

## **Joachim Betz: Institutionalisation of India's Political Parties**

India's political parties are part of a democratically stable political system, but they do have some flaws. The same holds true for the system itself and, even more so, for the institutionalisation of the parties.

The latter may be regarded as given in India; polarisation among the political parties is limited, and extremist parties are the exception. This being so, parties are quite capable of forming coalitions. What is more, the separation of functional and territorial interests is assured because the country's civil society is relatively flat and there are hardly any autonomous civil organisations. Not only is the volatility of Indian voters low, it is decreasing.

What has been increasing since 1977, on the other hand, is the number of political parties represented in the Lower House, one reason for this being that the concentration of parties in the union states is not to be found at the national level. The institutionalisation of the parties, however, is less developed than that of the party system as a whole. India has some hundreds of parties, not all of them registered by the election commission. Most of the smaller parties are mere tools of leaders appointed by acclamation and have no organisation worth mentioning.

The survivability of the country's national parties, many of which are very old, is astonishingly high. Most voters migrate only between the two biggest parties. Although the Indian population has relatively great confidence in democracy – which may be deduced from increasing election turnouts, for example – the political parties themselves are held in low esteem. The parties' links to specific social groups are stable; this applies particularly to the BJP and the CPI-M. The BJP, for instance, has more than one million members. It belongs to a family of Hindu nationalist organisations which also includes numerous trade unions, civil organisations, youth groups, and councils. The CPI-M is similarly situated.

The vertical and horizontal organisation of India's political parties is quite good. The highest statutory organ is the party convention or congress. At the higher levels, most parties have their own dedicated secretariats and secretaries general, with the secretariats responsible for the individual states of the union in the BJP, for example, employing as many as 20 people on a permanent basis. The same holds true for the Congress Party. On the other hand, the parties largely lack an institutionalised memory: Up-to-date and reliable parliamentary telephone directories, for instance, are difficult to find, and most official duties are taken care of in the office holders' private homes.

Any assets owned by the Indian political parties are confined to relatively large properties where their offices are located. As dues are low, their financial basis is often meagre. Therefore, current expenditures are covered by recruiting new members, issuing urgent appeals to registered members to pay outstanding dues, charging application fees for potential candidates, or collecting donations from individuals and companies. At the same time, there is a separate process for compensating the campaign expenditures of particularly successful candidates.

That the decision-making autonomy of India's political parties is largely independent of the classical civil society results from the relatively flat structure of society itself, the fact that the country's civil organisations are often controlled by political parties, and other factors.

Parties have large numbers of members, corresponding to the conditions in Western multi-party systems. However, official figures must be handled with care. An estimated membership of 25 to 30 million for the country's national parties alone appears realistic. Impressive as these figures

may be, they must be put into perspective: On the one hand, they do not at all correspond to the moderate returns from membership dues; on the other, they are kept low by mobilising bogus members, which is still practised very often. Indeed, the true membership of an organisation consists only of its active rank and file, whose number is certainly not in accord with the figures given above.

The parties' funds are sufficient to keep the party machine going, but they are not high enough to meet the costs of election campaigns. In general, the parties contribute five to 20 percent to the campaign costs of their candidates. This shows that only candidates who have their own means may lead an effective election campaign.

All Indian parties have their own party programme, their objectives being to secure the welfare of the Indian nation, establish a social, secular, and democratic state, and preserve world peace. While party programmes are couched in general terms, showing hardly any dividing lines between the parties, election manifestos are more distinctive, although they hardly have the potential to lead to any ideological polarisation between the parties that is worth mentioning.

In India, the parties' internal democracy shows considerable defects, offering party chairmen a remarkable scope of influence. Only the CPI-M elects the members of its Central, State and District Committees, who then, however, have to relinquish their power – to the politburo, for instance. Party congresses are held only rarely. In most cases, they approve the leaders' resolutions by acclamation, and they do not have the power to decide on the final selection of candidates. In point of fact, the parties' internal democracy falls short of their statutes. Throughout the two decades after 1972, for example, the Congress Party did not hold any internal elections; instead, their leaders were appointed by the party chairman in office.

The Congress Party has hardly developed any culture of internal dispute. Upcoming resolutions within the AICC are preformulated and passed unanimously. Even the BJP, which has always been anxious for a certain democratic aura, is by now suffering from a certain 'congressisation'; after all, there has been no contentious vote about appointments to key positions in the party in the last few years. It is surprising that the CPI-M of all parties, which propagates democratic centralism, presents a higher degree of internal democracy, although even the CPI-M never permits internal dissensions to reach the general public.

Due to unconventional financing methods and their lack of internal democracy, among other things, India's parties suffer from personalism, factionalism, clientelism, and established dynasties. For a long time, there have been factions which line their pockets either with money or through party or government posts and are often very long-lived. In 1985, a constitutional amendment was initiated to contain the evil by depriving MPs who changed parties of their mandate, but it failed. It is obvious that the office holders' loyalty towards their respective parties is not very high – on the contrary: People changing to another party, party spin-offs and party amalgamations happen every day, so that parties try hard to retain dissidents even in cases of severe indiscipline. Dissidents are additionally encouraged by the fact that candidates often have their own following outside the party, which promotes personalism and/or clientelism. Political parties prefer to nominate candidates that are well-known and well-heeled such as, for example, members of the old nobility, caste leaders, actors, and tradesmen. This, in turn, favours the pronounced dynastic element in India's parties, which is associated with other family names besides those of Nehru and Gandhi.

Institutionalisation deficits in India are caused by various factors: India is ruled by a patronage-based democracy in which office holders take part in decisions about jobs, orders, permits, and

other governmental benefits, protecting the citizen from infringements by the authorities (a). The benefits of patronage may be either individual or collective, the latter including cancellations of debts and high subsidies on energy, fertilisers, and water (b). In general, these benefits are highly attractive; around sixty percent of the jobs in the formal economic sector are provided by the state (c). Thus, voters and voter groups have good reason to act strategically, i.e. to support those parties which provide access to the benefits mentioned (d). The parties and the entrepreneurs themselves also follow a strategic line vis-à-vis the population: By granting certain groups access to benefits they secure a powerful position for themselves (e). And, ultimately, the entry of a candidate is made difficult by the high barriers erected by the first-past-the-post rule in each constituency which, in turn, motivates them to strike deals and form alliances (f).

As a matter of fact, India's parties show significant institutionalisation deficits, and the price for the patronage-oriented behaviour of both the electorate and the elected in India is high. Before the country's elected and, after them, the voters may feel obliged to adopt a universal programmatic code that serves public welfare, India's society will have to change considerably.