

The Voice Of 63% Of The People of India

Jawhar Sircar



A protest, organised by Congress MPs Mallikarjun Kharge and other opposition MPs during a protest march "Democracy in Danger". (Photo by Raj K Raj via Getty Images)

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In 1967, when I was just 15 years old, I was attracted to Ram Manohar Lohia's brand of desi socialism that targeted the nexus between caste and class in India. The Congress had been in power for 20 years and appeared quite invincible. But socialist leaders such as George Fernandes, Madhu Limaye, Rabi Ray and Kishen Pattanayak believed that the mighty Congress could be dislodged. It seemed like a tall order, but in the elections of 1967, the Congress was knocked down to barely a few seats above the majority mark. What was more interesting is that non-Congress coalition governments were formed in Punjab, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, while in Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, coalition governments were constituted with the help of Congress defectors.

The age of tumult in Indian politics had begun, and opposition parties appeared on the political stage as the prime actors. It would become quite a rarity for the next half century to have a strong one-party rule—with the two regimes of [Indira](#) Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi being the exceptions. For some strange reason, their absolute majority regimes carried within them the seeds of their own downfall. Indira learnt it the hard way when 'uncle' Jayaprakash Narayan led the opposition to topple her—triggering a bitter period of Emergency. The cobbled-up Janata Party that followed tried its best to punish her excesses, but was completely outmanoeuvred. Indira in the opposition was more menacing than in government. She returned to power in 1980 and was characteristically strong where governance was concerned, but imperious vis-à-vis the opposition. She paid the price for meddling in dangerous religious politics in Punjab.



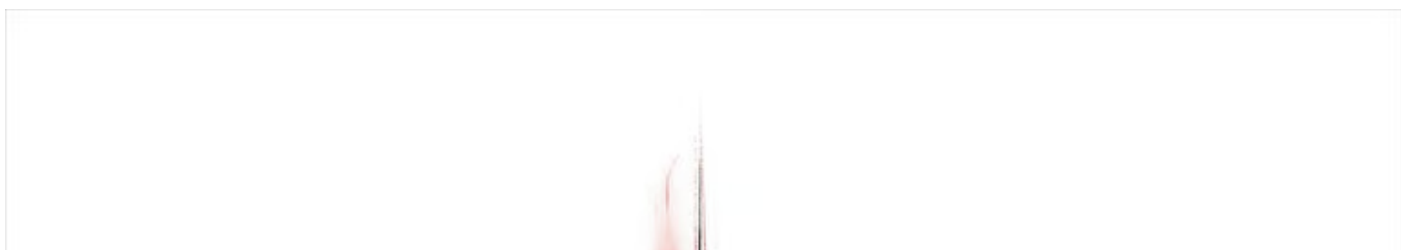


Rajiv swept the 1984 polls following his mother's assassination, but had to go through existential pains even before completing half his term. As an eyewitness and participant in those days, memories race through the mind of his excruciatingly painful last 30 months. The opposition missed no opportunity to heckle him on the Bofors scam, the opening of the locks of the Ayodhya sanctum and on his retrograde reversal of justice after the Shah Bano decision—all of which strengthened the opposition, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The period between 1989 and 1991 witnessed the first of the several phases of minority-led coalition governments—this first one under V P Singh. [Rajiv's assassination](#) in 1991 led to a temporary eclipse of the BJP-led opposition as P V Narasimha Rao became PM. His five-year tenure kept the primary opposition at bay—though he permitted the Sangh Parivar to raze the Babri Masjid to the ground. This boosted the BJP's standing among orthodox and fanatic Hindus so much that after two short-lived governments in 1996 and 1998, [Atal Bihari Vajpayee](#) managed to form the first stable coalition government from 1999.

It was then that Sonia Gandhi assumed the leadership of the [Congress](#) and led the opposition with maturity and determination—so much so that the Congress returned to power in 2004 as head of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The BJP's opposition was so petulant that newspapers had to remind them to get off their high horse and accept the fact that they were in the opposition. The first term of the UPA regime was quite wobbly, as it needed ideologically-opposed allies like the Left—until they were outwitted. The next UPA regime was plagued by corruption cases—the Commonwealth Games, allocation of coal blocks and the 2G spectrum case. These revelations were raised vociferously by the [BJP](#) that declared disruption of Parliament as a legitimate form of protest.

A fundamental question that often arises is whether we need an opposition at all. Apart from the fact that it is absolutely essential in parliamentary democracy to have an active opposition, another obvious reason is that the majority of voters require their voice to be heard through the opposition. To de-complicate this quizzical statement, one needs to look at the results of the last two parliamentary elections. In 2019, the BJP managed to garner 37.3 per cent of the valid votes polled, while it mustered 36.6 per cent of the votes this year. This means that around 63 per cent of people of India—the vast majority—did not vote for Narendra Modi or his party.





Every government in a parliamentary democracy rules on the basis of the largest number of seats won (or gathered)—not on the basis of voting percentages. Conversely, opposition parties represent those who do not rule. Cumulatively, the votes they represent are invariably higher than those who are in power.

That's why the opposition needs to voice the opinion of "the rest". But the opposition was shouted down by the brute majority. It survived a desperate battle for 10 years, in spite of being pulled up and suspended in truck-loads. It goes to the credit of the truncated opposition that it was never cowed down and kept on fighting pitched battles. It was only when the opposition was forced to walk out—often thanks to the controversial rulings of the chair—that the government could hustle through dangerous bills such as the farm laws and the three criminal laws. At the same time, the opposition in Parliament often needs external support to win. For instance, public agitations led to the farm laws being withdrawn.

But after June 2024, all this has changed even though [Narendra Modi](#) is putting up a brave front. But everyone now realises that gone are the days when the PM could talk of decimating the opposition and an 'opposition *mukt*' Bharat. The voices of opposition leaders in both houses are now heard with greater interest. Even the hitherto enthralled media appears to be taking due note—you never know who'll come next. The voters of India expect the elected opposition to tell this truncated government the blunt truth—about their grievances.

(Views expressed are personal)

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