

FOR INTERNAL DEMOCRACY: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA REJECTING NOTION OF 'LEADER FOR LIFE' IN POLITICAL PARTIES

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has [rejected the idea of a 'permanent president' for a party](#), while taking issue with the Yuvajana Shramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP), which rules Andhra Pradesh. The party reportedly elected Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy as its president for life in July 2022. The ECI says such a step is inherently anti-democratic. The YSRCP's response to the ECI's letters sent earlier, that it will conduct an "internal enquiry", borders on the absurd. There is merit in the ECI's view and its insistence on internal democracy, as no individual should be elected leader for life. Any party that participates in a democratic process, and wants to govern and legislate, should include formal and periodic election of office-bearers as part of the way it functions as an association. Indian political parties are of myriad kinds — some, such as the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Communist parties, are structured, cadre-based organisations that function towards an ideological goal or a principle; others, such as the Congress, are more loosely structured collections of individuals with even different strands of opinion but functioning within an association that has core ideals; some others still reflect social or regional cleavages and so on.

Increasingly, the fragmentation of India's polity into a federalised, multi-party system has also given way to domination by "charismatic" individuals or their families, mainly because of the nature of support that these parties enjoy or due to their financing structures which necessitates centralised control by a single coterie or a family. This is why several political parties today do not insist on thoroughgoing internal elections to secure their leadership; and even if they do conduct polls, they lack sufficient contestation and are done to reaffirm the dominance of the high command. In some cases, with electoral politics being a zero-sum game, political parties are loath to allow internal contest, fearing that this could foster disunity, as opposed to nomination and consensus-building on leadership. The ECI has periodically used guidelines issued for registration of parties under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 to remind parties to conduct elections and to ensure that their leadership is renewed, changed or re-elected every five years. But the commission does not have any statutory power to enforce internal democracy in parties or to mandate elections. The lack of such substantive power only leads to parties carrying out the ECI's edicts in a mechanical manner. However, with dynasticism and a lack of internal democracy becoming a matter of public debate, perhaps public pressure would finally bear upon parties to do the right thing.

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