

Lessons on Inner-Party Democracy from the American Elections



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(Views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the author.)

Today, India is at a critical juncture with all socio-economic as well as political ills engulfing the nation from almost all possible directions. Starting from a series of bribery scams that are being exposed, to our plummeting ranks in almost all economic indicators – everything corroborates the hope for the rise of a fourth front (considering the third front still exists and is potent) in the form of Arvind Kejriwal's political debut with India Against Corruption, along with an emerging coterie of social activists, who are gradually morphing the political landscape and are all collectively reshaping the political couture of the nation.

Without even an iota of apprehension, Kejriwal has been able to create a wave of passion and excitement among common Indians for a probable better political future. Through his campaign against political parties and leaders, he has been instrumental in giving a vent to the pent up anger of the public against the corrupt, inefficient and slothful political outfits. However, the top brass of such parties can get their feet wet and get away with it, because even today, there is a dearth of intra-party democracy in almost all political parties in India. This very opacity guards the elite big bosses of the parties, who thus can never be replaced from their esteemed chairs, which eventually provides an incubation environment to corruption, favoritism and intra-party dictatorship. The most potent example of such perceived bravado is the Indian National Congress's obsession with the Nehru-Gandhi family, whose grip on the party is absolute. Therefore, despite the Congress party and their allies are getting embroiled in one expose' after another involving multibillion bucks, no eyebrows are raised and no fingers are pointed against its leadership from within. None of the Congress members have ever demanded explanations or enquires for the series of scams. The same is true for almost all political parties, except a few... in fact, except too few – which again is a temporary phenomenon. The dictatorial and dynastic rule of political parties is endemic to India; it is just the baton that gets passed from generation to generation.

The root cause for such a contest of attrition of democracy is that our Constitution does not enforce a structure for inner-party democracy and does not account for the fact that the electorate should have the right to choose the leader of every political party. This very loophole of our Constitution is undermined and exploited by almost every political party, who treat their fiefdom as a new business venture to stash up piles of cash and benefit their personal interest. Consequently, the recruitment and development of party members are not based on competencies but rather on loyalty and lobbying. The sycophancy syndrome is most potent with the INC, where they pamper the Gandhi family to the extent of shamelessness. Who can forget the former president Gyani Zail Singh who once said that if Indira Gandhi were to order him to sweep the floors, he would gladly do so with a broom! The same goes for most in the rank and file of the

party. Their endless flaws are overlooked in return for their loyalty towards the Nehru-Gandhi family. While INC's sycophancy is renowned, BJP is no saint either. The leadership at the top has had their lineup loyalists who have been tolerated, nurtured and profited by their respective leaders. Here, candidates are 'selected', not 'elected'. One who is closer to the supreme leader of the party or adds to the party's coffers is generally raised up the ladder, and not the one who is competent and liked by the party members or the electorate – clearly, a completely non-democratic way of choosing a party member to contest a so-called democratic election.

This is in sharp contrast to the US political system, where, in a transparent and prudent manner, the Presidential candidates are elected by the electorate based on their policies, agenda and brinkmanship. It spells out the continuance of the American dream and why Americans are proud of their democracy, which is par excellence compared to ours. Their election system of deciding on the right candidate is not only empowering the electorate, but also empowering the grassroots level workers, who are the torchbearers of both participatory and populist cultures. They can even discuss and influence party policies to an extent unheard of in India and most other developing nations. The three nationally televised debates between Obama and Romney shaped the final public perception towards them; and such a debate is indubitably the most democratic way of laying one's claim towards presidency – and giving in to the public to cast their final choice.

It is difficult to understand why such a level playing ground is not created in India's political structure! Sometimes, even the prime ministerial candidate is not announced before the elections, keeping the electorate in the dark! The eulogy of Obama's victory notwithstanding, India has every reason to learn a thing or two from America about how partisan battles are fought in a country's election. Comprehending the importance of party-transparency, China (a country infamous for its non-democratic setup) has adopted an open-cadre system for selecting party members and is promoting intra-party democracy since the last one decade. Similarly, the electoral process is quite transparent and clean in Europe, with corruption, scams and scandals even lower than those in US! That's because in the peaceful, prosperous and impeccably literate European nations, the electorate will not tolerate tainted and crooked leaders to run the show, quite unlike India.

India is not Europe; it differs substantially in terms of size, population density, demographics, education, and income levels. Here, the political elite remain in power as long as they want; and thus, more is the chance of oligarchic strains appearing with time. For example, Jawaharlal Nehru ruled for 17 years and Indira Gandhi for 11 years. A Constitutional curb to the tenure of the President/Prime Minister – similar to the 22nd Amendment to the US Constitution, which limits the number of years (to eight) that a single person can hold the Presidential post – would halt this phenomenon and drive a leader genuinely towards working for the public. Too much power in the hands of one or two individuals can upset the balance of power and set the ball rolling towards the Great Indian Loot – as has been the case for India, which has been mired by one after the other deals involving union ministers, bureaucrats and big businesses. That is why most countries of the world – even those including the banana republic in Africa

and Asia (like Burundi, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan) – have enacted tenure limits in their respective constitutions. While Burundi and Sierra Leone have a cap of two five-year terms, Rwanda has a cap of two seven-year terms. The new democracies in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, post scrapping their Soviet era political systems, too have restrictions in the tenures of their heads of state.

If that is the norm, and justifiably so, then the lack of a term limit in India is indeed standing in the way of a very efficient and challenge-free democracy in India. The tenure limit should be clubbed with an age cap as well – so that young, energetic and idealist leaders with fresh ideas can chip in and make a mark, similar to the expectations that surround the likes of Arvind Kejriwal. Those like Atal Bihari Vajpayee or even Jyoti Basu of West Bengal were almost bedridden in their final days in office. That is a liability for any government and for the country as a whole! The benchmark should be the likes of John F Kennedy, Bill Clinton or even Barack Obama who infused fresh verve into the social, economic and political system of America with their respective doses of great leadership. For a nation to steer towards real democracy, this very dichotomy of incubating a non-democratic party setup in a democratic system must be instantly and constitutionally erased. Or else, the electorate of the nation would keep electing parties and not visionaries!

About the Author:

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