



The Congress in India -- Crisis and Split

Author(s): Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.

Source: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Mar., 1970), pp. 256-262

Published by: [University of California Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2642578>

Accessed: 28-07-2015 19:24 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Asian Survey*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE CONGRESS
IN INDIA—
CRISIS AND SPLIT

/ Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr.
The University of Texas at Austin

In November 1969, the Congress party of India was torn apart after four months of inner-party conflict. The truncated leadership of the party organization, isolating itself from the will of the majority of the Congress Parliamentary Party, expelled Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, daughter of Nehru, from the Congress. In the centenary year of Mahatma Gandhi's birth, two Congress parties fought for the tattered standard of the nationalist movement.

From the time the Congress first assumed the responsibilities of public office, there has been conflict between the governmental and organizational wings of the party. In the early years after independence, as the political center of gravity shifted from the party to the Government, Prime Minister Nehru battled party presidents, and in 1951 assumed the Congress presidency himself. To hold the Prime Minister accountable to the party, Nehru argued, would reduce parliamentary democracy to a "mockery." The responsibility for decision-making lay with the Government. With Nehru's decline and death, however, the leadership of the organization, a coterie of state bosses called the Syndicate, reasserted itself and, engineering the two successions to bring Shastri Lal Bahadur (1964) then Indira Gandhi (1965 and 1967) to power, sought to dominate the office of the Prime Minister.

The traditional conflict between the two wings was accentuated by the widespread defeats inflicted on the Congress in the 1967 elections and the loss of power in half the states. Beyond this, however, increasing political consciousness among the mass electorate underscored two basic facts: (1) the obsolescence of a Congress political machine which rested on the support of wealthy peasants and landowners, and (2) the widening economic disparities of the nation, reflecting the gap between Congress policy and effective implementation.

In the tension between the Government and the party organization, the presidential election in 1969 brought the conflict to the surface and initiated the four month crisis that split the 84-year-old Indian National Congress. In challenge to the Syndicate, Indira Gandhi sought to securely reestablish

the dominance of the Prime Minister within the party, and facing the 1972 elections, she sought to secure her choice of candidates in nomination and to give effective meaning to the Congress commitment to socialism.

The first round of battle took place at the meeting of the All-India Congress Committee at Bangalore in July 1969. To gain initiative at the Bangalore session, Mrs. Gandhi sent a note of "stray thoughts" to the Working Committee urging a more aggressive stance toward economic policy—nationalization of major commercial banks, effective implementation of land reforms, ceilings on urban income and property, and curbs on industrial monopolies. The Syndicate, ideologically incohesive, was divided in its reaction. Conservatives S. K. Patil and Congress President Nijalingappa sided with Morarji Desai in opposition; Kamaraj and Home Minister Y. B. Chavan expressed favor. To avoid a split on the eve of the presidential nomination, Chavan secured a unanimous resolution calling on the central and state governments to implement the Prime Minister's suggestions. The Syndicate, however, in alliance with Desai, sought to retain its hold over the party and to secure the Congress presidential nomination for its own man, Sanjiva Reddy, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi's preference for V. V. Giri, the seventy-four year old Acting President who took over on the death of President Zakir Hussain earlier in 1969.

By custom, the nomination is made by the eight-member Central Parliamentary Board, elected by the All-India Congress Committee. With no chance for Giri, Mrs. Gandhi, with the support of Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, Industries Development Minister, formally proposed Jagivan Ram, Minister for Food and Agriculture. Reddy's nomination, however, was secure with the support of Nijalingappa, Kamaraj, Patil, and Desai. Home Minister Chavan threw his lot with the majority. With Reddy's nomination by Congress, V. V. Giri entered the presidential contest as an independent. He resigned as Acting President, and in a vigorous campaign drew the support of the Samyukta Socialist Party, the regional Dravida Munnetra Kalagam (D.M.K.)—the ruling party in Tamilnadu—the Muslim League, the two wings of the Communist party, and almost all elements of the United Front governments of Kerala and West Bengal. The right wing opposition, the Jana Sangh, Swatantra and the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (B.K.D.) of Uttar Pradesh, put forward former Finance Minister C. D. Deshmukh as their candidate. The Praja Socialists sat the fence between Giri and Deshmukh.

