[**Party vs democracy**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649652/party-vs-democracy)

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EVENTS in India of late richly illustrate once again that Indian ‘democracy’ is unique among recognised parliamentary democracies. This should cause no surprise.

The fault lines were set in 1937 when responsible government and provincial autonomy were first introduced in India. The issue was the appointment of the speaker of the then United Provinces (UP) Legislative Assembly. Both Gandhi and Nehru agreed that he could and should be a party man. They opted for one Purshottam Das Tandon, a rabid Hindu communalist.

The reason was two-fold. Neither of the two leaders was enamoured of the British system of government. It was alien to the Indian tradition which rested on patriarchy, not equality. The assemblies were another front in the struggle for freedom. They believed in the Congress’s exclusive hold on power. This outlook led to partition. After independence, the Congress clung to this doctrine.

Parliamentary democracy was never given a chance in India.

In September 2021 the Congress high command comprises the party president Mrs Sonia Gandhi, son Rahul Gandhi and daughter Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.

They called for fresh elections to the leadership of the Congress party in the state legislature in Punjab against the wishes of its leader Capt Amrinder Singh. He resigned as chief minister. The party in the legislature decided in accordance with settled Indian political tradition not to elect the new leader itself but to leave the choice to the high command. The trio plumped for an obscure person, in preference to one Navjot Sidhu. Since retiring from cricket, Sidhu entered two diverse arenas — politics and TV comedy. His performance in both fields is notable for forced tasteless quips and a sustained flow of laughter.

The story does not end there. The new chief minister; an obscure Charanjit Singh Channi took his list of cabinet members in New Delhi for the high command’s approval. The net result is a mockery of parliamentary democracy as well as federalism. How can a chief minister who is a nominee of the centre stand up to that very centre to assert his state’s rights?

Parliamentary democracy rests on the fundamental principle that the elected representatives of the people accept no orders from anyone outside the legislature. The head of cabinet selects its members who therefore owe their loyalty to him. But the high command wants its own stooge as chief minister and controls him by also selecting his cabinet colleagues. No chief minister can stand up to the high command.

This was not always the case: India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru had to reckon with independent chief ministers. They owed their power to the electorate and were his peers in the Congress working committee — men like Dr B.C. Roy of West Bengal, Govind Ballabh Pant of UP, and Ravi Shankar Shukla of the Central Provinces. All were rank Hindu communalists. The truth is that while Nehru was a popular idol, the party machine was under the control of Vallabhbhai Patel. The chief minister now shared his outlook.

In 1972, prime minister Indira Gandhi, having swept the polls at the centre and in the states had opted for the present model of ‘readymade’ chief minister. Centre ministers were sent to the states as their chief ministers. The party in the legislatures obediently elected them as their leaders to qualify them as chief ministers.

This is party rule, not parliamentary democracy; and its origin lay in 1937 when the Congress high command consisting of Gandhi, Nehru and Patel nominated chief ministers who were called premiers at that time.

In November 1937, Nehru wrote: “What is the responsibility of the electorate? That electorate plumped for the Congress candidates, not because of their individual merits, but because they represented the Congress and its programme. Nothing could be clearer than this. The vote was for the Congress … It is to the Congress as a whole that the electorates give allegiance, and it is the Congress that is responsible to the electorate. The ministers and the Congress parties in the legislatures are responsible to the Congress and only through it to the electorate.” No wonder he had scorn for constitutionalists.

At the heart of it all lies the selection of the candidates. In the UK, the party in the constituency elects its candidate. In South Asia, he gets the party ticket for the elections to the front-line party bosses at the centre and is beholden to him. This extends the perversion of our parliamentary democracy. The truth is that the latter was never given a chance in India as such. The liberal constitutionalists took power like there was no democracy. In 1937, the Congress had no taste for parliamentary democracy.

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