

# *Policies & Perspectives*



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

*The election (or selection) of a new face as the Congress national president is not an everyday affair, and it, therefore, brings along a sense of excitement for the party in particular and the Indian polity in general. There have been less than two dozen persons who have occupied this important post in the party since Independence. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), on the other hand, has had 10. But a comparison would be out of place since the BJP came into existence only since 1980. However, it is interesting that while the Congress has had just one person — Sonia Gandhi — as its president since 1998, the BJP has had eight during the same period. Depending on interpretation, it can be seen as a sign of robust inner party democracy in the BJP or an overwhelming feeling of trust Congressmen have demonstrated in their chosen leader. Given that this two-decade of status quo in the Congress leadership is about to change, the buzz around Rahul Gandhi taking charge soon enough and bringing in a new team and new ideas, is understandable.*

*There is a whirlwind of opinions on the anticipated elevation of the Congress vice president, but not surprise. After all, considering how leaderships are shaped in the party, it had been assumed from the day Rahul Gandhi entered active politics by becoming the chief of the Indian Youth Congress, president of the National Students Union of India and the party's general secretary, and successfully contesting the Lok Sabha election for the first time in 2004, that he would, barring any untoward development, eventually end up as the party's chief, if not the country's Prime Minister. This belief received a boost after he was appointed vice president in early 2013 — incidentally at a time when things had begun to spiral out of control for the Congress's image in the wake of major scams and Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement. It can be speculated that Rahul Gandhi's promotion as party president would have happened earlier but for these challenges which, senior Congress leaders felt, could be more effectively handled by Sonia Gandhi. Additionally, media reports had it that the veterans in the Congress, comfortably ensconced in their equations with Sonia Gandhi for two decades and more, were not too comfortable with the prospect of dealing with a young new leader who had failed to prove his mettle in electoral battles. The Congress party's rout in the 2014 Lok Sabha election which Rahul Gandhi led from the front, came as a dampener to the anticipated coronation.*

*In that sense, the present situation is a no-risk opportunity for the party. The Congress cannot possibly lose anymore substantially than it already has. This does not necessarily mean that the party can only win from hereon; one merely presumes with some amount of certainty that major debacles have already happened. As party president, Rahul Gandhi will not surprise anyone if he leads the Congress to more defeats, since he has already been short of expectations on more than one occasion. However, if by a stroke of luck he strikes gold, that would amaze people — not the least his party workers. The other reason why his elevation cannot be any longer delayed is to do with incumbent chief Sonia Gandhi's deteriorating health. For close to two decades, she has helmed the party in times good and bad. She led the Congress to a stunning and surprising victory in 2004 when the general opinion was that the BJP, riding on the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Government's*



performance and Vajpayee's own charisma, would be voted back to power. Sonia Gandhi managed the feat by clubbing together a rainbow coalition with a host of disparate political organisations, and then for the next 10 years, effectively managing the affairs of the Government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Now she believes the time is right to pass the baton to her son and deputy who, regardless of his leadership setbacks, cannot shirk the responsibility in the way he did when he refused to join the UPA Government despite many appeals from Congress leaders and even from the then Prime Minister. With the incumbent chief determined to quit office, the stray opposition which still exists within the party to Rahul Gandhi's elevation will evaporate. Besides, the old-timers will ensure that Sonia Gandhi remains in circulation as the party's parliamentary board chief as well as possibly the convener of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

While Rahul Gandhi is a pan-India leader who is confronted with all the challenges that national political figures have to face in their careers, he has to combat a more fundamental issue: That of being first accepted as a serious politician. His frequent disappearances to, at times unknown destinations, in moments when the party needs his presence, his trivial comments on weighty matters (terming GST as "Gabbar Singh Tax", for instance), the mundane photo-ops he indulges in, his short understanding of complicated issues, a penchant to antagonise key regional leaders who then walk out of the Congress and effect its downfall, and failure to anticipate party crises and set in motion damage-control measures, are apparent. He needs to work on these impressions. He ought to have realised by now, even before he assumes charge as Congress president, that he is face to face with leaders such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP chief Amit Shah who are full-time politicians, are forever plotting their next electoral wins, and are adept at turning setbacks into opportunities. Looking within his party, he needs the political cunningness of Indira Gandhi and her mass-connect ability. Besides, he could do with the sobriety of PV Narasimha Rao and Lal Bahadur Shastri's humility. Unless he projects as a seasoned politician — critics will say that since he already has had ample time to do so, there is no hope of a turnaround — he will fail to revive the fortunes of his party. The party would also miss out on winning over the trust of senior leaders of like-minded parties who would be needed in coalition-formation, and who will be in no mood to subordinate themselves before a relatively young politician.

