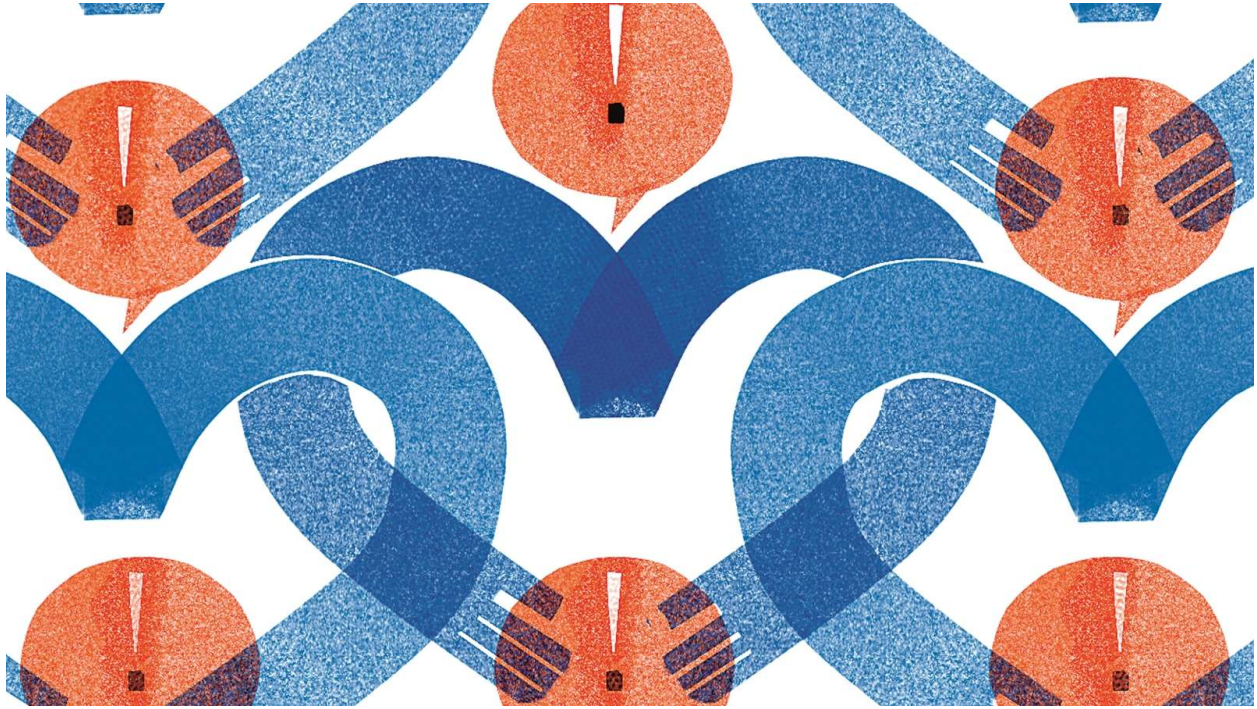


Rahul Gandhi sets INDIA's mission to reclaim the Republic

This focus on resistance is by no means a reckless call to abandon constitutional and parliamentary democracy, but a plea to reconnect politics to the people.

Yogendra Yadav



This historic responsibility must involve a fusion of energies: Opposition parties in and outside the INDIA bloc, non-party but political movements, organisations of workers and farmers, spontaneous and unorganised protests as well as civil-society organisations and citizens. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Resistance. This one word summarises Rahul Gandhi's June 8 address to the INDIA bloc leaders, clearly one of the most consequential political speeches delivered by an Opposition leader in recent years.

It is consequential not for reasons that have attracted public attention so far. The reference to other Opposition parties like the CPI(M) and DMK has invited reactions, understandable once indoor comments were made public. Yet this expression of disagreements was and should be seen as underlining a fundamental unity of purpose of the entire Opposition. A subsequent article by Dipankar Bhattacharya, general secretary of the CPI(M-L), puts this idea in a more inclusive and wider perspective. Similarly, the remark that the "Congress party is a resistance movement" should be read as a reclamation of an ideal rather than a statement of current ground reality.

