

India and the Congress Party

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What does one make of the Congress Party? It has been obvious for some time now that it seems to have lost its way, certainly in terms of having any clear direction for the country, and increasingly in terms of its inability to connect with the people, to respond to old and new challenges and to deal responsively and effectively with criticism. Yet it remains hugely significant. This is not only because it currently is the dominant party in the ruling UPA coalition that is supposed to govern India. Even in the future, at least for the rest of the decade, it is impossible to think of national politics without recognising the critical role that will still be played by this party, even with (likely) diminished electoral support.

Even though the Congress Party has dominated the national scene for the greater part of the post-Independence years, has been controlling the central government now for nearly a decade and indeed is now the principal party with a national presence, there is very little in terms of analytical or scholarly material available to help us understand what exactly drives this party. So outside observers are reduced to speculation about the “first family” (which remains opaque and distant even for ordinary Congresspersons) or reading the tea-leaves left by the statements of various Congress leaders or simply accepting partisan (either fawning or extremely critical) and mostly journalistic accounts. Objective analyses of the party and its role in India over the past few decades from a social science perspective are surprisingly rare.

A new book by political scientist Zoya Hasan (“Congress after Indira: Policy, power, political change, 1984-2009”, Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2012) contributes to filling this gap. Hasan’s study covers the experience of the party after the death of Indira Gandhi in 1984. But her real point of departure is the recent past, particularly the period after the unexpected victory in the 2004 parliamentary elections that brought the party back to power on the national stage. She notes that it is a fascinating moment in Indian history: “when India is at once a rising power with an expanding middle class, and a poor, unequal and misgoverned country” (page 6).

At that point the Congress party had long since ceased to be the fulcrum of the political system, and increasingly had to respond to shifts in politics (the rise of the BJP and of various regional and Left parties) as well as economic changes, many of which were in turn brought about by its own policies in its previous stint in power in the first half of the 1990s. This period is also particularly interesting because in some ways the Congress had to partially reinvent itself in these changed circumstances.

Hasan investigates the structure and direction of change within the party and its governance agenda in response to these changing conditions as well as its own internal dynamics. Some of the analysis is more historical, beginning with the Congress Party’s approach to religious politics in the context of the Shah Bano and Ayodhya controversies. The phase of economic liberalisation in the 1990s is also considered. According to Hasan, while economic liberalisation strategies did provide much greater freedom for private capital and thereby changed the nature of capitalist accumulation in India, it did so without completely compromising on economic

sovereignty, such that externally India was seen as an example of “prudent” deregulation. Even so, the economic processes and growing inequality unleashed by liberalisation produced their share of discontents, and contributed to the national decline of the party and electoral reversals from the mid 1990s onwards.

The greater bulk of the book is devoted to the period of the first UPA government, 2004-09. Hasan shows how the return of the Congress to national political power through the unexpected victory in the 2004 general elections was largely a result of three major changes, which were in turn driven by Sonia Gandhi’s leadership: the reassertion of secularism, willingness to make alliances with various regional parties and rapprochement with Left parties. But then the party had to adjust to the realities of coalition politics, as well as to the balance of power between party and government, creating the unique relationship between 10 Janpath and the actual seat of government.

Hasan tracks the important policy changes of the period, including the attempts to reconcile equity with growth with the essentially growth-oriented economic paradigm, which in turn necessitated certain tangible policies such as the NREGA and increased social expenditure of the government. She argues that the “scheme-oriented” approach was partly a way of combating the continued organisational weaknesses of the party and partly a means of countering the identity politics that was otherwise making headway particularly in certain regions. (It is surprising that Hasan dwells very little on what many see as a fundamental feature of the organisational weakness of the party – the inability to move beyond dynastic succession.)

It is certainly true, as Hasan argues, that the redistributive policies of the government in this period helped the Congress party electorally in 2009. Yet the extent to which they were internally generated can be debated. It is well known that many of these policies were initially opposed within the government, and their adoption and even partial implementation were due in no small measure to the outside pressure from the Left, on which the coalition government depended for its survival. The deceleration and even collapse of such efforts in the second UPA tenure after 2009, when it no longer required Left support, stands testimony to the extent to which it was not so much the internal dynamics of the party, but the broader political context including Left pressure, which allowed such progressive policies even within the broader context of economic neoliberalism.

Hasan examines in some detail the Congress party’s response (through its policies in the UPA government) to three critical issues: rural backwardness and growing urban-rural inequalities; minority development, and the strategic attitude to the United States as exemplified in the Indo-US nuclear deal. She suggests that the approaches in all three of these areas signalled major departures that impacted upon the core constituencies of the party: the poor, minorities and middle classes.

Hasan’s analysis ends in 2009, and therefore covers what in retrospect appears to have been a more optimistic period for the party as well as for the UPA government – a period when it felt politically resurgent in a country that also felt it was on the cusp of more positive transformation. Much of that mood has dissipated nationally thereafter. In fact, reading this book at the end of 2012, which has clearly been an *annus horribilis* for the party, almost creates a mood of nostalgia pervaded by melancholy suggestions of what might have been.

The proliferation of revelations of scams and scandals that have defined much of the past two years, and the growing restiveness of people against what is perceived as an increasingly distant and intolerant government that is not fundamentally concerned with the welfare of the people, may seem like a remarkable adverse shift in the fortunes of the party that projected itself as the saviour of the aam aadmi and aurat. Yet the seeds of this were clearly already present and indeed were probably essential features of the previous period of economic boom.

Thus the revelations of corruption and crony capitalism mostly refer to that very period, 2004-09, when the party was celebrating its role in presiding over unprecedented boom. In turn, much of that boom driven by private accumulation was itself related to the massive concessions provided to such capital by the government. The nexus between politicians and private enrichment was obviously an essential part of that, and it was also fundamental in determining the Congress party's approach to getting and retaining power.

In fact, Hasan appears to recognise this aspect, which has become so evident and marked in current public perceptions of the party. She presciently points out that "One remarkable feature of the Congress since the early 1990s was the tendency to move away from ideological frameworks. If asked what the Congress stood for, few leaders could give a coherent answer beyond expressing commitment to pluralism and social justice. One thing is clear: the Congress has no ideology, only strategy. If there is one ideology that the party continues to represent, it is the ideology of power. Economic liberalisation has accentuated this trend and brought individual and special interests into the open." (page 225)

In purely electoral terms, the Congress party's political future obviously depends, as Hasan points out, on the plans for succession of the top leadership in party and government as well as the ability to regain control of key states that now seem to have been permanently handed over to non-Congress parties. But this is only the surface arithmetic. There is a deeper calculus at work, in terms of the ability of the Congress Party to capture the pulse of the people – something that was in some way attained in 2004, but seems increasingly elusive for a party whose quotidian actions appear to be insensitive, distant and even cynically patronising in approach, and often politically tone-deaf. Since the party continues to be a significant player that cannot at all be discounted in future political developments, it will be interesting to see whether it can hope to change its nature and direction in these crucial respects.

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