While there are challenges, there is at least one apprehension which need not bother Rahul Gandhi when he becomes his party's president: That of being held accountable from within. So far he has escaped blame for the Congress's continued defeats despite leading the party in elections; scapegoats were always available. On the other hand, the stray wins that came its way were promptly attributed to him — even when he had played little role in the triumph — such as in the Punjab and Bihar Assembly elections. This does not mean that the Congress refuses to apportion blame for defeats; it fixes accountability provided the person is from outside the Nehru-Gandhi family. The Congress lost the 1996 Lok Sabha election after Narasimha Rao completed his full five-year term as Prime Minister (he was also party president, having refused to delegate the responsibility elsewhere and gained the displeasure of the Nehru-Gandhi family loyalists straightaway). Senior leaders immediately held him responsible for the defeat, not just over his governance but also for his role as the party's chief. This is best exemplified by Pranab Mukherjee in his book, 'The Coalition Years', which is the third in his series of memoirs. His subtitle to one of the chapters dealing with the



subject tells it all: “*PV Leads Congress to Defeat in 1996*”. He says that the party faced a major defeat under Rao’s leadership, “reducing its strength from 230 to 140 in the Lok Sabha”. He points out that there was an 8.4 per cent swing away from the Congress vis-a-vis 1991. The clamour against Rao was shrill and corruption charges (which remained unproved) against him made matters worse. Besides, he had to suffer the taint of having ‘allowed’ the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya. Eventually he had to quit.

His successor’s fate was to be no different, since he too came from outside the family. Sitaram Kesri, that old warhorse and party treasurer for 16 years, who is credited with engineering the downfall of two Congress-supported regimes of HD Deve Gowda and JK Gujral, was virtually dismissed as party chief in 1998 after the Congress failed to perform well in the national election. Kesri had become president following a keenly contested election against Sharad Pawar and Rajesh Pilot. Congress leaders demanded the president’s scalp for the Congress’s dismal performance which eventually paved the way for the first BJP-led Government at the Centre. There was no hesitation in holding him accountable. The demand for Sonia Gandhi, who had by then become a primary member of the party, to take over the reins, grew. Kesri received feelers asking him to make way, but he declined. The party was faced with a dilemma, as it had the unpleasant and unprecedented task to oust a sitting president. In his book, Mukherjee explains the modus operandi. As a senior member and one who was justifiably credited with understanding the nuances of the party’s constitution, he discovered a provision for the purpose — Article XIX-J which allows for appropriate steps to be taken by the Congress Working Committee (CWC) not mentioned in the Constitution, with the caveat that such a step had to be ratified by the All India Congress Committee within six months. That done, Sitaram Kesri’s fate was sealed. The book goes on to tell how the drama unfolded. The CWC met under his leadership and senior members including Sharad Pawar and Ghulam Nabi Azad appealed to Kesri that he invite Sonia Gandhi to assume charge. He declined to entertain their request, called the meeting to an end and walked out. Being the senior-most, Mukherjee was asked to preside, and the CWC passed a resolution thanking Kesri for his leadership and, cleverly invoking his earlier media remark that he would step aside to make way for Sonia Gandhi, appealed to her to assume the responsibility. Sonia Gandhi gratefully accepted the offer.

Pranab Mukherjee glosses over the details. Author-journalist Rasheed Kidwai is more forthcoming in his book published a few years ago, ‘24 Akbar Road: A Short History of the People behind the Fall and Rise of the Congress’, of Kesri’s humiliation. He wrote, “Kesri died a disturbed and disillusioned man. He could not reconcile himself to his ceremonial ouster. There was much that he wanted to say, but he suffered an asthma attack and then slipped into a coma.” The humiliated veteran leader died in October 2000. He had been a victim of nothing less than a shameful coup.

