

Indian Prime Minister : A Framework for Political Analysis

C.P. Bhambhri*

ALL MODERN POLITICAL SYSTEMS, democratic or authoritarian, have moved towards the direction of 'executive leadership' in the governance of their countries. The factors responsible for growth in the power and influence of the executive in the public affairs are the character of modern wars, complexity of technological societies, growing military and economic interdependence of the countries leading to an active role of the national governments in domestic and foreign affairs. In all developed societies, irrespective of their ideological orientations, active involvement of the government in the societal affairs is clearly observable. This government-alisation has further strengthened the position of the executive. The developing societies have started with government-alisation because the problems of under development cannot be otherwise resolved. The challenges of under development have led to a situation in which the executive has to play a central as well as a critical role. These near-universal phenomena in the growth of the power and role of the executive needs to be examined in the light of the Indian experience of the last twenty-five years with a view to understanding some specific political processes which have operated in the country and helped in the accretion of the powers of the prime minister. The study of various political developments in the country which have an impact on the role of the prime ministers would be done to find out a pattern of behaviour in all the three Indian prime ministers. If a pattern is not discernible, the further question which would need probing is : Is institutionalization of the role of the prime minister possible without proper development of other political structures in the country ? Thus, a proper appraisal of the role of the prime minister is possible only when we can clearly establish its relationship with other sub-systems of the policy. Some aspects of the relationship

* M.A., Ph.D., Associate Professor, Centre for the Study of Political Development, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

of the prime minister with other institutions have been defined by the fundamental law of the land. At present we are not concerned with them. Our starting point is that articles 74 and 75 of the Indian Constitution establish a pre-eminent position of the prime minister in the central government. He is the head of the Council of Ministers, and for actions of the government, is responsible to the Lok Sabha.

From this formulation we would like to pose the following questions for analysing the actual role of the prime minister. The questions which need to be answered are :

1. What has been the actual role and variation in the role of the prime minister in the Indian political system during the twenty-five years of the existence of this office ?
2. What have been the political and institutional bases of his powers ? Does he earn his legitimacy from constitutional or extra-constitutional structures of support ?
3. Has India, like other parliamentary systems, reached the stage of prime ministerial government ?
4. What has been the style of working of the three prime ministers in normal and emergency times ?
5. What were the policy orientations of the three prime ministers and what was its impact on their functioning ?
6. What has been the relationship of the prime ministers with their party and various factions of the party ? Their relationship with the opposition parties, army and bureaucracy would also throw light on the actual working of the prime ministers. The Constitution defines the relationship between the prime minister and some other sub-sets like the President, ministers, Parliament, etc. But for a correct appraisal of the role of the prime minister, it is inadequate to discuss his relationship with other constitutional sub-sets ; we must understand his relationship with other sub-systems in the political system.

Closely connected with the above questions is : What are the areas of activity which determine the position of the prime minister ? A few such areas can be identified for ranking the position of the prime minister. They are :

1. What are the constraints in which a prime minister functions in selecting his cabinet colleagues ? What is the degree of freedom for a prime minister in selecting his team and allotting them

various portfolios? The hypothesis is that the greater the freedom of the prime minister in this activity, the more powerful he is in relation to his peers in the cabinet and the party.

2. How does he guide decision-making in the cabinet? How much influence or weight he carries in crucial and critical areas of national policy-making? How much he guides, and how much is he guided by the cabinet, decide his powers vis-a-vis his cabinet colleagues?
3. Is the prime minister an unquestioned leader of the party, or does he share this with some other party leaders? Is he first among equals in the party hierarchy or is he more than an equal? An empirical reply to this question would determine the position of the prime minister. If at the apex of the party hierarchy there is a group of leaders with independent support base, the prime minister will have to take them with himself in the governance of the country; and this collective leadership can inhibit the prime ministerial policy initiative. The answer has to be found out to the question: What are the equations of the prime minister in his party with other leaders of the party?

To determine the degree of power exercised by the prime minister, constraints and freedom in which he operates need to be examined. The greater the constraints, the lesser would be his powers.

II

The major hypothesis of this paper is that if the prime minister has established his legitimacy independent of his constitutional and institutional power structure, he would exercise more powers than a person whose support structure is co-terminus within the legal and constitutional boundaries of the political system. If a prime minister has earned legitimacy from the people, and has a direct rapport with them, constraints over his powers would be less. If the prime minister has been able to create a popular consensus around his policies and personality, he would be able to exercise a lot of initiative in the governance of the country. If this does not happen, he will have to share his powers with other party and factional leaders. Intra-party competition would be a great check over the powers of the prime minister. But if the party leaders look towards him as the source of power, and if they depend on him for their electoral victories, the prime minister can act autonomously and quite independent of the advice and influence of other party leaders.

