of a 1971 study sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research.)
15. For apprehensions regarding lack of institutionalisation and growing delegitimation of the system see: Jayaprakash Narayan, "A Hopeless Situation", *The Radical Humanist*, Volume 36, Number 5, August 1972, pp 7-10.
- of the magnitude of the task of economic performance and the various constraints operating upon the Central Government in the post-1971 period, see: Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "The Writ from Delhi: The Indian Government's Capabilities after the 1971 Elections", *Asian Survey*, Volume XI, Number 10, October 1971, pp 858-69.
- Hustings: From Electoral Mandate to Challenge of the Rajni Kothari, "Political Economy of Garibi Hatao", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume VI, Numbers 30, 31 and 32, July 1971, pp 1549-56.
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