

Sonia Gandhi declines India's prime ministership

A craven capitulation to big business and the Hindu right

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The Indian and international press have almost universally hailed Sonia Gandhi's decision to forego India's prime ministership as a courageous act of self-sacrifice. In reality it was a craven capitulation. A capitulation to the Hindu supremacist right—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had begun an agitation against the “humiliation” of a “foreign” prime minister. But even more fundamentally a capitulation to Indian and international capital.

Gandhi's Congress party, which will form India's new government with the support of a half-dozen regional parties and the Left Front, has now anointed Manmohan Singh as prime minister designate. The Finance Minister in the Congress government of Narasimha Rao, Singh was the principal architect of the economic “liberalization” agenda that every Indian government has pursued since 1991 and has long been viewed by big business as its foremost representative in the Congress leadership.

India's stock markets had plunged in response to last week's shock general election result, which saw the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance driven from power by a popular backlash against the increasing poverty, economic insecurity, and social polarization that have resulted from the drive to make India a low-wage haven for world capitalism. However, once it became public knowledge Tuesday afternoon that Gandhi had renounced any claim to the prime ministership and Singh was likely to be named in her stead, share prices started to soar. The Bombay Stock Exchange, India's largest, rose 8 percent in value, its second largest ever one-day rise.

Spokesmen for Indian business have been gushing in their praise for Singh and for Gandhi's “statesmanship”. The “stature of Sonia Gandhi has gone up tremendously by not taking the prime ministership and recommending [the] name of Singh, [who is] known for balance, knowledge of economy, humility and ability to listen to people,” N. Srinivasan, the director general of the Confederation of Indian Industry, told India's largest press agency.

To big business, Gandhi's elevation of Singh is a welcome sign that the incoming government will press forward with economic “liberalization” despite the electorate's wishes.

Gandhi has provided no public explanation for her decision. In remarks to Congress leaders, a transcript of which has been made available to the press, she claimed she has never evinced any

interest in becoming prime minister. This claim is belied by the reaction of all levels of her Congress party. The Congress' parliamentary faction unanimously requested Gandhi rescind her decision. Some members of the Congress Working Committee have since threatened to resign in protest. Meanwhile, distraught Congress cadres have protested outside Gandhi's Delhi residence and the headquarters of the BJP.

Gandhi, who has officially led the Congress since 1998 and who acted as its chief spokesperson in the just completed election campaign, gave every indication she was preparing to assume the post of prime minister. Over the weekend she got herself re-elected as the head of the Congress Parliamentary Party and met or had emissaries negotiate with leaders of the parties that will provide the votes needed to bring a Congress-led coalition government to power.

Mimicking a tactic Mahatma Gandhi often used to justify arbitrary and controversial political decisions, Sonia Gandhi told the Congress leadership she was responding to her “inner voice”. She also claimed she is not interested in wielding power. But in declining the post of prime minister she has in no way moved to lessen her or the Nehru-Gandhi family's control of the Congress political machine. The party's constitution was amended Tuesday to create a new position of Congress Chairperson whose principal prerogative is to choose the party's leaders in the two houses of parliament and, thus, when the Congress is able to form the government, the prime minister. (Hitherto, the leaders were chosen by the Congress' parliamentarians.) Sonia Gandhi was promptly elected Congress Chairperson, meaning Manmohan Singh, who she then named as her choice for prime minister, will serve at her pleasure.

Gandhi's aides and Congress leaders, meanwhile, have let it be known that her family feared for her safety given the Hindu supremacists' vehement opposition to her becoming prime minister, that she was personally hurt by the assertions of the BJP and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) that she is not an Indian, and that she was loathe to see the issue dividing the country.

Everyone knows, however, that for the BJP and the RSS the issue of Gandhi's Italian birth was merely a pre-text to stoke up communal animosity and seek to overturn the elections results. Gandhi's refusal to take the post of prime minister will not stop

the Hindu supremacists from seeking to “divide” the nation, that is to foment communal reaction. Rather, by bowing to pressure from the Hindu supremacists, Gandhi has bestowed on them a legitimacy denied them by India’s electorate.

Amid the din of press approval for Gandhi’s actions, there were some voices of concern about the impact of such a capitulation to the Hindu right’s bullying and thinly-veiled threats of violence. “There will be a temptation now, for some of her most vociferous critics in the *Sangh parivar* [the network of organizations led by the RSS] ... to crow and gloat,” declared the *Hindustan Times*. “If Ms Gandhi had made her intention clear from the very beginning, her noble, brave and selfless decision would have had a greater impact.”