Another hypothesis derived from the above hypothesis of 'independent legitimacy' is that in a federal set-up, a prime minister with a national image can be more powerful than an individual who is identified with an

area or region of the country. In a federal set-up, the cabinet would be a coalition of regional interests and act as a brake over the prime minister, if he himself has only a regional support base. The other regional leaders in the cabinet would share power with such a prime minister, and the style of the prime minister would have to be coalitional and accommodating. A prime minister, with a national image and national support base would have the capacity to take national decisions by subordinating regional interests and act as an authoritative spokesman of the whole nation on domestic as well as foreign affairs.

These hypotheses need to be tested for theorising about the powers of the prime minister in India. This theorising would have to be done on the basis of past experience and the emerging trends of Indian politics. The model has to be empirical as well as futuristic and the evidence has to be collected at micro as well as macro levels of the functioning of the Indian political system.

III

An attempt would be made here to relate some aspects of the above theoretical framework to the experience of the political system with the three prime ministers. It would be conceded immediately that Jawaharlal Nehru was more than a prime minister. He had already established a position in the national hierarchy of leadership before he became the prime minister of the country. For about two decades before independence India struggled for freedom under the coalitional leadership of Gandhi and Nehru. It was a strange coincidence in the national public life that two tall leaders, with opposite world viewpoints, played a complementary role and earned an independent support from the Indian masses. Nehru had many competitors in the Congress hierarchy before independence, but none of them had the support of the masses (howsoever amorphous it might be) as Nehru had. Because of this he was a 'natural' choice to lead the country after independence. The theme of his talks to the masses in the pre-independence period was that the independence of the country was needed to abolish mass poverty. The poverty was man-made and remedies for its abolition existed. Only we needed opportunity, which would come with independence. The Indian masses having suffered poverty, injustice and exploitation for centuries found in Nehru their hope. This mass-leader identification provided Nehru with a national base and legitimacy. With this plus point he became the prime minister. The politics of ballot confirmed it repeatedly that the masses were with Nehru. All other leaders within the Congress Party realised this factor and its implications very clearly. Nehru was an unchallenged leader of the Congress Party and the government because he drew great support from the masses. This made other party and factional leaders dependent on Nehru for

their political survival. In the federal set-up, he was above regions ; in the party set-up, he was above factions ; and thus he acted as an umpire in intra-party and inter-state conflicts. This role of an undisputed leader was the result of Nehru's place in the national movement and his autonomy from party factions or regional barriers.

The above description is helpful in analysing Nehru's activities as prime minister. His position in the cabinet was pre-eminent. To prove this statement, evidence has to be collected on Nehru's role in : (a) policy making, (b) selection of cabinet colleagues, (c) allotment of portfolios to cabinet ministers, (d) selection of party nominees for party offices and legislatures, (e) settling intra-party conflicts, and (f) resolving crises and conflict areas in the governmental structure.

The evidence in all these areas would lead to the unmistakable conclusion that in the Indian political system, Nehru's position was one of pre-eminence. He played a decisive and crucial role in normal as well as emergency times. At policy level, Nehru's name was identified with the 'third path', neither capitalism nor communism but peaceful and planned change towards socialism and industrialisation. In foreign affairs, the policy of peace and non-alignment was the distinctive contribution of Nehru. In the Council of Ministers, he collected individuals whom the party expected to be there and also those whom Nehru personally wanted. If Patel and Azad were stalwarts in the party, non-party men like C.D. Deshmukh found a berth in the cabinet because Nehru thought that talent of such individuals could be used in nation-building. After Patel's death and Purshotam Das Tandon's resignation, Nehru's clear approval was needed for the presidency of the Congress Party. The members of the Congress Working Committee were nominated by the Congress president with the approval of Nehru. Nehru played a dominating role in the selection of Congress candidates for state legislatures and the Lok Sabha elections. Further, he allotted crucial portfolios like defence, oil and petroleum to cabinet colleagues who had ideological persuasions of Nehru. Since he was the leader of the Congress Party, its character was always reflected in the composition of the cabinets. All the dominant factions of the party were represented in the cabinet. He was committed to economic planning and guided the basic economic policies of the country as chairman of the Planning Commission. When the country was in a state of crises due to the demand for linguistic reorganization or due to the Sino-Indian boundary conflict, Nehru's opinions dominated in resolving the conflicts. He snubbed Thimayya and asked him to withdraw his resignation and thus showed clearly that the situation was firmly in his grip. When he was ageing he made a last-moment effort to purge the party from the unwanted leaders and leave the succession issue after his

death to be a fight among equals. As head of the government, a network of intelligence service was at his disposal to inform him about important happenings in the country.

