

The Election Commission of India is right in rejecting the notion of ‘leader for life’ in 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.

Expected Question (Prelims Exam)

Q. Consider the following statements in the context of 'Election Commission of India'-

1. It conducts the elections of the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, State Assemblies, President and Vice President in the country.
2. Articles 324 to 329 of the Constitution deal with the powers, functions, tenure, eligibility etc. of the Election Commission and the members.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only (b) 2 only
(c) Both 1 and 2 (d) Neither 1, nor 2

Ans. (c)

Expected Question (Mains Exam)

Q . While describing the functions of the Election Commission of India, discuss what it means for the Election Commission of India to reject the idea of a 'leader for life' in political parties and how appropriate a decision this is for democracy? (250 Words)

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC main examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.