[**The masses bringing change?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1707529/the-masses-bringing-change)

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THE media is riveted to the news that the Congress party will elect a new president in October, one who will not be from the Nehru-Gandhi family. So what will that do for the party or even for the country? Usually, insightful friends see in the jostling a pantomime sponsored by corporate chiefs whose names the Gandhis have dared to call out. The ‘rebellion’ within the Congress led by some who never won a Lok Sabha election, is an element in the script. When business captains met in Gujarat ahead of the 2014 elections to name Narendra Modi as their prime ministerial candidate, the move had a main purpose: to ensure the removal of the Gandhis from the opposition frame. The Gandhis on their part never wanted to be in politics. Now, they have an interest: to keep certain party men from capturing the party.

So, elect a new president by all means. However, a truer groundbreaking quest would be to perhaps figure out what really does India’s oldest party plan to do that would make it worthy of being the only party with a pan-India base. Statistics can be a misleading ploy but who can’t deny the hard facts the strangely stacked numbers reveal? The BJP won all of 37 per cent votes nationwide in the last general elections. The Congress got only slightly more than 19pc votes that translated to fewer than 10pc of the Lok Sabha’s seats for the first time.

But statistics are like a babbling toddler. You have to patiently understand the babble to divide the angst or the joy as the case may be. The cold facts are that the Congress was routed in 1977 and removed from power with a tally of 34pc votes, just 3pc fewer than the BJP’s current numbers. And with 34pc, the Congress was routed. However, and this is crucial, what the BJP hasn’t succeeded in doing is to have an imprint with a vote share spread in almost every Indian state. The Congress holds the position despite being in power only in Rajasthan today. Spare a thought for the needed change, if only the Congress puts its act together, not necessarily as the Lone Ranger of Hollywood movies but more like the Samurais of Kurosawa, rallying the entire opposition, resolutely and selflessly. The BJP rubs in the point that the Congress has only two seats in Uttar Pradesh, true. But the BJP had two seats in parliament once, and that was not long ago as Indian politics goes.

Focus is key. The torture the other day of a physically frail Sonia Gandhi being summoned by the government’s revenue sleuths to their offices was despicable. The BJP thrives on being mean with critics and opposition parties. When BJP’s senior leader L.K. Advani was grilled, however, over charges of dubiously transacted election funds wealth, which implied money laundering, the Congress ensured that all questions were asked at Advani’s residence. It was not his privilege, just a courtesy to a senior opposition leader.

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However, what was disconcerting other than Sonia trudging to the revenue officers thrice in a row was to see the party ‘in action’ over the matter. Every senior leader was dying to court arrest. They who never came out when mobs killed innocent Indians, or when wrong Indians were sent to jail. Protest the leader’s perverse grilling by all means. But spare a thought also for the time the same leaders were missing from view when a woman was gang-raped in Gujarat of 2002 and her rapists were set free with a nod from the highest court. Masses would have joined the Congress had it protested then as it did Ms Gandhi’s personal trauma. Who was advising the Gandhis to squander the precious chance to redeem their pledge for a national movement when citizens were being assaulted by the state? Is the new president going to lead the charge?

Whatever has happened to the second freedom movement, anyway? Had the leaders spoken out of turn? Was the thought too unwieldy for their brand of slothful politics? In that case it’s so ironical.

Gandhi critics cite the party’s recent habit of perpetually losing elections. They seem less concerned that where the party did win the states with allies, it found its satraps deserting the party to join or help the BJP in toppling the Congress and its allies. Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and more recently Maharashtra come to mind as states the BJP did not win but rules. Is changing the party president the answer?

It could be crucial, therefore, that while ushering in a new party chief, Congress leaders also define what they meant when they called for a second independence movement. Focus on that instead of undermining the critical importance of the Gandhis, not necessarily as leaders but as a uniting force at this critical juncture of politics ahead of the 2024 polls.

Let’s be clear. The family was thrust into politics by a string of dark events, beginning with Indira Gandhi’s assassination. It’s a lie that her son coveted the job as her successor. There’s no evidence to support the claim. The minions may have created the pressure rightly or wrongly that he alone could save India from the instability triggered by Indira Gandhi’s policies, chiefly towards Punjab, and then by her gruesome death. However, Sonia Gandhi is on record as threatening to leave her husband if he became prime minister. She feared, presciently as it turned out, that he too would be killed. Now that Rahul is setting out on a ‘Unite the nation march’ next month — after having refused the party president’s job yet again — he could be preparing India for the resumption of mass politics that had gone missing from the Congress worldview. He is taking a very necessary risk at a very violent moment in Indian history. Is this ambition?

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