

THE OPPOSITION NEEDS TO TAKE UP THE GAUNTLET

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'The Opposition also needs to go beyond the well-worked modes of fighting a mighty electoral enemy' | Photo Credit: AP

It is to the credit of the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that its electoral agenda is planned out in a manner that there is always attention to every detail, be it a municipal or parliamentary election, long before the particular election is even notified. The Opposition, which stands out for not having done any such long-term exercise, is compelled to react to the Modi-set agenda. This becomes clear when the most critical election on the horizon, the general election in 2024, looms large. As things stand, perhaps even its result is predictable.

The most startling political development, of the process of disqualifying Rahul Gandhi as Member of Parliament through a legal process and making a martyr of him is part of the grand plan for 2024 — of making it a fight based on a single plank of Narendra Modi versus Rahul Gandhi. Issues will become irrelevant in this battle. And Mr. Gandhi has taken up the challenge on Mr. Modi's terms: his exclusive concern is to defend himself at any cost.

The only issue for Mr. Gandhi is one that he emphasised repeatedly in his press conference held on the afternoon of March 25, 2023 — the denial of his legitimate right to respond in the Lok Sabha to charges levelled against him by some Central Ministers, which Mr. Gandhi calls "lies", as well as the alleged relationship between Mr. Modi and businessman Gautam Adani and the investment of "20,000 crore" in Adani Group businesses. Nothing suits Mr Modi and the BJP more than this plank.

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One might be forgiven for hoping that Mr. Gandhi would have grasped the game plan by now and, therefore, rise above it. What is at stake today is an enormously bigger battle than the one between Mr. Modi and Mr. Gandhi, or over the issue of the alleged Modi-Advani relationship and the rather paltry sum of 20,000 crore. The battle today is one that is inescapably fixed on it being democracy versus dictatorship. Mr. Gandhi's press conference might have pleased Mr. Modi no end.

It is clear to any observer that this battle will have to be fought beyond the issuing of press statements, bravado, and defending oneself against 'lies' or 'truths'. This requires a dramatic step by seizing the initiative from the BJP and inviting the entire Opposition to be the united

defence of democracy. Since Mr. Modi wants to pitch the agenda as one about himself versus Mr. Gandhi, the one sure way to steal a march would be for Mr Gandhi to announce that he would not be a candidate for the Prime Minister's post in 2024. In fact, an even more decisive step would be to announce that no member of the Gandhi family would be a candidate and then call for the defence of democracy against signs of creeping dictatorship, which is evident in the state's growing control over all constitutional institutions and even the media. The drive that is relevant today is not the Congress's victory but the BJP's defeat.

The second step would be to begin negotiations with the Opposition not as their natural and given leader, but as one among equals. The Congress might have to concede much more to the Opposition parties than is even legitimately its due.

This is precisely where its statesmanship, its claim to sacrifice its narrow electoral interests for the sake of the nation, and for the nation's most valuable asset, democracy, will find resonance with the other parties and, with the nation. Pettiness over the number of seats here and the number of candidates there will ensure the defeat of this vital exercise. It is good to remember that the notion of self-sacrifice has much greater value in Indian society than the assertion of self-interest.

It is through a larger view of the crisis now and the assumption of the role of an elderly but benign conscience keeper that the Congress can re-establish itself as the country's far-seeing leader. The Opposition also needs to go beyond the well-worked modes of fighting a mighty electoral enemy, namely holding demonstrations, braving water canons and passing resolutions. There need to be some dramatic turns which take the attention away from Mr. Modi's visual spell and clever one-liners in his public meetings.

If it does unite, the Opposition must not fall prey to the BJP's strategy of 'Modi versus who', but posit the 2024 election on the alternative plank of 'democracy versus dictatorship'. In this, there need to be very clear plans, rather than general statements, to defend constitutional institutions, values, freedoms and people's welfare.

Is this hoping for too much from the Congress, the Gandhis, and the Opposition parties? The answer may be yes.

But hoping against hope is the only resort left for us hapless, ordinary citizens of India.

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