

Crisis Management: High Command Style

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Recent developments in Karnataka politics—more specifically Congress party politics—have attracted nation-wide attention and could be termed as having been unprecedented in the history of the politics of the State. These events need to be assessed in the backdrop of three critical factors. In the first place, the nature of the mandate secured by the Congress party in the 1989 Assembly elections has to be borne in mind in any analysis of the emerging political scenario in the State. Further, the internal dynamics of the Congress party must also be taken cognisance of, while seeking an explanation to the political convulsions that confronted the State. Finally, the impact of the political crisis on the working of the parliamentary system of government in Karnataka cannot be ignored.

The 1989 Assembly elections in Karnataka saw the Congress party returning to power after a gap of nearly seven years. The party secured a three-fourths majority in the State Assembly having won 176 of the 222 seats for which elections were held. The voters had unequivocally endorsed the claims of the Congress party and had fondly hoped that the infighting and instability witnessed during the Janata party rule would be a thing of the past. Such optimism amongst the voters could be justified on the ground that the Congress party had explicitly stated in its election manifesto that if voted to power, it would ensure stability and progress in the State. Further, any party which has had to cool its heels in the Opposition for seven long years, would be expected to take its election promises more seriously and honour the verdict of the electorate. The Congress party had all factors and forces going in their favour with the 1989 Assembly elections—a fund of goodwill, a steamroller majority in the Assembly and an Opposition that had been decimated and was in a state of total disarray. However, four years after having returned to power, the party appears to have frittered away the voter's mandate.

Having changed its Legislature Party leader and Chief Minister thrice within four years—we have now been assured by the Congress leadership that

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there would be no change in the State leadership till the next Assembly elections—the ruling party has been plagued by infighting and internal discord which has contributed to a lacklustre performance at the governmental level. The Congress Party President and Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao, has himself admitted that the Congress party's major problem in south India, is the internal dissensions within the party. It is very clearly, the familiar story of a public mandate not respected, a public mandate treated with insensitivity and the gradual evaporation of public support, all self-inflicted.

It is beyond the shadow of doubt that the recent trends in Congress party politics in the State have been triggered off by the lack of inner party democracy and a Central leadership that has practiced the 'politics of procrastination'. Open rebellion by Ministers against the leadership of the Chief Minister and the staging of *dharnas* on the floor of the Legislative Assembly by the ruling party legislators protesting against the style of functioning of the Chief Minister are all symptoms of the disease of hyper-Centralisation that appears to plague the ruling party. The ushering in of the 'envelope culture'—wherein the party legislators unanimously elect the leader whose name is mentioned in the envelope brought by the party observers (representatives of the High Command)—has left the Chief Minister with little initiative and control over the party.

THE practice of requesting the Central leadership to choose the leader of the Legislature Party (and in the event of it being the ruling party, to choose the Chief Minister), which was ushered in during the leadership of Mrs Indira Gandhi, is today an accepted norm in the Congress party. Any attempt to alter this trend is met with stiff resistance as it has become a part of the party culture. This has resulted in a situation in which, at the State level, mass leaders have failed to emerge in the Congress party. In this context it must be stressed that Devraj Urs was among the last mass base leaders in the party at the State-level. His emergence as a mass leader could be traced to the fact that after the split in the Congress party in 1969, he was sought to be

projected as a State-level leader to challenge those who had opposed Mrs Gandhi's leadership. Urs' increasing popularity in the State was viewed with apprehension by Mrs Gandhi. This was one of the main factors that contributed to friction between the two and resulted in a final parting of ways.

Gundu Rao was handpicked by Mrs Gandhi to lead the Congress Legislature Party in 1979. She was also instrumental in his becoming the Chief Minister in January 1980. All the subsequent leaders of the Congress Legislature Party have been specifically chosen by the Congress High Command. During the period January 1980 to January 1994—a span of 14 years—the Congress Legislature Party has had seven different leaders. This includes the seven years when the party was in Opposition and the leader of the Congress Legislature Party was changed thrice during this period. All these changes were invariably dictated by dissident activity or the desire of the Central leadership to 'impose' a new leader.

Thus, when the nomination of the leader of the Legislature Party by the High Command became the order of the day in Congress-ruled States—especially Karnataka—Chief Ministership depended on the blessings of the High Command. The party workers, legislators and Ministers came to realise that only by pleasing the High Command could they occupy or remain in important positions of power. Increasing pressure came to be mounted on the High Command—especially when it was perceived as being indecisive and practicing the 'politics of procrastination'—by the dissidents to remove an incumbent Chief Minister. In this context it is relevant to note that during Bangarappa's Chief Ministership, Veerappa Moily, spoke of the need for a 'major surgery'—albeit by a 'Central surgeon'—to rescue the State administration. Later, after becoming Chief Minister, Moily had a taste of his own metaphor, when his Deputy called for the intervention of the 'big doctors' in Delhi to prescribe the medicine to cure the State administration. The *dharna* staged by the ruling party legislators on the floor of the Assembly to protest against the Chief Minister, needs to be seen as part of the pressure tactics adopted by the dissidents and an attempt to draw the attention of the High Command.

The 12-point formula put forward by the High Command—which has apparently been finally accepted by both the loyalists and the dissidents—reads more like a list of do's and don'ts. Further, several issues mentioned in the formula are an open censure of the style of functioning of the Chief Minister. The political developments of the last few

weeks would only heighten and legitimise the intervention of the Central leadership of the Congress party in State affairs and further weaken the position of the Chief Minister and would add weight to the Opposition argument that Karnataka has a 'lame-duck Chief Minister'. Such a trend, of hyper-Centralisation in the party, would only strengthen the argument that local initiative and autonomy are being stifled.

Many among the dissidents in the Congress party in Karnataka have discontinued their anti-Moily campaign only because of the Central intervention and not out of any genuine conviction. Even Rajashekara Murthy has categorically stated that he accepted the 12-point formula because he was convinced that it had been suggested by Narasimha Rao.

The most telling impact of the recent political developments has been on the working of parliamentary democracy in the State. A basic principle of parliamentary democracy is the concept of collective responsibility and leadership of the Prime Minister/Chief Minister. The sanctity of the concept of collective responsibility has been totally destroyed in the State during the last few years. During Bangarappa's Chief Ministership, Moily, Azeez Sait and K.H. Patil were openly critical of the Chief Minister even while continuing in the Cabinet. More recently, S.M. Krishna and the other dissident Ministers have questioned Moily's leadership even while continuing as Ministers. Ministers absenting themselves from Cabinet meetings has become a common phenomenon. Ministers have publicly traded charges and the Chief Ministers have not intervened. The situation has come to such a pass because the ultimate decision-making is done at the High Command level. A Congress Chief Minister finds it difficult to remove any Minister without consulting the High Command. The recent example of Moily recommending the acceptance of the resignations of the dissident Ministers and subsequently withdrawing the advice on instruction from the High Command bears testimony to this fact.

What is seen in Karnataka today—more specifically within the Congress party—is the 'politics of remote control'. As long as the strings of control are in the hands of the Central leadership of the party such crises are bound to surface from time to time. The 'leave-it-to-the-High-Command' style of Congress crisis management would, in the long run, jeopardise the interests of the party. The moot question is: can the party break free of a tradition that has been religiously followed for the last two decades? ■