

## **Congress Leadership Crisis: What it Portends for the Party?**

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### **Summary**

*The Congress party has been facing upheavals in all its state units. The Punjab fiasco, which was simmering for a while, led to a change in leadership in the state. The new dispensation is a gamble that the party's high command has taken with neither the new Chief Minister nor state party President having a stellar track record of leadership. There are also rumblings within the local units of the party in Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Kerala. At the national level, the group of 23 senior Congress leaders (G-23) is becoming vocal again with demands for organisational reform and a Congress Working Committee meeting. The situation is compounded with the Gandhi family neither calling for organisational elections nor deciding on who among them is willing to be party chief, since Sonia Gandhi is believed to be only interim president. If the party has to be of relevance in the states going to polls next year, it needs to get its act together very soon.*

### **Introduction**

In 2017, the Congress party won a huge majority in the Punjab polls – 80 seats in the 117-member Punjab assembly – under the leadership of Captain Amarinder Singh. However, while there was some murmuring within the party then, the infighting has now come out in the open. A couple of party members rebelled against the Chief Minister, especially after the government lost the sensitive Behbal Kalan and Kot Kapura<sup>1</sup> firing cases. The High Court (HC) not only quashed the Special Investigation Team's (SIT) report but also questioned its methods and asked the government to reconstitute another SIT. The HC ruling led to turmoil within the Congress with partymen terming it a huge loss of face for the state government that had promised to bring the accused to book in both the sacrilege and the firing case when it was elected in 2017. The judgment sparked a row with many Congress leaders criticising the government led by Amarinder.<sup>2</sup> The revolt against the Chief Minister was led by Navjot Singh Sidhu.

To quell the rumblings, the party leadership tried to bring about a truce among the warring factions and appointed Sidhu as the president of its Punjab unit in July 2021. However, the opposition to the Chief Minister did not subside with the result that the Congress high command had to ask Amarinder to step down. While he resigned on 20 September 2021, he

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<sup>1</sup> There was an incident of the Guru Granth Sahib being stolen from a Gurdwara in Faridkot district and other instances of desecration of the Holy Book in other places leading to police firing. The culprits for the repeated desecration have still not been arrested, despite various special investigations teams being set up. Also referred as firing in the sacrilege cases.

<sup>2</sup> "Amarinder Singh", *The Indian Express*, 11 October 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/about/amarinder-singh/>.

deemed it a “humiliation”.<sup>3</sup> Charanjit Singh Channi, a Dalit leader emerged as a compromise Chief Minister candidate. As if the state and the party had not seen enough drama, Sidhu soon sprang a surprise by resigning as the Punjab Congress President within days of the new Chief Minister being selected. However, the party high command has managed to persuade him to withdraw his resignation. There appears to be uneasy truce at present.

Amarinder, having openly expressed deep anguish over his removal, has announced his intention of quitting the Congress party. He has, however, not made his future intentions known. Meanwhile, senior central leaders of the Congress party who were earlier dubbed as the G-23<sup>4</sup> have expressed their disappointment in the way a tall leader of the party was asked to step aside from the Chief Minister’s position. Vocal members of the G-23 like Kapil Sibal have expressed concern about the way decisions are being taken in the party, insinuating that it is not known who is the “decisions maker”. The turmoil in the Punjab Congress and some high-profile exits from the party prompted Sibal to comment that the Congress needed to introspect why leaders were leaving the party.<sup>5</sup> He commented that at the moment the Congress party has no president, and, hence, people were not aware who was taking crucial decisions. He went on to add, “We know and yet we don’t know.”<sup>6</sup> Sibal, insinuated that those considered close to the Gandhi family had deserted them whilst the G-23 leaders were still with the leadership though not as “yes men”. Sibal further expressed his fear that if the party does not take cognisance of the political changes taking place in the country, it may be losing its leadership role in the opposition space to the Trinamool Congress.

Meanwhile, another member of the G-23, Ghulam Nabi Azad, wrote to Sonia Gandhi seeking elections to the post of the party president and seeking a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC). All these demands do not appear to have evinced any reaction from either of the two Gandhi siblings or interim party president, Sonia.

