

Reforming Political Parties in Contemporary India-A Study of Internal Democracy and Accountability

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Introduction

Seventy-five years after India attained independence, many of the institutions underpinning its parliamentary democracy have come under intense public scrutiny. Despite being the world's largest democracy in terms of electorate size and frequency of elections, India is not necessarily among the strongest democracies when assessed in terms of institutional quality, political accountability, and democratic depth. The declining credibility and performance of key political institutions, particularly political parties, have begun to undermine democratic governance itself. Increasing voter cynicism, declining trust in political leadership, and the perception of politics as a domain dominated by money, muscle, and family influence reflect deeper structural problems within the party system.

The constitutional system adopted in 1950 presupposes the existence of robust, programmatic, and internally democratic political parties that are capable of aggregating public preferences, articulating coherent policy alternatives, and recruiting leadership committed to constitutional values and representative governance (Kumar 2013; Yadav 2010). Political parties were envisioned as mediating institutions that would translate social diversity into democratic consensus while ensuring accountability of elected representatives.

Political parties are central to democratic functioning. They act as the primary interface between citizens and the state, mobilise public opinion, contest elections, form governments, and structure legislative decision-making. In theory, parties provide citizens with meaningful political choices and mechanisms of accountability. Yet, unlike the relatively stable two-party systems of the United States or the United Kingdom, contemporary India exhibits a highly fragmented multi-party system, resembling political systems in Canada or several European democracies (Sridharan 2012). While multi-partyism by itself is not inherently problematic and may even enhance representation of diverse interests, the absence of strong internal democracy, ideological coherence, and effective external accountability mechanisms within Indian political parties has produced serious systemic distortions. These distortions have weakened democratic norms, facilitated elite capture, and contributed to growing public disillusionment with formal politics.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of political parties in India's democratic system.
2. To analyse the extent of internal democratic deficits within Indian political parties.
3. To assess the nature of external accountability and financial transparency of political parties.
4. To study the impact of criminalisation on party functioning and electoral politics.
5. To evaluate the reform measures suggested by the Election Commission of India and civil society organisations.
6. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening political party democracy in India.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design. It relies exclusively on secondary sources of data, including reports of the Election Commission of India (ECI), studies and election analyses by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), government documents such as the Vohra Committee Report, statutory provisions under the Representation of the People Act, 1951 and the Income Tax Act, 1961, and research articles, books, and academic journals on Indian politics and democracy.

The collected data were systematically analysed using content analysis and comparative interpretation. This methodological approach enabled the identification of recurring patterns of democratic deficit, institutional decay, and regulatory non-compliance within political parties across different regions, ideological spectrums, and organisational types. The study also draws upon comparative democratic theory to situate the Indian experience within broader global debates on party reform and democratic accountability.

Twin Democratic Deficits in Indian Political Parties

The effectiveness of democratic governance in India depends not only on the conduct of free and fair elections but also on the internal functioning and public accountability of political parties. Elections alone cannot ensure democratic outcomes if political parties themselves function in authoritarian, opaque, or unaccountable ways. In recent decades, Indian political parties have exhibited serious institutional weaknesses that undermine their democratic character. These weaknesses are most evident in two critical areas: internal democracy and external accountability. Together, these twin deficits have distorted party behaviour, weakened representative governance, and reduced the capacity of parties to act as vehicles of democratic participation.

1. Internal Democracy

Most political parties in India suffer from acute democratic deficits in their internal functioning. As voluntary membership-based organisations, parties are expected to maintain transparent membership rolls, conduct regular internal elections, encourage ideological debate, and ensure leadership accountability to ordinary members. The Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951 requires recognised political parties to maintain updated membership registers, record subscription payments, and file relevant details with the Election Commission of India. It also mandates the existence of internal party constitutions providing for periodic elections to party offices and decision-making bodies.

In practice, however, these requirements are rarely implemented in a substantive manner. Internal elections, where they occur, are infrequent, opaque, and largely symbolic. Leadership positions are often predetermined through informal consensus among elites or imposed by dominant leaders. Decision-making authority is concentrated in a small inner circle, marginalising ordinary members and local party units. Party conventions and organisational meetings are frequently reduced to ceremonial events rather than forums for deliberation and dissent.

Over the past three decades, many political parties have increasingly evolved into family-dominated or personality-centric organisations. Parties such as the Indian National Congress, DMK, and Samajwadi Party have functioned as dynastic entities, where leadership succession is determined by lineage rather than merit or organisational support. Other parties, including AIADMK, RJD, BJD, and TDP, have revolved around charismatic individuals whose authority eclipses institutional norms (Chhibber & Kollman 2009). Such concentration of power undermines collective leadership and weakens internal checks and balances.

Even cadre-based parties like the BJP and the Left parties, historically known for organisational discipline, ideological clarity, and internal consultation, have experienced weakening grassroots structures and declining internal debate. Centralisation of authority, electoral pragmatism, and the increasing dominance of professional campaign management have diluted ideological commitment. Party manifestos, once reflective of programmatic visions, have often degenerated into ritualistic documents lacking policy coherence, long-term planning, or mechanisms of accountability.

