

Regional parties are in a generational churn

The changes in the NCP are the latest in a generational transition that India's family-run regional parties are undergoing, one that will have a key impact on the 2024 general elections.

It was clear from the get-go when Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar decided to resign as the president of the party a month ago. The three-day drama that saw Pawar take back his decision as a gesture of deference towards party members now seems aimed at a predictable outcome—sidelining his nephew and de facto No 2, Ajit Pawar, to install a member of his direct bloodline. The scripted act gave him the moral authority to appoint daughter Supriya Sule as the NCP's working president, making it clear who'll take over the mantle of the party. Make no mistake, Pralid Patel's simultaneous appointment will likely be temporary; merely to smoothen the jagged edges of this transition. Ajit Pawar should be only as surprised as the senior Pawar might have been during the 2019 early morning swearing-in with Devendra Fadnavis in Maharashtra. In power politics, players should always be prepared for such moves. But beyond the machinations in Silver Oaks bungalow, the switch

holds important takeaways for Indian politics, because it's the latest in a generational transition that India's family-run regional parties are undergoing. Since 2013, even as Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi (himself the fourth generation of a family with three PMs) have become de facto leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress, respectively, a raft of regional parties is undergoing the generational churn.

Some have emerged unscathed—such as MK Stalin of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)—and others with control over the party but diminished electoral footprint, such as Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party (SP). In some, such as the Bharat Rashtira Samiti (BRS) or the Trinamool Congress (TMC), the transition plan is clear but in progress. And in others, such as the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) or YSR Congress Party, the line of succession remains unclear.

The succession patterns in these regional parties indicate three major pathways.

The first is where the leadership transition didn't spark any major challenge to the heir apparent (the child of the party founder). This includes the National Conference (the Abdullah family), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (Lalu Yadav's family), the National People's Party (PA Sangma's family), and the DMK (M Karunanidhi's family), among others. There

was a clear indication from the patriarch about the successor, and other family members and party leaders fell in line. The TMC appears headed this way.

In the second case, the nominated successor was challenged either from within the family or by another party leader. For example, Akhilesh Yadav had to wrestle with his uncle Shivpal Yadav to take control of the SP and Manpreet Badal had to leave the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) to make way for his cousin, Sukhbir Badal. Similarly, HD Deve Gowda's trusted lieutenant, Siddaramaiah, couldn't see a future for himself in the Janata Dal (Secular) with the rise of HD Kumaraswamy, and joined the Congress.



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In the third case, however, the succession drama consumed political parties and took a toll on them. In the Shiv Sena, for example, Raj Thackeray had to first resign to make way for his cousin, Uddhav Thackeray. And then, the party split vertically last year after Eknath Shinde rebelled as it became clear that Uddhav Thackeray's son Aditya was being groomed to take control of the party.

A similar development played out up north. While Om Prakash Chautala faced no major threats when he succeeded his father, Chaudhary Devi Lal, his two sons could not keep the party united. Today, a weakened Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) is led by his younger son Abhay Singh Chautala, while its offshoot, Janan-



By appointing Supriya Sule as NCP's working president, Sharad Pawar made it clear who'll take over the mantle of the party

ayak Janata Party (JJP), is under the tutelage of elder son Ajay Singh Chautala and his son, deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala. Similarly, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) is still caught in a factional battle between Ram Vilas Paswan's son Chirag Paswan, and his uncle Pashupati Kumar Paras.

What do these patterns portend for the NCP? Ajit Pawar should look at other dynastic parties and note that brothers and nephews have rarely emerged victorious in the succession race. Leadership transitions are usually limited to the direct bloodline, and mostly favour sons. Nephews and brothers are relegated to political oblivion. He should have seen this coming, and prepared himself for the challenges ahead.

Though Supriya Sule has emerged victorious for now, she has a task at hand too. Many second-generation dynasts are struggling to replicate the charisma and grassroots connect of the party founders. From the Gowdas in Karnataka and the Singh family of the Rashtriya Lok Dal, to the Chautalas in Haryana and the Yadavs in Uttar Pradesh, the younger leaders are floundering. NCP's influence in Maha-

rashtira has been declining over the years.

Why should the ordinary citizen care? It's because these family-run parties control a clutch of important states, have been more successful than the Congress in holding onto their own turf, and will be key constituents of any Opposition alliance that may step up to challenge the BJP in 2024. Their dynastic pedigree is their weakness, but their local rootedness remains their strength—and it is for the next generation of these families to nurture this connection.

The BJP knows this. Faced with some anti-incumbency, economic distress and the sub-par performance of some of its state governments, the BJP will use nepotism and dynasty as a potent mobilisational plank ahead of 2024. PM Modi is already upping the ante on this—termining the still-nascent Opposition unity as an attempt to save family members facing charges of corruption. If they want to succeed, regional parties will need a better response to the nepotism narrative.

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The views expressed are personal