## Internal Strife facing the Party in Other States

Chhattisgarh, another Congress ruled state, has also been seeing turmoil within the party. Bhupesh Baghel, second time Chief Minister, is facing opposition as he completes half of his term. A faction led by another Congress minister in the state, T S Singh Deo, claims that the party high command had agreed to hand over the chief ministership to him after the government completed half its term. The party has seen legislators from both factions congregating in Delhi to give their side of the story to the high command. The high command seems to have bought time by announcing that Rahul Gandhi will visit the state.

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<sup>3</sup> “Is there space for ‘humiliation and insult’ in Congress, asks Amarinder”, *Hindustan Times*, 24 September 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/is-there-space-for-humiliation-and-insult-in-congress-asks-former-punjab-cm-amarinder-singh-101632428340484.html>.

<sup>4</sup> A group of senior party leaders, self-proclaimed reformists, that wrote to Sonia Gandhi demanding sweeping changes in the party structure.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to Luizinho Faleiro in Goa, Jyotiraditya Scindia in Madhya Pradesh, Sushmita Dev in Assam and P C Chacko in Kerala.

<sup>6</sup> Krishn Kaushik, “Punjab, exits give fuel to G23: Kapil Sibal, Ghulam Nabi Azad speak up”, *The Indian Express*, 30 September 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/congress-g23-leaders-bjp-punjab-crisis-kapil-sibal-7541895/>.

While this has merely provided temporary relief to the Chief Minister, the demand for change has neither abated nor has it been settled. The rumblings in the state are creating further headache for the central leadership, which has not been able to decisively quell the issue.

The party's woes in Rajasthan do not seem to end what with former Deputy Chief Minister Sachin Pilot and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot being locked in a leadership tussle. The problem had reached a flashpoint when about 18 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), loyal to Pilot, rushed to Delhi, after disputes over different offices between rival factions of the Rajasthan Congress Committee, creating uncertainty over the survival of the government. The faction claimed it had the support of 30 MLAs and could topple the government. However, the party high command seemed to weigh in with the Chief Minister and Pilot was removed from the posts of Deputy Chief Minister and President of the Rajasthan Pradesh Committee. After some backroom deliberations, the feud was resolved with Pilot having a discussion with the Gandhi siblings and a vote of confidence was passed in the Assembly.

In Kerala, though the party is not in power, yet there have been major rumblings with some of the senior Congress leaders taking umbrage in not being consulted on various issues by the party unit. Earlier, one of the senior-most leaders in the party, P C Chacko, left the Congress, alleging that there was no democracy left in the Congress and group interest was paramount in the state unit. Chacko joined Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. Chacko has been a Gandhi family loyalist and was even chosen by the party hierarchy to head the Joint Parliamentary Committee set up to probe the 2G scam when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in government. In a further blow to the party in the state, V M Sudheeran, another senior leader announced his resignation from the All India Congress Committee. He was upset with the state and national units for ignoring his views over organisational and political matters.

The Goa unit of the Congress party saw Luizinho Faleiro, a seven-time MLA, leave the party and join the Trinamool Congress. He is an ex-Chief Minister with sizeable clout amongst Catholic voters in South Goa and has the potential to dent the Congress vote bank there.

### **Unease Building up Among the Congressmen**

These dissident voices in the state Congress point to the dissatisfaction within the party at the way issues are being managed and the kind of drift that is seen due to the lack of a decisive and formally appointed party leader. The demand for a meeting of the CWC emerged many times but no meeting has been called so far to discuss these issues. The demand is seen to be significant because the CWC has membership across sections and an open discussion in that forum will resonate with the leaders. It would also provide a platform for all shades of opinions within the party to be aired. Members of the G-23 also feel concerned about the use of caste and religion in appointments within the party. There is a large section of leaders who have a sense of disquiet with the decision-making process of the Gandhi siblings.

