

Counter-Factual View: Why A Direct Attack on Rahul Gandhi May Improve BJP's Electoral Chances in 2024...

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Source:

A lot's been said over in the past week by political commentators on the possible ramifications of the juridical sentencing of Rahul Gandhi that led to his disqualification as an MP.

Two excellent pieces penned down recently by [Pratap Bhanu Mehta](#) and [Christopher Jaffrelot](#) warrant closer look.

Mehta [argues how](#) the Modi-Shah government –“a regime that is paranoid and full of impunity”, is “veering towards a full-blown tyranny” and has “overreached” in attacking the Opposition, harassing civil society, suppressing any form of dissent-protest, and can be seen as “harbingers of a full-blown system of rule where all the interlocking parts add up to the one objective of tyrannical rule: To create pervasive fear”.

Jaffrelot views the current state of political transition in India as part of a ‘new sequence’ that has started. He argues, “When institutions of the Republic are captured by the ruling party the way they are in India today, the opposition is forced to find alternative ways and means.”

According to him, the “political neutralisation” of Rahul Gandhi became a necessity for the BJP to undertake post the “success of Bharat Jodo Yatra” and his remarks on the state of Indian Democracy made abroad.

“Rivals of Rahul Gandhi, including Arvind Kejriwal, are now realising the existential risk that this regime is representing for all dissenters — including them, something the arrest of Manish Sisodia had already made clear. When opposition leaders close ranks, the task of authoritarian leaders become more complicated: their polarisation strategy, in a way, boomerangs.”, says Jaffrelot.

My view here is more counter-intuitive to Jaffrelot’s.

There are two points to make.

Yes, the BJP may have “overreached” in its attack on Rahul Gandhi. There is also almost no previous case of any MP being disqualified from Lok Sabha on ‘defamation’ or ‘slander’ grounds.

But, there is still an electoral logic behind the madness and chaos triggered by the chain of events seen since last week-and the disqualification of Rahul Gandhi as an MP.

First, it appears to be an open challenge thrown by the BJP to Rahul Gandhi in affirming the ‘class of political leader he really is’. If he claims to really ‘fight’ the BJP on his own, he has to prove to what extent-and cost is he willing to go on from here.

A street-fighter politician like Mamata Banerjee or Sharad Pawar may not think twice in going to jail — at such a provocation- while throwing a punch or two back at the BJP, which would only enhance their ‘personal popularity’ amongst voters.

Manish Sisodia from the AAP ultimately went to jail for the charges levied against him, and his party made a lot of news in showing how the BJP was attacking the AAP and its leaders through the weaponization of centralised agencies.

Similarly, will Rahul Gandhi be prepared to go to Jail and take the fight against the BJP from there-driving his party closer from within and with others in the opposition outside?

The pre-independence movement anchored by the Indian National Congress (INC)-including Gandhi’s own family, saw many leaders go to jail, and took the fight against the British Raj-its’ injustices, while being in prison. Rahul Gandhi, the great-grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru who spent more than nine years of his life in jail and made many sacrifices for the cause of India’s freedom, so far, hasn’t shown any indication of what his great-grandfather did or his own party leaders did-to fight an unjust regime at the time.

Personal popularity of leaders matters more than anything else in Indian politics, particularly at this point when there is no national level ‘face’ to counter Modi’s personal popularity. We argued this at length in our recent book ...

Bharat Jodo Yatra may have surely helped Rahul Gandhi re-define his ‘personal image’ to the larger masses, positioned him against the BJP, someone who was earlier perceived as a dynast with little or no personal charisma (amongst voters).

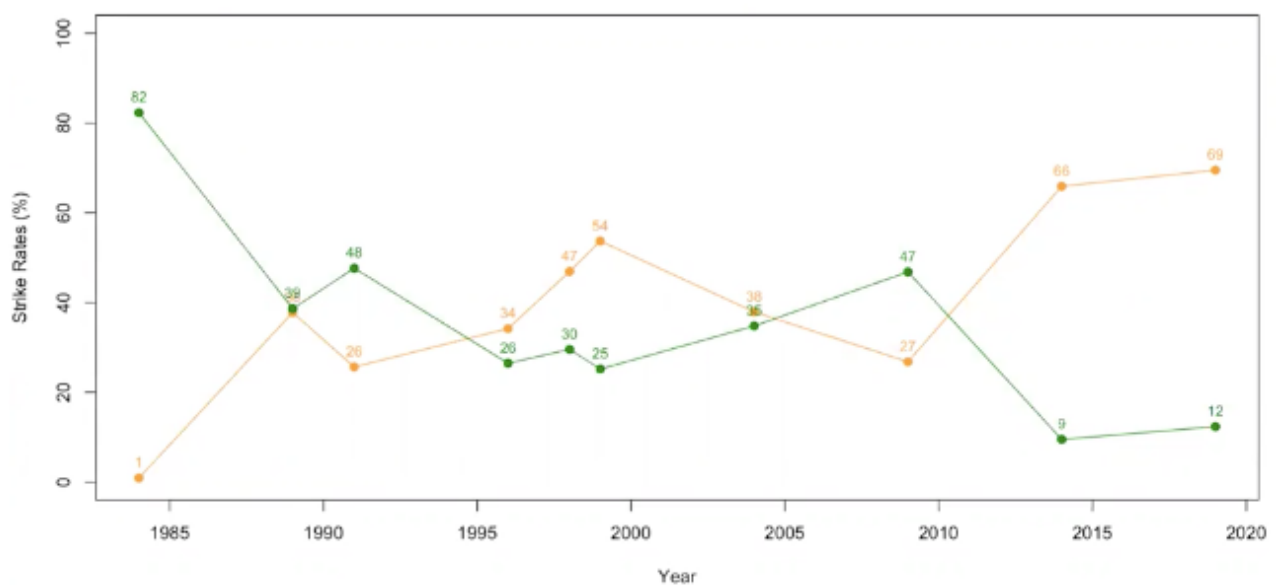
But, the main litmus test of his ‘personal popularity contest’ against the likes of Narendra Modi -is to be seen now (and in the weeks ahead).

