

# Behind the Indian press's adulation of Sonia Gandhi

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When Congress Party boss Sonia Gandhi announced last month that she was resigning her parliamentary seat only to seek re-election in the by-election her resignation triggered, India's corporate media all but unanimously proclaimed her a master political strategist. Once again, Gandhi had confounded her political opponents, or so the story went, while bolstering her credentials as a politician uninterested in the perks of office.

Typical was the reaction of the *Hindustan Times*. In an editorial titled "Sonia Gandhi's a smart politician," it termed Gandhi's temporary withdrawal from the Lok Sabha "a masterstroke"

In fact, Gandhi's resignation became necessary because a campaign that the Congress had gotten up against the rival Samajwadi Party using the so-called office-for-profit issue had gone badly awry. The current head of the Gandhi-Nehru Congress dynasty and power behind the throne in Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government suddenly found herself in danger of being stripped of her Lok Sabha seat by presidential order. Had that happened, Gandhi would have been legally barred from seeking re-election until the current parliament is dissolved—that is, until the next all-India election.

It was the Congress, with Gandhi's fulsome support, that first made a hue and cry about the constitutional prohibition against Indian parliamentarians holding a Union or state government-appointed post unless parliament has explicitly excluded that post from the office-for-profit prohibition.

The Congress had charged that Samajwadi Party actress-cum-politician Jaya Bhaduri was violating the office-for-profit prohibition because she was simultaneously a member of the upper house of India's parliament, the Rajya Sabha, and the chair of the Uttar Pradesh Cinema Promotion Board.

Acting on the Congress's complaint and the recommendation of the Election Commission, Indian President Abdul Kazam found that Bhaduri was holding a state government appointment that parliament had not specifically exempted and therefore stripped her of her Rajya Sabha seat. (Although the Samajwadi Party and the Congress are ostensibly allies against the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, the two parties have long been locked in a bitter and unseemly power struggle. Earlier this year, Samajwadi Party leaders accused the central government of bugging their phones.)

The opposition, with the BJP in the lead, responded to the Congress's successful goring of Bhaduri by charging that Gandhi was herself in violation of the office-for-profit prohibition, since she was both an MP and chairperson of the National Advisory Council, a new body created by the UPA government after it came to power in 2004 to monitor implementation of the UPA's Common Minimum Programme.

Realizing that Gandhi was at best in a legal gray zone, the Congress responded to the opposition campaign by trying to adjourn parliament so that new legislation could be brought forward providing Gandhi with the requisite exemption. But the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance allies, the Samajwadi Party, and the Left Front all refused to cooperate, with the BJP accusing the Congress of trying to hijack the parliamentary agenda to serve Gandhi's personal interests.

Gandhi and her advisors then happened on the resignation ploy, which made the office-for-profit issue mute, since she no longer held a Lok Sabha seat.

The dominant partner in India's coalition government evidently did not want Gandhi's fate to be determined by a president appointed by the previous BJP-led government.

Within Indian political circles, it is generally accepted that the office-for-profit prohibition—which was instituted to prevent the executive from trying to influence parliamentarians through the distribution of sinecures—needs to be overhauled. Some 60 other parliamentarians, from both the government and opposition benches, are reputed to be holding Union and state government appointments in violation of the office-for-profit rule.

Despite the political fireworks, the issue is unlikely to have any serious impact on the future of either the UPA government or Sonia Gandhi.

But the Congress's attempt to profit through the office-for-profit issue and the press reaction to Gandhi's resignation do merit further comment.

First and foremost, the extraordinary rallying of the press around Gandhi and the fawning praise of her leadership underscore that the most powerful sections of the Indian ruling class view that the UPA regime—which holds powers only because of the parliamentary support of the Left Front—currently constitutes the best vehicle for pressing

forward with their neo-liberal agenda.

Since coming to power in May 2004 on a wave of popular anger at the increasing misery and economic insecurity produced by the BJP's economic reforms, the UPA has accelerated the dismantling of all regulatory restraints on capital, while using the Stalinist-led Left Front to contain and derail the inevitable popular opposition.

Admittedly, last fall, there were increasingly loud complaints from India's corporate elite that the UPA government was bending too much to pressure from the Left Front and temporizing in the face of popular protests against further privatizations and deregulation and the gutting of restrictions on layoffs and plant closures.

But Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister P. Chidambaram were quick to respond with pledges to accelerate the pace of reform—Chidambaram notably promising that the UPA will act with a “killer instinct” akin to that of China, which has given capital carte blanche while ruthlessly suppressing working-class and peasant unrest.

More importantly, the government announced the opening of the retail sector to increased FDI and pushed forward with its airport privatization plan in the face of a militant strike, which was ultimately suppressed by the unions.

India's corporate elite was no less impressed with the UPA's negotiation of a nuclear accord with the Bush administration over the protests of its Left Front parliamentary allies. The Indo-US nuclear accord is viewed by the Indian elite as going a long way to realizing its ambitions for India to be recognized as a world power, for it constitutes de facto recognition of India as a nuclear weapons state and holds out the promise of a close partnership with Washington.

One certainly can imagine that under different conditions—conditions in which the corporate elite had grown disenchanted with the Congress-led UPA—the press might have spun Sonia Gandhi's problems with the office-for-profit issue quite differently.

The fact that the president of the Congress and head of the Congress parliamentary party was in violation of a constitutional prohibition would have been proclaimed a scandal and Gandhi's maladroitness of the office-for-profit issue against the Samajwadi Party held up as evidence of her poor judgment.

Although the circumstances are different, one only has to recall how the press pilloried Natwar Singh, then India's foreign affairs minister, after he was named in an appendix to Paul Volcker's final report on the so-called Iraqi oil-for-food scandal. Volcker provided no evidence of any wrongdoing by Singh, and other countries, including France and Russia, dismissed his report as an attempt by the US Republican right to smear its opponents. Yet the press and Singh's opponents in the Congress party leadership latched onto the Volcker report as a means of drumming out of the government someone known for his opposition to the Iraq War and who opposed

privileging the Indo-US relationship over other bilateral ties.

The press adulation of Sonia Gandhi is also significant because of the light it sheds on the continuing degeneration of the Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie. However unjustly, the Congress, because of its association with the struggle against British rule, once enjoyed genuine mass support.

Today, it is a corrupt and bloated apparatus—a party that has failed to win a parliamentary majority since 1984, and that is dependent on the Left Front not only to sustain it in office, but to lend its claims to be a progressive party, concerned with the plight of the poor, any semblance of credibility.

The Congress's factional war with the Samajwadi Party is nothing new. Indira Gandhi was assassinated after an attempt to exploit Sikh communalist politics backfired. But without any significant support in large swathes of the country, the Congress today relies more than ever on the media, maneuvers and reactionary appeals to win votes and form governments—whether it be the recent recruiting to the Congress of the former Shiv Sena Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Narayan Rane, or the attempt to prevent a rival coalition to come to power in Bihar through the use of president's rule.

And atop the Congress is the entirely accidental figure of Sonia Gandhi, who owes her position as supreme arbiter of Congress organizational affairs to the death of her brother-in-law, Sanjay Gandhi, and the assassination of her husband, Rajiv Gandhi. Yet the Congress leaders must all pay homage to Sonia Gandhi's wisdom and character. Thus, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that Gandhi's recent resignation had once again shown her to be India's “tallest leader” and someone with “a rare commitment to moral values.”

And the press—at least as long as the corporate elite calculates the UPA is the best vehicle for pursuing its neo-liberal agenda—joins in.



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