

Democracy 101: Lessons from India

By giving the Congress party a fresh chance to deliver on democracy's promise Indians have placed their faith in the institutions of pluralism, the true guarantees of a brighter future

It's official: India is truly the world's largest, genuinely pluralistic democracy. In a dramatic series of events outside her residence near the Indian parliament May 18 evening, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi rejected her Congress party's mandate to assume the prime minister's position, telling supporters that she is "not hungry for power" and that irrespective of India's decision, her party had "won the battle."

Still jubilant from the shocking election results, India's citizens expressed dismay at her decision. Some tried to immolate themselves, others pointed guns at their heads, threatening to commit suicide if she did not fulfill the will of the people. India's 85 percent Hindu population already has a Muslim president, and sent clear signals that they wanted Sonia Gandhi, a Catholic, to be their prime minister, proving that India embodies in one country the anti-clash of civilizations.

But by renouncing her expected claim to the prime minister's office, Gandhi has permanently transitioned India away from dynastic entitlement towards meritocratic governance, and India is the better for it.

As America suffers its own presidential election this year, it can learn a few lessons from this incredible story unfolding in one of the world's poorest countries.

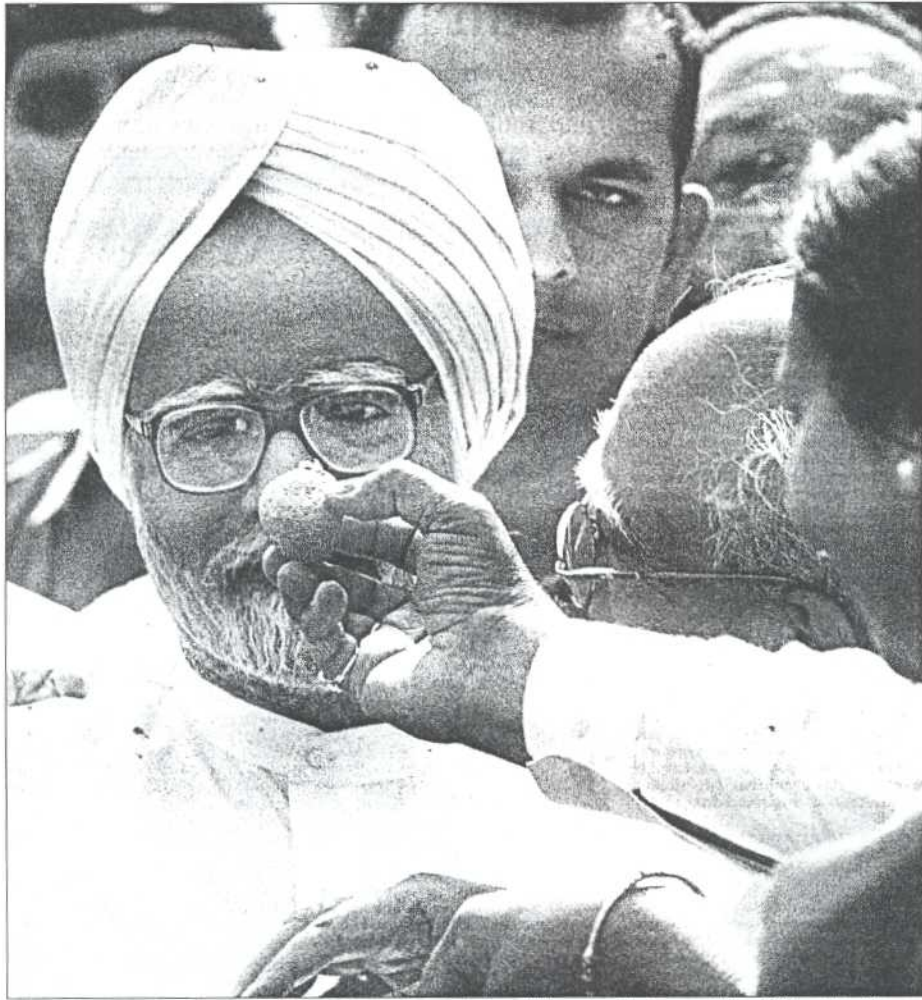
First, get out the vote. Despite having to cross the Rajasthan desert in camel-drawn carts and threats of violent reprisals from militants in Kashmir, the Indian election authority mapped out a multi-stage balloting process lasting a month, with security teams and electronic voting machines moving around the country each week.

Despite the economic destitution which characterizes daily life for over 400 million Indians, voter turnout was higher than in the US and close to the level of many West European nations. As ousted BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee conceded in accepting defeat: "The people have spoken... My party and alliance have lost, but India has won." India's voting machines are now being sold to Florida, and Indian columnists are proudly offering election-monitoring services to America.

Second, secularism is the faith of democracy. Over the course of the six-year reign of the nationalist NDA coalition, the Indian government had tacitly acquiesced to some of the most heinous anti-Muslim communal violence since India's bloody Partition in 1947. Voters saw straight through the party's last minute pandering to Muslims in densely populated states and soundly rejected the chauvinist platform, which had come to be its hallmark.

The Congress party's victory is seen as a victory for the protection rather than persecution of minorities. In addressing her party May 18 evening, Sonia Gandhi declared that, "My aim has always been to defend secularism," not to become prime minister. A true democracy neither governs by, nor distinguishes among, faiths.

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Furthermore, in a land of thousands of social castes, social mobility has increased, allowing even the most downtrodden and excluded populations the opportunity to define the political priorities of those far more fortunate. Even if our next president is a 'Boston Brahmin,' his cabinet should reflect the true diversity of the nation's population.

A multi-party system encourages competition and demands effectiveness. India's myriad political parties allow a far greater panoply of social interests to be legitimately and transparently represented than in the US. By not achieving an absolute majority, the Congress party must form a coalition consisting of a masala of various factions and parties ranging from the marginalized to the Marxist.

Though stifling at times, this process requires that parties agree on a Common

Minimum Program to guide Parliament's work. Rather than constant bipartisan bickering, large democracies require multiple political groups to adequately capture diverse needs and interests, and stimulate competition to lead consensus among them.

Sonia Gandhi's decision was largely based on economic concerns. The Indian stock market dropped by over 15 percent in two days after the election results were delivered due to concerns that Gandhi's coalition partners would bring the previous government's rapid liberalization policies to a halt. But her right hand man, the new Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, was the architect of India's first wave of liberalization in the early 1990s and would have been at least finance minister under Sonia Gandhi.

The consensus does exist to continue India's economic reforms, but the broad base of the electorate rightly questioned to what end.

Finally, impatience is a virtue. The election of Sonia Gandhi's Congress party has been widely read as a victory for nepotism and name recognition over meritocracy and agenda-driven leadership. But the people do have an agenda, and the ruling BJP

coalition did not fulfill it during its six-year reign. Its campaign promised that 'India is shining,' but for a largely illiterate population, the benefits have not trickled down from the dot.com millionaires favored by the forces of rapid privatization.

Democracy is not inimical to development. By giving the Congress party a fresh chance — even under the leadership of a 'foreigner' — to deliver on democracy's promise Indians have placed their faith in the institutions of pluralism, the true guarantees of a brighter future.

The one month-long Indian election captured the imagination of a great many observers around the world. Headlines in India proclaimed Sonia Gandhi would be the "waitress-turned-world leader." Though she sacrificed her chance to hold the highest office, the Sonia phenomenon is a sign of things to come. For example, Senator Orrin Hatch has proposed a constitutional amendment — enthusiastically supported by Arnold Schwarzenegger — which would allow immigrants who have been citizens for 20 years to run for president. India's present could be our future.

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