To sum up, Nehru's effectiveness as prime minister of the country depended upon his supra-constitutional position in the country. What would happen after him? Was this model of prime ministership the pattern? The next prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, spent about two years of uneventful rule. He became the prime minister because the party bosses wanted him against Morarji Desai, another powerful contestant for the coveted office. The manner in which party consensus was worked in his favour by the party bosses made him dependent on them in the selection of his cabinet colleagues. Due to his bad health and lack of experience or perspective in foreign affairs, his dependence on his secretariat increased and his performance at the conference of non-aligned countries held at Cairo was a failure. As Nehru's successor, if he tried to do something on his own, he was charged of deviating from Nehru's path. If he did not do anything different, he was criticised as a prisoner of indecision. At the policy level, he committed himself to Nehru's policies of socialism and non-alignment. In the cabinet, he was first among equals, and in decision-making he was dependent on bureaucracy. The Pakistan war raised his stock in the country, but he did not live long to show whether he had consolidated his position in the party and the government. His short tenure of office, his bad health, his lack of perspective and his dependence on the party bosses inhibited his initiative. He did not have any independent national base, and before becoming the prime minister he was known as a trusted lieutenant of Nehru and a man without any rigidity of policy-frame. These are hardly the qualities to make a man play a pre-eminent position in national affairs. Thus, he went to Tashkent with other important cabinet colleagues so that the settlement with Pakistan could be defended by a group of important ministers in the party and in Parliament. There is nothing wrong in the prime minister taking important cabinet ministers in international negotiations. But if we put this event in the context of the totality of the manner of working of Shastri, the moral of this event is that Shastri had no authority to make commitment for the whole country on his own. And he was not sure that his commitment would be acceptable to the country. Such an individual would act only as *primus inter pares* in the cabinet.

IV

Indira Gandhi has passed through three distinct phases in her political career which need to be underscored for properly appreciating her political position in her party and the country.

When Indira Gandhi was elected as prime minister on January 19, 1966, it was a pre-election year. For many of the important leaders in the Congress Party, she was a make shift pre-election arrangement, to be replaced by a permanent incumbent to be elected after the general elections of 1967. Its evidence is found in the fact that Morarji and his followers again threw the challenge to her leadership, after the general elections of 1967, and ultimately a compromise was evolved and a contest was avoided by making Morarji the deputy prime minister. Thus, from 1966 to 1967 was a period of 'probation' or apprenticeship for the new prime minister. In this period, she was trying to find her way. The fact that Indira Gandhi had yet to emerge as an effective leader of the party and of the government influenced her relationship with the higher echelons of bureaucracy and party.

Her second phase of power starts with 1967 and ends with 1969 when the Congress Party was split into two factions now known as Congress and Congress (O). During this phase, she was searching for issues to establish an independent identity of her own. This search for 'self-identity' brought her into clash with the entrenched leadership in the party. The prime minister got involved in very serious political issues and conflicts with other leaders of the party. Since the picture of the conflict was confused for quite some time, and the results were unpredictable, she could not be very sure about her political position. It is worthwhile to examine her relationship with bureaucracy and other sub-system in the polity during this period of acute intra party conflict.

After the Congress-split started the phase of the consolidation of power by the prime minister. In this phase of consolidation, she made her politics issue-oriented and the large masses of people identified their aspirations with the new policies of the prime minister. This issue-oriented politics earned for her a new legitimacy in the Indian political system, and it made her one of the very effective and powerful prime ministers of India. From the post-split period to the fifth Lok Sabha elections, she occupied a position of definite primacy both in the party and in the cabinet. She was the real leader, and effective power resided in her.

The above mentioned description shows that Indira Gandhi has emerged as a very strong prime minister, but this journey towards power has been full of political struggles and ups and downs.