Within the Congress, as Chavan sought a rapprochement between the Prime Minister and the Syndicate, Mrs. Gandhi relieved Morarji Desai of his Finance portfolio, deepening the wedge between the two groups. To save his "self-respect," Desai then resigned as Deputy Prime Minister. Although Mrs. Gandhi claimed to have taken the action because of Desai's position on her economic measures, Desai had, if grudgingly, accepted the A.I.C.C. resolution. The Syndicate viewed the affair as a vendetta, but as sympathy grew for Desai, Mrs. Gandhi retained the initiative. She announced the nationalization of fourteen major commercial banks, at once

justifying her earlier action and pushing the Desai controversy into the background. The purpose of nationalization, she announced, was to provide more equitable access to bank credit, particularly for small farmers and artisans. Chavan, Kamaraj, and Atulya Ghosh, previous advocates of bank nationalization when Mrs. Gandhi seemed uninterested, welcomed the decision. The banks, holding some 70% of the country's total bank assets, were largely in the hands of a few dominant business families, the Birlas, Tatas, Dalmias, and Jains. Nationalization involved the expenditure of little political capital and reaped widespread support for the Prime Minister. She declared the action as "only the beginning of a bitter struggle between the common people and the vested interests in the country."

Indira Gandhi, though having signed Reddy's nomination papers, had yet to come out clearly in favor of the party's conservative nominee. Indeed, there was speculation that Reddy would try to use the untested powers of the presidency against the Prime Minister, if not to unseat her altogether. Where at first Reddy's election seemed assured, with the Congress holding 52% of the votes, increasing rumors of defections to Giri caused considerable unease among Syndicate members. Within one week of the election, party President Nijalingappa issued a whip instructing all Congress members of parliament and the state legislative assemblies to vote for Reddy and also asked Mrs. Gandhi to make a statement of support immediately for the Congress nominee. The Prime Minister, the leader of the Congress Parliamentary Party, refused to issue a whip for Reddy, and her supporters called for a "free vote" of conscience in the election. A large number of the Congress M.P.s indicated their support of a free vote; some publicly tore up the whip notice. Support for Giri was now in the open.

Fifteen candidates, with three leading contenders, stood for the election, held on August 16. As neither Reddy nor Giri achieved the required number of votes on the first count, the second preferences indicated on the Deshmukh ballots were then tabulated. On the second count, Giri was declared elected. Giri's lead on the first ballot came primarily from the non-Congress states of Tamilnadu, Kerala, and West Bengal. On the second count, it was the second preference votes of the B.K.D. which gave him the victory, as the second preference vote of Deshmukh's Jana Sangh and Swatantra supporters generally went to Reddy. Violations of the Congress whip—particularly in Andhra and Uttar Pradesh—were considerable. On the first preference vote, two out of five Congress M.P.s and one out of four M.L.A.s supported Giri.

Giri's election was greeted with tremendous popular enthusiasm. In the wake of Reddy's defeat, the Syndicate was in disarray. It had been embarrassed and was determined to bring disciplinary action against the Prime Minister. With pressure from those states with narrow Congress majorities, where a split might put them out of office, and with the mediation of Chavan, the Working Committee "closed" the matter with a plea for unity.

The unity resolution only papered over an almost conspiratorial atmo-

sphere on both sides. Moving to give "a more cohesive and purposive direction" to the work of the Council of Ministers, Mrs. Gandhi requested the resignation of four junior ministers who were known to support the Syndicate. In heated exchanges with Nijalingappa, Mrs. Gandhi launched a signature campaign among the members of the A.I.C.C. to have a new Congress President elected by the end of the year. The Prime Minister argued that Congress policies cannot be fully implemented unless the party organization is fully committed to them. More than four hundred of the seven hundred odd elected members of the A.I.C.C. signed the requisition.