Thus it was that responsibility for the defeats were pinned on party chiefs Rao and Kesri. The first allegedly brought the strength of the Congress in the Lok Sabha down to 140 seats from 232 in 1991, and the second fared no better in 1998. Neither Rao nor Kesri was a grassroots leader capable of swinging votes in the Congress’s favour. They could not have been blamed for the losses just as much as they could not have been credited for a victory — if it had come the Congress’s way. Sonia Gandhi had vigorously

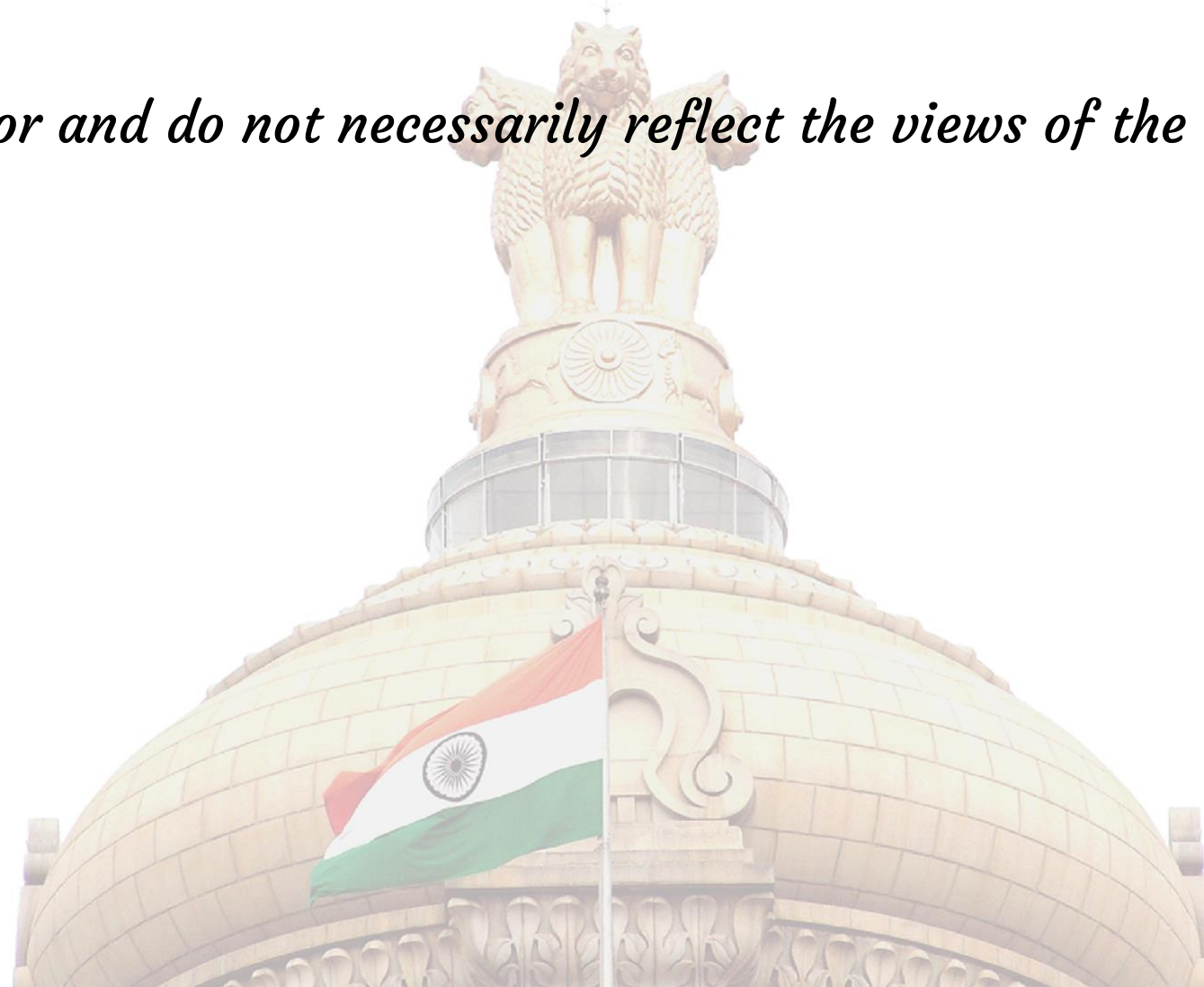


*campaigned for the party in 1998 which the Congress lost. And yet it was not she but Kesri, who had little backing by then within the party and whose departure was already being scripted, was made the scapegoat. Full credit went to her for the 2004 and 2009 victories, but the accountability for the 2014 debacle was deflected away from her. Rao and Kesri lost their place for reducing the Congress to 140-odd seats in the Lok Sabha, and yet there was not the faintest question on Sonia Gandhi's leadership ability after she helmed the party to the lowest ever Lok Sabha tally in history: 44 seats.*

*It may be argued that it was effectively Rahul Gandhi, and not Sonia Gandhi, who had led the campaign. In that case, has he been held accountable, a la Rao or Kesri? The soon-to-be party president can count on such discriminatory practice to continue within the Congress. The moot point is whether it would be in the party's larger interest?*

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*(Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the VIF)*



## About VIF

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