Even a cursory glance at the evidence would show that Indira Gandhi's journey of prime ministership has been from one of 'accommodation' to 'assertion' and from dependence to independence. After the split of the Congress Party and the nationalization of banks, she started consolidating

her position both in the party and in the government. Slowly and gradually, she consolidated her power so much that her writ ran in an unquestioned manner both in the party and the government. Its most important evidence was that she shifted Y.B. Chavan from the Ministry of Home Affairs and herself took over its charge. Except for temporary purposes, no prime minister before Indira Gandhi took over the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Knowing the crucial and critical position of this ministry in the administrative complex of this country, her critics saw some design in this operation. She also took over the charge of the Intelligence Bureau, Central Bureau of Investigation and the Directorate of Economic Intelligence. The press comments were that it was a great concentration of powers in the hands of the prime minister. The Hindustan Times, in an editorial under the title "What is it all About?", wrote: "Mrs. Gandhi has seemingly demonstrated that it is she who cracks the whip in the party." In another editorial, under the caption "Not The Best Recipe", it again wrote:

One of the principal outcomes of the cabinet reshuffle is the enormous concentration of work and power, patronage and punishment in the hands of the Prime Minister. To the burden of Home has been added Revenue Intelligence. The CSIR and Electronics have both been brought under the Cabinet Secretariat (together with the Department of Personnel). Mrs. Gandhi is not going to have the time to attend to all this. The result could either be hopeless accumulation, delay and drift or a transference of direction and control from ministerial to bureaucratic hands.

Participating in a discussion on a no-confidence motion against the government, Madhu Limaye, M.P., criticized this reshuffle of cabinet and alleged, that an overbusy prime minister cannot look after all these departments. He said that her work of administering the several departments and agencies under her charge has necessarily to be carried on by the bureaucracy in the cabinet secretariat.

Replying to the debate on the no-confidence motion Indira Gandhi defended the reshuffle of the cabinet, and transfer of some departments under her direct responsibility. She said neither the cabinet secretariat nor the prime minister's secretariat had been invented by her. The prime minister's secretariat in its present form had been designed by her predecessor, Lal Bahadur Shastri. There had been no additions to it since then because no extra work of responsibility had been entrusted to it.

She said that in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, the intelligence departments were the direct responsibility of the prime minister. Hence, she had not done anything unusual.

An analysis of the reshuffle of the cabinet and its end-result show clearly that the prime minister emerged politically very strong and an unquestioned leader of her party and the cabinet.

By taking over direct responsibility of the Ministry of Home Affairs and other allied functions, she assumed direct control over the huge bureaucratic apparatus of the country. The Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for running the administration of the country. Now the prime minister by taking over the Ministry of Home Affairs herself assumed effective administrative and political leadership of the country. The prime minister drew two distinct advantages from this new arrangement. They are: (a) By being her own home minister, she would get all the information directly about the critical sectors of politico-administrative life of the country. All nerve centres of communication came under her direct control. This would help her in decision-making about crucial issues facing the country; (b) For providing effective leadership to the country, she now had all the instruments of power under her direct control. She would decide the functioning of bureaucracy. By assuming personal responsibility of controlling the bureaucracy of the country, she would be able to ensure effective implementation of her policies. This reshuffle of the cabinet clearly showed that Indira Gandhi desired to use bureaucracy as an effective instrument for achieving public goals.

As the position stands today, the electoral victories of 1971 and 1972 consolidated the position of Indira Gandhi as an undisputed leader of the party and the government. She has shown a clear policy orientation and has left a personal mark on basic policies of the country in situations of crises. She has exercised complete choice in the selection of her cabinet colleagues and in allotting them portfolios. A prime minister's dependence on his cabinet colleagues increases if he does not have independent sources of information and expert advice. If on various issues the expert advice has to come to the prime minister via her ministers and their civil servants, the prime minister's initiative gets curbed. To overcome this, the prime minister has her own expert advisers in her secretariat. This independent source of information and expert advice helps Indira Gandhi to operate with her own instruments.

The above survey of the role and powers of the three prime ministers of India shows clearly that institutionalization of the prime ministerial form of government has not taken place in India. We have passed

through certain peculiar political situations. The most important is the role of one-party dominance. What would happen to the position of the prime minister if a coalition pattern emerges at the Centre? Its possibilities in a country of the continental size, with an uneven level of political development, exist. Further, if a national party system does not emerge, the alternative would be plural centres of power in the country. These plural centres of power would be competitive, and would have definite impact on the role of the prime minister. Another direction of political development in India can be competition between regional parties and national parties. Any erosion in the strength of national parties would lead to erosion of the pre-eminent position of the prime minister. Since India is a political system in the making, and a viable party system has yet to emerge, definitive prediction about the future of the office of the Indian prime minister cannot be made. On the basis of past experience, it can be surmised that the role of a prime minister is dependent on his political strength in the country. It must be stated at the end that all the three prime ministers have functioned in the overall constraint of the democratic political system. The position of the prime minister has to be understood in the context of these constraints.