Seeking to cast the inner-party struggle in an ideological mold, Mrs. Gandhi had strengthened her hand immeasurably. "Ideological divergences," wrote Pran Chopra in *The Citizen* (August 23, 1969), "offered aid and abetment the more they were brought in to conceal ambition; towards the end they began to matter more than anything else." The Syndicate is fundamentally non-ideological, but conservative in temper and tied to a base of support among landed and big business interests. Indira Gandhi, if committed to socialism, is no radical, and among her followers are some of highly questionable ideological credentials. The Congress Chief Ministers of the states, most of whom are aligned with her, had never been particularly anxious to implement a socialist policy of land reform and risk the alienation of their landed source of money and votes. Their assessment of Congress chances in 1972, however, prompted an opening to the left and a recognition that long professed Congress policies if left unimplemented would leave Congressmen behind at the polls at the next election.

On October 31, on the night before the scheduled meeting of the Working Committee, Nijalingappa announced his decision to drop two of Mrs. Gandhi's supporters from the Working Committee. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, a nominated member, was charged with anti-party activities and informed that he no longer enjoyed the confidence of the Congress President. C. Subramaniam, opponent of Kamaraj in Tamilnadu, was told that his membership had "lapsed" with his pressured resignation from the presidency of the Tamilnad Congress Committee. These actions, designed to ensure the Syndicate of a majority in the Working Committee meeting, were met by the Prime Minister and her supporters with boycott and a parallel meeting at her residence. There, with Home Minister Chavan now firmly with Mrs. Gandhi, they resolved to hold a meeting of the A.I.C.C. at Delhi in late November to elect a new Congress President.

With demonstrators outside, the eleven members out of twenty-one who attended the regular Working Committee meeting at the A.I.C.C. headquarters declared the requisition illegal. They affirmed their own commitment to the path of socialism, and accused the Prime Minister of attempting "to find in the Congress organization a scapegoat for the manifest failures of the administration." Exchanges between the two camps continued with increasing vituperation and pettiness. Nijalingappa, pressed by Kamaraj and Morarji Desai, accused the Prime Minister of intrigue,

indiscipline, and corruption and served a "show cause" notice on her to explain why disciplinary action should not be taken against her. Mrs. Gandhi, in turn, requested the resignation of the Railway Minister, Dr. Ram Subhag Singh, a Syndicate supporter. The Congress Chief Ministers, working to save their own governments, attempted various compromise formulas and even arranged an abortive luncheon between the two combatants.

On November 12, the Working Committee expelled Indira Gandhi from the Congress and instructed the Congress Parliamentary Party to elect a new leader. The C.P.P., however, has its own constitution, and a motion of no-confidence requires a two-thirds majority. Meeting the following day, the C.P.P., in an overwhelming majority of its 432 members, reaffirmed its support for the leadership of Mrs. Gandhi. Syndicate supporters in Parliament boycotted the meeting and met informally at Morarji Desai's residence. Meeting again two days later in formal session, one hundred and eleven Congress M.P.'s elected Desai as chairman of the Congress Parliamentary Party in Opposition. Dr. Ram Subhag Singh was elected leader of the party in the Lok Sabha, the lower house. With sufficient number in the party to gain official recognition (which no party before had ever done), Dr. Singh emerged as India's first Leader of the Opposition. Against the 60 or so Congressmen in opposition in the Lok Sabha, the Prime Minister held the support of more than two hundred. With the formal split in the Congress party, however, the Government of Indira Gandhi no longer commanded an absolute majority in Parliament. While a few Congress rebels from earlier days began to return to the party fold, the survival of the Government now depended on support from members of the opposition.