Using the current crisis as an opportunity to stand against a ‘tyrannical’ BJP, uniting other opposition leaders (like Kejriwal, Mamata, Pawar) to present a synchronised opposition front, will be Rahul Gandhi’s main challenge.

The Yatra may have done more for the Congress party itself to appear more united - between the North and the South, but the opposition at large (of which Congress is a miniscule part of) remains a set of incoherent, scattered plots in an axis quadrant against BJP’s electoral bandwagon.

Secondly, perhaps, this is why the BJP may continue to attack RG in the months ahead and promote the Congress -alone, as its principal opposition in 2024. Electoral results from 2014 and 2019, as analysed by Neelanjan Sircar et al. in their work, show how well the BJP ‘strikes’ against the Congress in any head-to-head electoral battles-particularly after 2014.

The electoral scenario (BJP vs. Congress) now is very different from how it was between these two parties in the 90s or 80s.

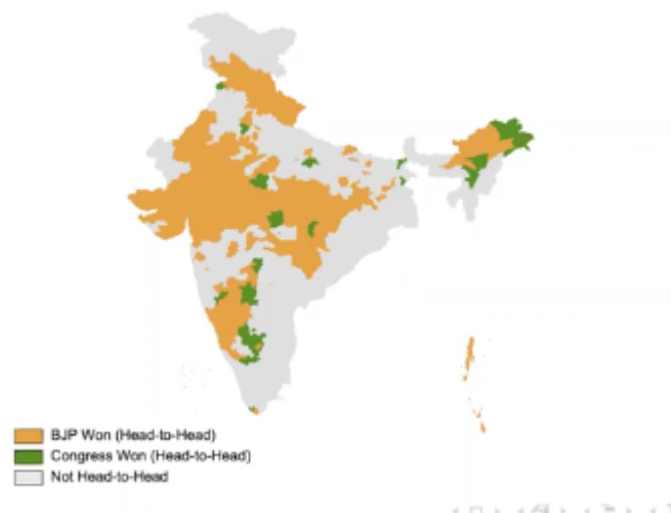


BJP’s Strike Rate vs. Congress’ Strike Rate (Source: Neelanjan Sircar, CPR)

Somewhere, the Grand Old Party -INC has failed to factor this 'change' into its electoral planning and political strategy.

It is still invested in the vision of seeing *itself* (alone) as the principal national opposition force to the BJP (something that electoral results show not to be the case). The BJP too is happy to be invested in that vision-knowing how well it does against the BJP in national electoral contests.

As Sircar's work shows, in terms of Indian states, during national elections, there is a substantive regional variation -in terms of support for the BJP (vs. Congress) at national level elections (vs. Vidhan Sabha electoral trends).



Source: Neelanjan Sircar, CPR

States like Bihar, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh saw BJP, in 2014, winning 194 out of 213 contested seats-seeing a strike rate of 91% (vs. Congress) and 69% of the total number of seats were won by the BJP. In AP, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, BJP won only 7 out of 101 contested seats (strike rate of 7%) and won 2% of total seats.

The spatial dimension observed in the degree of power concentration for the BJP across a few electorally significant states (from Bihar...to UP..) is striking and greatly revealing of the structural fault-lines seen between itself and the Congress.

For the Congress, even in states like AP, Kerala, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where the BJP doesn't do well, it would need the support of regional parties to win these big at a national level. This isn't rocket science! Anyone with a basic statistical understanding of past electoral trends can point this to the Congress Leadership-and to Rahul Gandhi, and signal the urgent need for the party to join forces with all regional opposition parties, in presenting a more united front against the BJP-so far it has failed to do so.

One can agree with Jaffrelot's broader argument that the current targeted attack against Rahul Gandhi presents itself as a 'turning point' in Indian politics- as a run up to what may happen in the 2024 polls.

But, if a counterintuitive logic was to be conceived, one can say that this: a direct attack against RG and the Congress rhetorically placed as BJP's national opposition, may actually work in favour of the BJP than against it in 2024, unless the Congress can put aside its 'ego' and learn to convene a national (opposition) front against the BJP, that has an electoral dividend in states where BJP's electoral hold and power is deep.

That will be Rahul Gandhi's (and his party's) main challenge going forward.