The *Hindu*, for its part, implored that Gandhi’s “stunning act of self-denial” should not “be allowed to be seen as an endorsement of the vicious campaign that the Sushma Swarajs, the Uma Bhartis, the Govindacharyas [all BJP stalwarts] and the rest in the *sangh parivar* have launched to block and subvert the electoral verdict.... In no democracy are losers in an election entitled to overrule the umpire on who won and lost.”

The leaders of the Left Front, who throughout the elections argued that working people should lend support to the Congress and thereby block the BJP’s return to power, immediately announced their willingness to accept Gandhi’s decision and support Indian big business’ choice for prime minister.

Subsequently, however, they indicated their shock and concern at Gandhi’s elevation of Manmohan Singh. If true, this is only proof of their wilful and criminal political short-sightedness. According to the *Times of India*, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)’s General Secretary, H.S Surjeet, and the former CPI (M) Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, “who have an extremely cordial relationship with Mrs. Gandhi, find her decision quite incredible.” The CPI (M)’s Bengali daily termed Gandhi’s decision a surrender” that “will only lend additional strength to communal forces.”

Behind a populist, even pseudo-socialist rhetoric, the Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian elite, has implemented policies that have paved the way for the growth of reaction. First it pursued a national development project that served to consolidate the rule of the national bourgeoisie, but left the mass of India’s toilers mired in poverty. Then in the early 1990s, it made an about-face and adopted an export-led growth strategy that aims to make India a magnet for foreign capital through privatization, deregulation, and massive cuts to public and social services and assistance to small farmers.

Moreover the Congress has a long and sordid history of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right. In the spring of 1947, even as the Congress leadership was negotiating the communal partition of the subcontinent with the British and the Muslim League, it campaigned for the creation of a Hindu-dominated West Bengal under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mookerjee, the Hindu Mahasbaha leader who went on to found the Jana Sangh, the BJP’s direct organizational and ideological precursor. In the early years of independence, Vallabhbhai Patel, the Home Minister and Jawaharlal Nehru’s principal rival for the Congress leadership, repeatedly sought to negotiate the RSS’s entry into the Congress.

Manmohan Singh was a senior minister in the Congress government of the early 1990s that proved unable and unwilling to counter the BJP agitation that ended in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya and possibly the worst communal riots since partition.

But if Gandhi’s decision was an adaptation to the Hindu supremacist right, it was even more a demonstration to Indian and foreign capital that whatever the mass of India’s toilers want, the incoming government will press forward with big business’ agenda.

It was not that the Congress had agitated against the economic reforms. But to garner votes, it sent mixed messages, pledging to business its support for the continued dismantling of India’s nationally-regulated economy, while appealing to popular anger over the lack of jobs and increasing economic hardship with various populist promises.

Shaken by the election results, business, both Indian and foreign, was determined to impress on the Congress leadership that it was not ready to accept any temporizing. Capital was not gunning for Sonia Gandhi *per se*. But when she declined to accept the post of prime minister and gave the job to Manmohan Singh instead, capital was quick to recognize that she had provided a dramatic demonstration of her and Congress’ intention to heed the markets, not the voices of India’s toiling masses.

In its lead editorial Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* chortled over the success of international capital in using the recent stock sell-off to send a blunt message to the incoming Congress government, while declaring Manmohan Singh, whose choice had not yet been confirmed, “the most reassuring candidate.” “The lesson of the past week,” declared the *Journal*, “is that if India truly wants to become an economic power it has to pay heed to the global voters known as investors, in addition to its own voters at home. India now attracts attention as well as capital, and the same market forces that have helped to promote an economic revival will ruthlessly punish policy mistakes.”

The US has become far and away India’s largest trading partner over the past decade and Wall Street shares Indian capital’s ambitions to make India a major site of cheap labor production, especially in the information technology, business processing and pharmaceutical and bio-tech research sectors. And like Indian big business, Wall Street is determined to see India’s anti-liberalization election mandate quickly and decisively countermanded.

Seldom has an incoming bourgeois government elected on the basis of populist phrases so rapidly revealed its true nature: The yet to be constituted, Left Front-backed Congress regime will be a government of extreme crisis that will connive with Hindu right and implement the agenda of Indian big business and international capital.



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