

WHY A PRESIDENTIAL SYSTEM MAKES SENSE

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By Bhanu Dhamija

[Shashi Tharoor](#), a member of Parliament from the Congress party, has argued once again that India should switch to a US-type presidential form of government if it wishes to have a democracy that works. He's made this case many times before but the latest trigger is the ugly political game being played in Rajasthan.

Ironically, the main pushback to this sensible idea comes from Tharoor's own party. An article by Sanjay Jha, until recently a party spokesman, declared that the problems in Rajasthan are not because India's parliamentary system has failed, but because it is being subverted by the ruling [BJP](#). The case for a presidential system has also been criticised by Mohammed Ayoob, professor at the Michigan State University, on the grounds that India's problems are due to its venal political culture, not the parliamentary system. Similar are the objections of N Sai Balaji, a former JNU student union president, who argues that India needs to "democratise democracy," not abandon the present system.

The presidential system is superior to the parliamentary system precisely because it is much less likely to be subverted by a dominant political party or a corrupt culture. Tharoor's case is grounded on the presidential system's unique structural strengths — direct election of executive officials, independence of the executive and legislative branches, and separation of powers — that make majoritarianism and toppling the government nearly impossible.

Congress fears the presidential system under the mistaken belief that it would pave the way for a [Narendra Modi](#) dictatorship. Many Congress leaders think that since Prime Minister Modi is hugely popular, he would be elected President and rule the nation by fiat. "The general belief in the Congress is that parliamentary democracy is a guard against autocratic rule," Jha wrote. He quotes a party leader admonishing Tharoor's idea as "walking straight into Modi's trap".

But the presidential system, by its very design, offers the best protection against a one-man rule. America's founders devised that system after gaining independence from [England](#), mainly to avoid a British-type monarchical rule. Their system makes it impossible for powers to centralise in one branch of government. The President and the legislators there are independently elected and wield separate powers. In the last 233 years, no US President has ever been able to rule autocratically. Even these days, we see how President Donald Trump's autocratic tendencies are being suppressed by their Congress.

In fact, it is our own parliamentary system that fosters despotic tendencies. The reason is simple: The parliamentary system fuses both legislative and executive powers in the PMO. India's pseudo-federalism also gives our prime minister the power to appoint governors in each state and thereby control the entire nation.

It's unlikely that Modi will ever consider switching to the presidential system because it would curtail his powers. In the 1970s, [Indira Gandhi](#) dropped her plans to adopt that system for the same reason. Congress leader A R Antulay acknowledged this in 1994: "Indira Gandhi wanted to be a dictator, which is why in October 1976, she wanted a presidential system. But you can't be a dictator in presidential system."

Congress's other argument, that the presidential system is unsuited to India's diversity, is also fallacious. That system is more suitable for a diverse society because it is structurally decentralised. State and local governments have real powers, unlike in our system. Diverse societies need a decentralised system so that national majoritarian tendencies are curbed at the local level. This is why Congress leader Maulana Azad and others suggested a system for Independent India wherein state governments have more autonomy. But their advice was ignored.

Ayoob's objections to the presidential system are more informed. He argues that India's political malaise cannot be fixed by any system because we suffer from a poor political culture. India's politicians lack ideological commitment, and caste and communal considerations play a huge role in elections. "This is a societal virus that is unlikely to disappear by switching to a presidential system," he wrote. Ayoob also argues that since India lacks a "viable party structure, the presidential system will encourage even more irresponsible behaviour by elected legislators."

James Madison, the chief architect of the US Constitution, once wrote, "If men were angels, no government would be necessary." A good system of government is needed precisely because politicians have a lust for power, and people are parochial. The presidential system's structure minimises the impact of these human frailties. It divides and separates powers in multiple ways, so that politicians have less of an incentive to sell out for their own advancement. And its elections are held across many different constituencies — municipal for town officials, statewide for the House and Senate, and nationwide for the President—which make it difficult for ethnic or communal forces to form majorities.

As for Ayoob's point about India lacking a party structure, America's two-party system is an outcome of its presidential system, not a prerequisite. Two major parties developed in the US because of its nationwide presidential elections. Such elections compel smaller parties to join the political mainstream on centrist platforms. This is an outcome that India desperately needs.

Balaji doesn't actually object to the presidential system but bemoans everything that is wrong with the present one: "Centralisation of power, undemocratic methods of decision-making, and the influence of money on criminal nexus on elections." If he actually considered the presidential system, he would find that it offers a fix to all these ailments. The powers in that system are divided and separated precisely to avoid centralisation and ensure a deliberative democratic process. That system offers more democracy: more decentralisation, more directly elected officials, and more frequent elections.

We all know in our hearts that we are not behaving as a great nation with our current system of government. But if we do the hard work and switch to the presidential system, we could begin to build India into the country of all our dreams.

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