At the all-India level, the Congress party seems to be suffering from a serious leadership deficit. The appointed leader is conspicuously absent from most events and Rahul, who walked away from the Congress President's post two years back, seems to be spasmodic in his actions and pronouncements. Priyanka, his elder sibling, who is a general secretary for Uttar Pradesh (UP), seems to be doing a great deal of backroom decision-making; hence, the call for organisational elections and the creation of a formal leadership structure. Two years after Rahul quit as President and Sonia was appointed interim President, the party continues to lurch from one crisis to another without anybody being aware of who the decision makers are. Factional fights within state units do not augur well for the party, as it prepares for elections in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Punjab early next year. Party leaders have been seeking to put together state specific strategies in these states but factions within the party units in each state do not permit a well thought-out and cohesive approach. Organisational elections, scheduled 23 June 2021, have been postponed in a decision taken by the CWC in May this year owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is an irony of the fate of the Congress party that it has not been able to look beyond the Gandhi family to provide leadership. While announcing the postponement of the election in the May meeting, P L Punia, the party's spokesperson announced, "The Congress had begun the process (to hold internal elections) but it got disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. If not for that, our election schedule would have been on time and Rahul Gandhi would have been chosen as the party president."<sup>7</sup> This desire to have Rahul take over the presidency, from which he himself stepped down via a Twitter post in July 2019, ostensibly taking responsibility for the party's poor showing in the 2019 general election, has been the bane of the party.

### **Does the Grand old Party have a TINA Issue?**

Leaders in the Congress party need to recognise that the party is no longer the over-arching 'Grand Old party' that it was, and it is losing its sheen at a very rapid rate. Besides the fact that it has the lowest number of representatives in the Lok Sabha today at 44, it is left playing second fiddle to regional parties such as the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra. The rise of regional political formations, which are more representative of local aspirations, has denuded the utility of the Congress to voters in many states. Unlike the regional parties and maybe even the Bharatiya Janata Party, it still has a secular, all-India character and its support base cuts across all classes of Indians. However, its highest echelon has narrowed so much as to base its survival on only one family, which is losing its vote catching capability, but continues to be a uniting factor. The TINA (There Is No Alternative) factor of the family lies in the fact that no second rung leader in the party will allow any other second rung leader to ascend the 'throne'. There is also no other leader within the party who is head and shoulders above the others and could take on the mantle of being the face of the party and has mass appeal to win votes. The party has its core base intact but is crying for a charismatic leader who is a full-time political strategist and practitioner and can build mass appeal. So, the million-dollar question ultimately is: Can any other Congress leader keep the party united and lead it to electoral victories? And will

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<sup>7</sup> Anuja, "Two years since leadership crisis, Congress's bigger trouble continues to be from State Units", *The Wire*, 2 July 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/congress-leadership-crisis-state-units-disarray-elections>.

the other leaders accept that leader and function under his stewardship? The reality is that even if such a leader is thrown up by an election process, the Gandhi family will continue to be the alternative power centre around whom disgruntled elements congregate. The country witnessed that phenomenon playing out in the creation of the National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by Sonia during the UPA government's tenure. It was rumoured that the NAC had become a super cabinet.

If one were to drill deeper, the Congress still has a core group of followers and educated, young Indians would find its secular credentials attractive. Vibrant parliamentary democracies function more effectively with a capable and credible opposition party to keep the ruling combine in check. The party has taken on young leaders like Kanhaiya Kumar with outstanding oratorical skills and is in the process of recruiting Prashant Kishor with exceptional strategic capabilities. These are assets at the middle level that can give it the cohesive long-term political acuity, which it seems to be lacking. Aspirational India is still looking for a party with an all-India presence that is not mired in religion or caste politics. The Congress party can be the rallying point for broad-minded Indians as even in the 2019 elections, it polled 19 per cent of the votes. However, to be that alternative, the party will have to rejuvenate itself by undertaking organisational reforms, restructuring the party hierarchy, allowing the electoral process to throw up a leader and eschewing dynastic leadership. Maybe only then, it will provide a responsible opposition and later rise up like the phoenix.

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