The Prime Minister weathered her first challenge on the opening day of the winter parliamentary session, November 17. On a *de facto* motion of censure for adjournment in the Lok Sabha, a number of independents, waverers from various parties, the D.M.K., and the two Communist parties stood with the Congress Government. Ranged on the other side were the Jana Sangh, Swatantra, the Praja Socialists, the Samyukta Socialists, and the Congress Opposition.

The Congress split was institutionalized in December 1969 with two separate Congress sessions. The old Congress under Nijalingappa, meeting at Ahmedabad, engaged largely in a ritual of attack and self-justification. It had, however, attracted a far greater number of delegates than expected. The Indira group challenged their claim to a majority of the members and questioned the credentials of many delegates. A week later, at Bombay, the new Congress met with an equally impressive number of delegates—in turn challenged by the Syndicate in what became a meaningless game of numbers. Jagjivan Ram, Indira's choice, became the new Congress President, succeeding C. Subramaniam, who had served as Acting President during the previous weeks. That the new Congress embodied many of the old contradictions was clear with Subramaniam's interim appointments to fill the vacancies on the Working Committee. The ideological conflict between left

militants and the centrists, manifest in the controversy surrounding the appointments, emerged almost at once in the Bombay session. The economic program presented, largely a restatement of past Congress commitments with a promise for implementation, caused considerable disappointment among the Young Turks in the party who sought a far more radical posture for the Congress. Indira Gandhi, for all her efforts, however, remained on a political leash which limited the range and freedom of her action. The Prime Minister nevertheless now operated from a position of greatly enhanced strength both as leader of her party and, for the time at least, of the nation.

The split in the Congress was mirrored in the contradictions and confusion of the parties in the opposition, but the prospects for a general polarization in Indian politics are unlikely, for both on the left and on the right, there are deep divisions in ideology, temperament, and social base. The Prime Minister, to maintain support and to ready herself for forthcoming elections, will have to effectively implement the Congress economic program. Slogans and rhetoric will no longer suffice. The Government will inevitably be drawn further to the left, both to fulfill its own self-image and to meet the pressure from its new allies among the opposition. The confidence the Prime Minister now commands will be strained increasingly, however, as each of the groups sustaining her survival demand a greater role in the Government. Although now with a substantial majority, the Prime Minister is vulnerable to political blackmail, as any one of the elements can threaten to withdraw support and potentially defeat the Government. Mrs. Gandhi can only go so far without losing the base of support within her own party. At a point where the Prime Minister is unable or unwilling to yield to outside pressure, she might then dissolve the Lok Sabha, and in parliamentary mid-term elections seek a mandate from the people in the form of an absolute majority in her own right. In order to gain control of the Congress organization in the states, or to establish alternative structure where necessary, Mrs. Gandhi will likely postpone elections as long as possible, perhaps until the general elections of 1972. She now rides a crest of popular support, however, and would be at a tactical advantage in holding parliamentary elections separately from the general elections, where the contests for the state assemblies would challenge the Prime Minister's search for a stable Congress majority at the Center with distracting local issues.

The instability and pattern of defections which have characterized politics at the state level since 1967 might well rise to the top. In the form of the French Fourth Republic, political *immobilisme* might shift responsibility of government from popularly-elected representatives to bureaucratic civil servants. Presidential intervention becomes a serious possibility at the Center and the position of the military more critical. The events of 1969 open a new era in Indian politics. The fragile unity of the Congress is broken, but unless short-term stability itself becomes the highest value, the unity of a party in inaction and in sustenance of the vested interests of the *status*

quo is unlikely to yield popular support. The system of one-party dominance in India has come to an end, and if the political horizon affords a prospect of unstable coalition government, both in the states and at the Center, it brings with this threat also the possibility of government more genuinely responsive to the people.

ROBERT L. HARDGRAVE, JR. is an Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin.