

# THE POLITICAL ROLE OF SONIA GANDHI FROM 1991 TO 2018

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## ABSTRACT

*This study is about the role of Sonia Gandhi in Indian politics. She was a member in Lok Sabha for 4 terms. The study also examines her role as leader of the opposition and as leader of the governing coalition through the presidency of both the Indian National Congress and the National Advisory Council.*

**Key words:** Congress, Sonia Gandhi, India, politics.

## INTRODUCTION

Sonia Gandhi is a unique phenomenon in political world in general and in Indian politics in particular. Sonia Gandhi, an Italian who led the Indian Congress Party for 15 years and was a member of parliament for four terms. She was a leader either to the ruling coalition or to the strongest opposition. In this study we will clarify the role played by this Italian lady in one of the oldest democracies amidst a distinctive ethnic diversity. (More, 2015)

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to identify the political role of Sonia Gandhi from 1991 to 2018

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the political role of Sonia Gandhi as a member of Lok Sabha?
2. What is the political role of Sonia Gandhi as a president of both Indian National Congress and United Progressive Alliance?

3. What is the political role of Sonia Gandhi as a chairperson of the National Advisory Council?

## SCOPE OF THE STUDY

**Place Framework:** The State of India, located in South Asia

**Time frame:** The study period starts from 1991 to 2018

**Field framework:** The study belongs to the field of political sciences

## PRELIMINARY DEFINITIONS

**The Indian National Congress (INC):** It is the oldest national political party that emerged under English colonialism. Under the leadership of The Mahatma Gandhi the party led India's independence. The party had a broad popular base that enabled it to rule India for long periods of time. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018)

**The United Progressive Alliance (UPA):** It is a coalition of left-aligned Indian political parties formed after legislative elections in 2004. The main party of the alliance is (INC). It succeeded to form a government many times since its emergence. (Mohan, 2018)

**Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** It is an Indian national political party founded in 1980. It is based on a fanatical Hindu regime. The party was able to break the monopoly of Congress party to the government more than once. (*Banerjee, 2005*)

**The National Democratic Alliance (NDA):** It is a coalition of right-aligned Indian political parties formed in 1998. The main party of the alliance is (BJP). (*Prakash, 2013*)

**The Communist Party of India (Maoist):** It is an illegal Indian political party that aims to overthrow India's regime through a long-term popular war. The party emerged on September 21, 2004, after the merger of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of India and the Maoist Communist Centre of India. (*Rao, 2003*)

**The Lok Sabha:** It is the lower house of the bicameral legislature of India. The members are elected by universal suffrage for five years.

**The Karnataka Legislative Assembly:** It is the lower house of Karnataka state's bicameral legislature. (*Sethi, 2018*)

**The National Advisory Council (NAC):** It was a body set up by (UPA) government in 2004. Its function was to give advice to the Indian Prime Minister. (*Gupta, 2016*)

## PROLEGOMENA

On December 9, 1946, Sonia Gandhi was born to a middle class Italian family in Orbassano, a small town lies seven miles away from Turin city. She joined the Catholic school and then moved to Cambridge University in England to complete her English studies. She met with Rajiv Gandhi, the grandson of Indian leader Nehru, the eldest son of India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In 1969, she married him and moved with him to India. In 1983, she obtained Indian citizenship and was connected with the disciplined political knowledge as she became nearer to her husband's mother Indira Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi and her husband, Rajiv, preferred not to engage in politics at the outset. Her husband was a pilot. She preferred to stay at home to look after the family. She hated politics so much that she thought her children would be beggars to be politicians. (*Gandhi, 1992*) The situation changed a lot after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, where her son Rajiv was forced to lead the Congress Party and then

she began to enter the political circle against her will. She read many historical and philosophical books to support her husband during his political career to govern India. She accompanied him in all his tours to all distant and poor places. She had joined poor and simple people of that country living their suffering and talking with them about their hopes and aspirations. (*BBC News: May 2004*)

Sonia is fluent in five languages: English, Spanish, French, Russian and Italian. At first, her Hindi language did not rise to Standard Hindi. She received written speech in Latin characters instead of the lines and curves that characterize the Indian alphabet. (*Bhanot, 2005*)

### 1. Congress President

On May 22, 1991, two days after the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed by a bomb explosion in the south, the Congress Party showed an offer to Sonia Gandhi that she led the party. The reason was that the party suffered from disarray and internal unrest. It also suffered from weakness in India's political street as a result of allegations of nepotism and corruption, in addition to its inability to deal with India's economic problems and religious tensions. (*Bhanot, 2005*) The Congress sought sympathetic votes in the final round of voting for the upcoming parliamentary election of Lok Sabha through exploiting the name of that widow. Sonia apologized for that offer, saying that the tragedy that befallen her children prevent her to accept Congress presidency. She said that the political sacrifices of the Nehru family as well as the sacrifices of men and women of Congress are the source of its power. Sonia had left the possibility of a future engagement in politics after her grief. She avoided entering into a debate about her foreign origin, which would worsen the situation of Congress at that moment. The issue was ended with selection of P. V. Narasimha Rao as Congress President and subsequently Prime Minister. (*Singh, 2011*)

Over years, the Congress status was deteriorated. The party lost the 1996 general elections and many of its leaders withdrew into many factions. Sonia's affiliation to her family party came back when she returned to in 1997. On March 14, 1998 she was

elected as Congress President. She resigned on May 15, 1999, because of Congress leaders' criticism, namely Sharad Pawar, P. A. Sangma, and Tariq Anwar, about her foreign origin. So it is logic to say that Sonia saved her party when she joined it and when she resigned, with her constant assertion that she had chosen India as her country and that she would keep an Indian to death and that she loved India more than her life. Only five days later, many Congress members went on hunger strike, which led to withdrawal of her resignation on May 20, 1999. That was accompanied by expulsion of the opposition leaders out of the Congress. (*Bhanot, 2005*)

Sonia Gandhi has been re-elected as a Congress President four times - which is a record. The last one was on September 2010. This more than ever strengthened her role as a political decision maker in India. The most prominent roles of Sonia in this regard are the following:

1. On October 2, 2007, on the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, celebrating as International Day of Nonviolence, Sonia Gandhi addressed the United Nations for disarmament and for fight against terrorism.
2. In 2008, Sonia Gandhi succeeded in signing a peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement between India and the United States. The deal was very important for both sides. On one hand, it would help the United States to adapt and reduce China's developing power significantly and help implementation of USA dream in preventing widespread of nuclear weapons. On the other hand, India would obtain many economic and financial privileges to help in its development. This agreement had received strong criticism, especially from the left politicians in India, that it would strengthen USA dominance hindering India's ability to move freely. But Sonia demonstrated that Indian security interests, nuclear program and foreign policy independence would not to be compromised. (*Ganaie, 2013*)
3. One of the most important internal achievements of Sonia Gandhi was related to women's issues, unlike Indira Gandhi, who did not offer women's issues a great interest as these issues were not on her priority list so she did not try to promote them and raise their injustice. Sonia Gandhi confirmed her leadership in

the field of women's rights advancement. When an incident of mass rape of a girl resulted in her death, Sonia Gandhi announced her decision not to celebrate the New Year to mourn the spirit of this girl. It was the incident that prompted her to accelerate the enactment of the necessary legislation to deal with this crisis, especially as this type of crime had increased significantly to affect political stability. (*Singh, 2011*) The Congress Party under her chairmanship is seriously seeking parliamentary approval for:

- a) A new bill guaranteeing severe penalties for perpetrators of women's rape reaching up to 30 years' imprisonment and may even exceed some cases to expose the perpetrator to chemical castration penalty.
- b) An attempt to establish tribunals solely competent to hear rape crimes and to adjudicate cases of such offenses in a timely manner not later than three months after the occurrence of the crime. (*Bureau, 2011*)

Despite her efforts to protect Indian women, Sonia Gandhi has not been satisfied with her performance in this issue, considering that the Indian women problem is a national one that is linked to all women in various social strata. Therefore, all societal forces should join to improve the women status without limiting participation to one category without the other. The crisis requires urgent national solutions. Death penalty or imprisonment is not the only solution to end crimes against women. Rather, there must be legislation, other policies and educational programs aimed at instilling a sense of morality in individuals and raising them to respect the human brotherhood regardless of race, religion or language in order to stop series violations of human rights in India. (*More, 2015*)

4. In 2013, Sonia attacked the Supreme Court's judgment support for Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. She defined lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights. Sonia's foresight was established as the Supreme Court reversed this support on 6 September 2018. (*Rajagopal, 2018*)
5. When Maoist attacks increased, for example, the incident in May 2013, in which a large number of Congress Party leaders was killed, including the

former Minister of the Interior. Sonia Gandhi followed this event with great interest and expressed her deep sorrow for such an incident. Then, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh declared that negotiations with Maoists had become impossible and he would work hard to eliminate the rebels using the utmost intensity and violence. (*Hardikar, 2013*)

6. It is worth mentioning that Sonia Gandhi prepared her son to be the leader of the Congress Party as well as to be the Prime Minister. Thus he will represent continuation of Nehru's family phenomenon in India, which was found to remain. The political future of that family will continue to be governed by the performance of the Congress Party and its ability to penetrate the Indian social sectors, especially the rising middle class. (*Chowdhary, 2017*)

Sonia Gandhi returned to politics in the Congress campaign for the elections of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly election, 2018. Her speech in Bijapur highlighted the Congress as a second largest party in that election, leading it to win 78 seats. (*Sethi, 2018*)

## 2. Membership of Lok Sabha

### 2.1 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (Leader of the Opposition)

The election of Sonia Gandhi as head of the Congress party in 1998 coincided with BJP's loss of confidence vote in Lok Sabha by one vote following withdrawal of Jayaram Jayalithaa, a member of All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Sonia Gandhi, leader of the largest opposition party, began consultations to win the majority, but she failed, leading to general election of 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. Sonia became a member of Lok Sabha from Amethi. It is to be mentioned that In Bellary, she had defeated veteran BJP leader, Sushma Swaraj. (*Oldenburg, 1999*)

Sonia was elected as a Leader of the Opposition in 13<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha. She became a member of the General Purposes Committee from 1999 to 2000. In August 2003, she presented no-confidence motion against the NDA government led by Vajpayee. This was

an opportunity to bring more charges to weaken popularity of the NDA. She raised Indians' admiration for this fire-filled attempt. The speech by Sonia Gandhi in Parliament at that time was a major milestone on her way to become a political leader. This speech recorded its desire to take over the leadership of the country and to reach the highest position, despite the success of the NDA to overcome the matter by 312 votes to 186 because of the government's numerical majority in Lok Sabha. (*Singh, 2011*)

### 2.2 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha (the premiership)

The Congress entered the general election for 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, who raised the slogan of "Aam Aadmi" (ordinary man). The slogan of the BJP-led NDA was "India Shining". She wondered for who shines India? (*More, 2015*)

In the Rae Bareilly she was able to win the seat of the 2nd term. But the most important achievement was winning 145 seats by the Congress while NDA had only got 138 seats. This was owed to her hard work, along with the name Gandhi that she carries. She also became able to speak Hindi fluently and was able to attract crowds who address them in a way they understand easily. Despite the doubts surrounding some of the political visions advocated by Sonia Gandhi, she eventually succeeded in formulating a strategy that enabled the Congress Party to win the elections and restore the premiership. She focused her statements on the party's interest in pushing the peace process with Pakistan. She accused her competitors by claiming interest in this issue. She focused on the Indian countryside, which was still suffering from poverty compared by the urban areas which moved toward modernization and development. She performed numerous electoral rounds in rural areas to gain the support of a large sector of Indians in those areas. Priyanka (1972) and Rahul (1970) helped their mother Sonia to achieve this victory. Priyanka in particular had many features and traits of her late grandmother, Indira Gandhi. This helped to win the votes of India's young generation. (*Gandhi, 2007*)

This victory was a remarkable achievement for Sonia Gandhi, especially since this lady whose father was Italy led her party to achieve that victory in a

country whose political system suffers from the fear of foreigners. On May 16, Sonia was elected to lead a coalition government of 15 parties, mostly from the left. This coalition was named the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). But she gave up the premiership for the following reasons:

1. The success of the radical nationalists in their fierce campaign against Sonia as they refused to govern the country by a woman of non-Indian origins. The NDA, under the command of Sushma Swaraj, attacked Sonia's foreign origin and claimed that Sonia's premiership violated Article 5 of the Indian Nationality Act. But the Indian Supreme Court supported Sonia's position. In India, there are no legal provisions limiting the country's top political office to native citizens born in India, unlike the United States, where politically ambitious immigrants - like Arnold Schwarzenegger, who won the California government - are barred from becoming president. In this regard, Sonia sought to defuse the crisis on this matter through repeated statements made to the Indian media in which she confirmed that she never feels that she is a foreigner or that anyone perceived her as such, stressing that she is "an Indian" by all its meaning. (*Waldman, 2004*)
2. The Communist parties refused to participate in ruling coalition under her leadership and they only supported the government in the face of the opposition, as follows: Left Front (59), Samajwadi Party (36), Bahujan Samaj Party (19), Kerala Congress (1), Indian Federal Democratic Party (1), Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (1) Total: 335 votes (61.7%). (*Statistical report general elections, 2004*) This had put many questions and raised many doubts about their support
3. Her family feared that she would receive the same fate as her husband.

Sonia stressed that this position was not one of her objectives. She aimed the return of the Congress party to govern and to meet the deteriorating internal challenges. This was an intelligent behavior; it showed that she promoted the Indian tradition of renunciation. It also enabled Sonia to move freely beyond the limits of the official position pressures. (*Gandhi, 2007*)

With her abdication of the premiership, she chose Manmohan Singh as prime minister. (*Rules SC, 2001*). This is a very good choice for the following:

1. Manmohan Singh is the first Sikh to hold this high position in a predominantly Hindu state. This affirmed her respect for Sikh community and for ethnic and religious pluralism in India. (*Watson, 2004*)
2. Manmohan Singh was a prominent political leader, finance minister and governor of the central bank. He had a good reputation in India, that help to reduce the differences that could be raised by other Indian powers and help heal the rift between Muslims and Hindus. This was in line with her vision that India must remain a secular state, explaining that her concept of a secular state is that it is a state that embraces all religions. (*Bhanot, 2005*)

On March 23, 2006, she resigned from 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha then on May 15, 2006, she was re-elected in a bye-election.

### 2.3 15<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha

On May 16, 2009, the UPA led by INC under leadership of Sonia won a decisive majority in the general election. Manmohan Singh remained the prime minister. The Congress had got 206 seats in Lok Sabha, which were the highest party seats since 1991. The BJP had got 116-seat. Sonia was re-elected for a third term as a Member of Parliament representing Rae Bareli. (*Singh, 2011*)

### 2.4 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha

On May 12, 2014, the UPA and INC had got the largest loss in their history. The UPA had only got 55 seats, while INC had only got 44 seats. Sonia continued to represent Rae Bareli (fourth term). (*More, 2015*)

### 3. National Advisory Council Chairperson

On June 4, 2004, the Prime Minister established National Advisory Council. Sonia was

chosen as president of this council. On March 23, 2006, Gandhi announced her resignation from the Lok Sabha and also as chairperson of the National Advisory Council. (*Gandhi, 2007*) On May 29, 2010, she was chosen again as a president of NAC. She did all her efforts to implement the National Common Minimum Program which included:

1. Achievement of equal opportunities in education for different denominations and religious minorities.
2. Achievement of sustained economic growth of 8% per year to ensure safe and sustainable livelihoods.
3. Empowerment of women in politics, education, economy and law.
4. Encouraging the creative energies of scientists, professionals and productive forces. (*Mathew, 2010*)
5. Enhancing farmers' welfare in various fields.
6. Equality of all, there is no discrimination on a class basis.
7. Promotion of harmonious society and law enforcement without prejudice to anyone, and deal with fundamentalists so as not to disturb social peace.
8. The need for the government to be non-corrupt, transparent and constantly responsible and the need for management to be constantly responsive. (*Gupta, 2016*)

One of her achievements during this position was the issuance of the following laws

1. National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA No 42, which later renamed the "Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act" (MGNREGA). It is the Indian Labor Code and the Social Security Act, which aims to guarantee the "right to work". It aims to enhance livelihood security in rural areas by providing at least 100 paid working days per fiscal year for each family whose adult members volunteer for unskilled manual labor. (*Ranjan, 2015*)
2. Right to Information (RTI) It is a law that defines the practical system of citizens' right to information, through which any Indian citizen is entitled to request information from the public authority. That authority shall reply within thirty days. The law also

requires all public authorities to computerize their records to be widely disseminated so that citizens require minimum formal access to information. (*Abhishek, 2012*)

The NAC was criticized by oppositionists for not matching with the constitution as it represented an alternative to the government. However, there was another view that NAC could deepen democracy by facilitating both pre-legislative / pre-policy consultations. The NAC also finished draft recommendations before legislation that had significant role in law-making democracy. The Council stopped since Narendra Damodardas government won the 2014 general elections. (*Mathew, 2010*)

#### 4. Other positions

1. Chairperson, (i) Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, (ii) Indira Gandhi Memorial Trust; (iii) Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund;
2. Member, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.
3. President, (i) Swaraj Bhavan Trust; (ii) Kamla Nehru Memorial Hospital Society;
4. Trustee, Jalianwala Bagh National Memorial Trust; (*Singh, 2011*)

With all the previous efforts made by Sonia Gandhi, but in 2011, when she was ready to run for the Indian presidency, she faced great difficulties because of her Italian origins, exactly like what happened after the 2004 elections. (*Singh, 2011*)

#### ASSESSMENT OF SONIA GANDHI PERSONALITY

Through this study we realize how Sonia Gandhi managed to be an excellent successor to Gandhi family. She came to complete the march of the great leader Nehru, then the charismatic figure Indira Gandhi and then to complete her husband Rajiv Gandhi's journey and pave the way for her son Rahul Gandhi to complete what she could not do. Her political life had never affected her life as a wife, as there was no gap nor disagreements with Rajiv like that occurred between Indira and Feroze Gandhi. Sonia Gandhi of Italian origin could be named in golden letters in Indian history. She is one of the most influential women on India's 1.2 billion populations. Forbes magazine had ranked her as

the most powerful person in India for her ability to run the country amidst a host of problems plaguing the India's coalition government that was accused of failing to deal with mass protests against corruption. (*BBC News: May 2004*)

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