Criminalisation of Politics

The absence of internal democracy has significantly contributed to the criminalisation of party structures and electoral politics. When candidate selection is controlled by a small leadership elite, considerations of winnability, financial capacity, and coercive influence often override ethical or legal standards. The Vohra Committee Report (1993) exposed the growing nexus between politicians, criminal elements, and sections of the bureaucracy, warning that organised crime had begun to penetrate democratic institutions.

Subsequent electoral data have reinforced these concerns. According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, the Karnataka Election Watch (2004) revealed that candidates with criminal records contested elections in nearly 80 per cent of constituencies, cutting across party lines. During the 2007 Presidential election, over 60 Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assemblies, accounting for more than one per cent of the electoral college, were reportedly in jail on polling day. Certain states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, have displayed even deeper levels of criminal infiltration in politics, where individuals with serious criminal charges have repeatedly secured electoral victories.

Cases such as a Samajwadi Party Member of Parliament being declared an absconder while holding office highlight the gravity of the problem (ADR 2007). Criminalisation not only distorts electoral competition but also undermines the rule of law, normalises violence, and weakens public faith in democratic institutions. To address this, the Election Commission of India in 2004 recommended the disqualification of candidates against whom courts have framed charges for serious criminal offences. However, national political parties have consistently opposed and resisted the implementation of this reform, citing concerns over misuse and political vendetta.

2. External Accountability

Political parties, though legally classified as private associations, perform essential public functions and exercise significant influence over public policy, governance, and resource allocation. They receive large monetary donations, benefit from extensive tax exemptions, occupy subsidised government land and buildings, and enjoy various indirect state benefits. Consequently, political parties must demonstrate high standards of financial transparency, regulatory compliance, and public accountability.

Section 29C of the RPA, 1951 requires all registered political parties to submit annual audited statements of donations and contributions to the Election Commission by 31 October each year. Despite this statutory obligation, compliance has remained extremely poor. Data available from the ECI during the mid-2000s indicate that only a limited number of parties filed returns for the financial year 2003–04. Even among those that complied, reported contributions appeared implausibly low in comparison to the scale of campaign expenditure observed during elections.

Under Section 139(4B) of the Income Tax Act, 1961, political parties are eligible for income tax exemptions only if they file returns along with required disclosures to the ECI. However, information regarding tax compliance and enforcement remains largely inaccessible to the public, raising serious concerns about regulatory oversight. The opacity surrounding political finance has enabled the proliferation of unaccounted money, anonymous donations, and quid pro quo arrangements between parties and private interests.

Political parties also occupy substantial government land and buildings at highly subsidised or zero cost in prime urban locations. The absence of mandatory disclosure of assets, property holdings, and audited accounts has resulted in severe opacity. Although the ECI's 2004 report recommended compulsory auditing and public disclosure of party accounts, no major political party has implemented these reforms in a comprehensive or transparent manner.

Democratic Decay and the Need for Reform

The combined impact of weak internal democracy and poor external accountability has contributed to systemic corruption, erosion of public trust, and the consolidation of political clientelism. The absence of transparency has amplified the influence of money and muscle power in elections, skewing political competition in favour of wealthy and powerful actors. Dynastic control and personality cults have alienated professionals, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, and young citizens from political participation, creating a leadership vacuum that is often filled by opportunistic or criminal elements.

Political parties must therefore be reformed as democratic, member-driven, transparent, and publicly accountable institutions. International experience demonstrates that party reform is central to democratic consolidation. Citizen pressure, civil society activism, judicial interventions, and regulatory reform are essential for initiating and sustaining this transformation. Measures such as strengthening internal elections, publishing audited financial statements, enforcing disclosure norms, regulating political donations, and disqualifying criminally charged candidates can significantly improve the quality of democratic governance.

Major Findings of the Study

1. Most political parties in India lack genuine internal democracy, with leadership concentrated in families or individual leaders.
2. Internal elections are largely symbolic and fail to ensure accountability to party members.
3. Criminalisation of politics is widespread across major parties and regions.
4. Financial transparency and audit compliance remain extremely weak despite statutory provisions.
5. Political parties benefit from public subsidies but rarely disclose asset-related information.
6. Reform recommendations of the Election Commission remain largely unimplemented due to political resistance.
7. Participation of professionals, intellectuals, and youth in party politics is steadily declining.

Suggestions

1. Mandatory internal elections must be legally enforced under the supervision of the Election Commission of India.
2. Candidates facing serious criminal charges framed by courts should be disqualified from contesting elections.

3. Annual audited accounts of political parties should be compulsorily published in the public domain.
4. Political parties must disclose details of government land, buildings, and public assets held by them.
5. The statutory powers of the Election Commission should be strengthened to derecognise non-compliant parties.
6. Institutional reforms should be introduced to attract educated youth, professionals, and social activists.
7. Public awareness and sustained civil society monitoring should be encouraged to demand party accountability.

Conclusion

Political parties occupy a central position in India's democratic framework, yet their present condition reflects deep institutional decay. The persistence of internal authoritarianism, dynastic dominance, criminalisation, and financial opacity has weakened both democratic ethics and governance capacity. Without urgent and comprehensive reform, electoral democracy risks being reduced to a procedural formality rather than a substantive system of accountability and representation. The future of Indian democracy depends critically on transforming political parties into internally democratic, transparent, and socially responsible institutions. Sustained citizen engagement, regulatory enforcement, judicial support, and political will are essential to restore public confidence and ensure the long-term vitality of democratic governance in India..

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