The true significance of the speech lies in its diagnosis and prescription. This is the first clear-eyed recognition by the Opposition of a watershed moment in our political life: India's transition from competitive authoritarianism to electoral autocracy. This is also the first coherent articulation of a strategic shift: The Opposition's transition from politics of electoral contestation to politics of resistance. Both these pivotal ideas need to be unpacked, disseminated, debated and refined.

Rahul Gandhi's diagnosis goes beyond the rhetoric of lament. He puts his finger on the real issue: "The problem is the capture of the instruments of the Indian state by the RSS... The entire architecture — media, social media, the legal system, bureaucracy, intelligence agencies — is aligned to keep this government in power." He is clear that the situation is going to get worse: "In the near future, even those few instruments that used to work will stop working, because the BJP and RSS are tightening their grip on the Indian state." The fortnight after his speech has already deepened this capture. The Supreme Court's refusal to intervene in the rejection of Meenakshi Natarajan's nomination as a candidate for the [Rajya Sabha](#) and the open use of state and money power to break the TMC and the Shiv Sena have offered further evidence for the institutional capture that the Leader of the Opposition spoke about.

These observations about India resonate with a global trend noticed by political scientists. Beginning with Juan Linz's classic book *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (1978), we now have a growing academic literature on the transition from democracy to authoritarianism. We know that this transition does not happen overnight. Adam Przeworski famously defined democracy as "institutionalised uncertainty", a system where the rulers agree to take the risk of losing power. The backsliding of democracy is all about rulers tweaking democratic institutions so as to reduce and eventually eliminate this risk.

There are two intermediate stages in this descent from democracy. "Competitive authoritarianism" is a system where political competition does exist but is limited to the brief period of elections, where the ruling party does run the risk of losing elections, though the competition is unfair. The next step is "electoral autocracy", where the rulers manage to reduce the risk of losing power to a bare minimum by compromising all institutions and procedures, including electoral fraud, if needed.

India is currently between these two stages. We have been a competitive authoritarian state since 2019. India's descent into an electoral autocracy was stalled by the popular verdict in 2024. Since then, the ruling dispensation has left no stone unturned to reduce the political risk of losing any election. This involves a threefold monopoly: Sookhana (information control through media), sansadhan (monetary resources) and sanstha (institutional capture). This is being supplemented by a redesign of the desh-kaal-patra (time-space-actor) of elections: Reallocating and redrawing the constituencies through the proposed delimitation, rearranging the calendar of elections through One-Nation-One-Election and rewriting the voters' list through the SIR. Once this process is completed, we will be firmly an electoral autocracy with a negligible chance of a normal, democratic transfer of power through elections. The Opposition is finally confronting this dark truth.

Rahul Gandhi's speech does not limit itself to an analysis. What makes it a defining speech is a clear delineation of its implications for political action. The political instruments used by the Opposition thus far "only worked when the Indian state provided a fair field for them to operate in. That field does not exist any more... If political parties can't function, what functions? Resistance functions." He calls for moving away from over-reliance on electoral politics: "The problem is that [the Opposition] will not have a free and fair election to win. And so, we have to go into the mode of resistance." He insists that resistance is a spirit, a mindset, not an organisation.

This indicates a paradigm shift in oppositional politics — from the sansad to Jantar Mantar, from electoral contestation to ground mobilisation, from politics of regaining power to politics of reclaiming the republic. This resistance has to be democratic and non-violent. History tells us that the use of violence is both ineffective and counterproductive. What happened in Bangladesh or Nepal is not a template that can or should be replicated in India. We must carve out a democratic path to regaining democracy. This historic responsibility does not rest only with the INDIA bloc, or political parties in general. It must involve a fusion of energies: Opposition parties in and outside the INDIA bloc, non-party but political organisations and movements, organisations of workers and farmers, spontaneous and unorganised protests as well as civil-society organisations and citizens. This entails linking the diverse and often contradictory pain points of We The People.

This focus on resistance is by no means a reckless call to abandon constitutional and parliamentary democracy but a plea to reconnect politics to the people. As Rammanohar Lohia reminded us: Jab sadaken sooni ho jaati hain tab sansad awaara ho jati hai. (Parliament turns rogue when streets go empty).

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