



Democratising Political Parties

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This article is based on “**How to democratise the party**” which was published in The Indian Express on 23/10/2021. It talks about the need to democratise the functioning of political parties in India.

Democratic theory includes both **procedural** and **substantive democracy**. Procedural democracy can be said to refer to the practice of universal adult franchise, periodic elections, **secret ballot**, while substantive democracy can be said to refer to the internal democratic functioning of the parties, which purportedly represent the people.

The roots of the most pertinent challenges faced by Indian politics today can be traced to the **lack of intra-party democracy** in candidate selection and party elections.

Need for Democracy in Political Parties

- **Representation:** The absence of **intra-party democracy** has contributed to political parties becoming **closed autocratic structures**. This adversely impacts the constitutional right of all citizens to **equal political opportunity** to participate in politics and contest elections.
- **Less factionalism:** A leader with **strong grassroot connection** would not be sidelined. This will allow less factionalism and division of parties. Eg. Sharad Pawar formed Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Mamata Banerjee formed All India Trinamool Congress after leaving Indian National Congress (INC).
- **Transparency:** A **transparent party structure** with **transparent processes** will allow proper ticket distribution and candidate selection. The selection would not be based on the whims of a few powerful leaders in the party but will represent the choice of the larger party.
- **Accountability:** A democratic party will be **accountable to its party members**, for they will lose elections in the next cycle for their shortcomings.
- **Decentralising power:** Every political party has **State and local body units**, an election at each level will allow creation of power centres at different levels. This will allow **decentralisation of power** and the decision making will take place at the ground level.

- **Criminalization of Politics:** As there is **no well-defined process for the distribution of tickets** to candidates before elections, tickets are given to candidates on the vague concept of winnability. This has led to an additional problem of **candidates with criminal backgrounds** contesting elections.

Reasons for Democracy Deficit

- **Dynasty politics:** The **lack of intra-party democracy** has also contributed to the growing **nepotism in political parties**. With senior party leaders fielding their kins in elections, the succession plans for “family” constituencies are being put in place.
- **Centralised structure of Political Parties:** The **centralised mode of functioning** of the political parties and the **stringent anti-defection law of 1985** deters party legislators from voting in the national and state legislatures according to their individual preferences.
- **Lack of Law:** Currently, there is **no express provision** for internal democratic regulation of political parties in India and the only governing law is provided by Section 29A of the **Representation of the Peoples’ Act, 1951** which provides for registration of political parties with the ECI. However, the ECI’s power to require parties to hold regular internal elections for office bearers, and candidate selection is compromised in the **absence of any penal provisions**.
- **Personality cult:** There is a **tendency of hero worship** in people and many times a leader takes over the party and builds his own coterie, ending all forms of intra-party democracy. For example, **Mao Zedong** taking over the People's Republic of China; **Donald Trump** hijacking the Republican Party of the USA.
- **Easy to subvert internal elections:** The ability of existing repositories of power to subvert internal institutional processes to **consolidate power and maintain the status quo** is unquestionable.

Recommendations

- **By Law Commission:** The **170th report of the Law Commission of India** on reform of electoral laws, dedicated an entire chapter on the necessity of providing laws relating to internal democracy within parties.

It observed that a political party which does not respect democratic principles in its internal working cannot be expected to respect those principles in the governance of the country.
- **NCRWC Report:** The **National Commission for Review of Working of Constitution** states that there should be a comprehensive legislation regulating the registration and functioning of political parties or alliances of parties in India.
- **2nd ARC Report:** The **Administrative Reforms Commission’s (ARC) 2008 Ethics and Governance Report** pointed out that **corruption is caused by over-centralisation** since the more remotely power is exercised from the people, the greater is the distance between authority and accountability.

Way forward

- **Law to Compulsify Elections:** It shall be the **duty of the political party** to take appropriate steps to ensure holding of **elections at all levels**. The political party shall hold elections of national and State levels in **the presence of the observers** to be nominated by the ECI.
- **Amending Anti Defection Law:** The **Anti-Defection Act of 1985** requires the party legislators to act according to the party whip which is decided by the diktats of the highest party leadership. One way to democratise political parties is to promote **intra-party dissent**.

The anti defection law can be limited to disqualification of Members only if they vote against their party whip during important events such as **no-confidence motions**.
- **Reservation:** Seats can be **reserved for women** and members of the **backward community including minorities**.
- **Financial transparency/Audit:** It must be made mandatory for all political parties to submit their statements of expenditure to the ECI, **within the prescribed time limit**. Political parties not submitting on time or in the prescribed format should be heavily penalized.
- **Empowering ECI:**
 - The ECI shall be competent to **inquire into allegations of non-compliance** of any of the provisions requiring elections.
 - **Penalties for non compliance:** ECI should have the **penal power to deregister** a party until free and fair elections in the party are conducted.

Conclusion

Politics is inseparable from political parties as they are the prime instruments for the execution of democracy in the country. Introducing **internal democracy and transparency within political parties** is important to promote **financial and electoral accountability, reduce corruption, and improve democratic functioning** of the country as a whole.

It is imperative that political parties open their eyes to growing calls for electoral political reforms and take steps towards bringing in **intra-party democracy**.

Drishti Mains Question

“Democratising the political parties in India will democratise Indian Polity.” Comment.
