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Pranab and the Future of Indian Presidency

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In May 1969, the President of India died, and a story began that continues to unfold in New Delhi today. The tale involves the office of the presidency of India, the new occupant of that office, Pranab Mukherjee, and the descendants of Jawaharlal Nehru. It's a story with an unpredictable future and a twisty history.

Mr Mukherjee was sworn in as India's 13th President on 25 July 2012, but his career in the Congress Party and his connections with the Nehru family took off in the fateful monsoon months of 1969.

The Office

In theory, the President of India is a symbol, a head of state, a greeter of important guests and reader of scripted speeches. In times of uncertainty, however, the President becomes immensely important, capable of determining the fate of governments, as Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter and Prime Minister from 1966-77 and 1980-4, was well aware.

She had become Prime Minister as a compromise among party bosses in 1966. They thought 'the dumb doll', as she was described with memorable misjudgement, was going to be easy to push

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around. She wasn't dumb, and she was no doll. By 1969, she was itching to get rid of the old heavyweights, and the death of President Zakir Hussain gave her the chance.

The President is elected by members of the national parliament and members of state legislatures, each individual wielding a number of votes proportionate to the number of people she or he represents. In the election for a new President, the party bosses in 1969 put up one of their cronies. Indira Gandhi supported a rival, split the party and got her man elected.

From that point in 1969, the presidency of India became much more than a ceremonial walk-in-the-park or ride-in-a-carriage. It became a politically charged and, at times of crisis, pivotal institution.

The Man

In the same monsoon summer of 1969, Mr Mukherjee came to Delhi for the first time as a member of the upper house, representing the Bangla Congress, a breakaway party in West Bengal. He had a reputation as a good organiser, having got a man from faraway Kerala in the deep south elected to a seat in parliament from West Bengal. (This was V. K. Krishna Menon, the failed ex-Defence Minister of 1962). Indira Gandhi needed energy and talent to maintain her new party. Mr Mukherjee, who started working life as government clerk, needed a patron once the Bangla Congress disintegrated. By 1972, Indira Gandhi had inducted Mr Mukherjee into her Congress Party.

By 1973, he was a 38-year-old Minister in her government. He kept his head down as Minister of Revenue and Banking during her 'emergency' of 1975-7, and he stayed loyal when she was swept out of office in elections in 1977. More important, during the two years in the wilderness in 1978-9, he was treasurer of Mrs Indira Gandhi's party at a time when she needed funds. He built links with India's greatest rags-(almost)-to-riches success story, Dhirubhai Ambani. Indira Gandhi returned to power in 1980, and Mr Mukherjee prospered. By 1982 he was Finance Minister, No. 2 in the cabinet and described as her 'hatchet man'.

He fell out with Indira Gandhi's family after her assassination in 1984. The office of the President was crucial in the estrangement. On the two previous occasions when a Prime Minister died in office, the President had called on the senior minister in the government to act as Prime Minister. In 1984, that would have been Pranab Mukherjee, a point that he is said to have made to Indira's son and heir, Rajiv Gandhi. Indira Gandhi's family appear to have inherited an unfortunate belief that India cannot get along without them, and a compliant President – carefully chosen by Mrs Gandhi for his loyalty – duly swore in her son as Prime Minister.

Thereafter Mr Mukherjee was excluded from Rajiv Gandhi's circle and even briefly formed a rival political party in West Bengal. He came back into the Congress fold in 1989 and rose to prominence again after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991. He ran the Planning Commission from 1991 to 1996, during the economic reforms driven by the Congress-led government of 1991-6. By 2001, he was back in cautious favour with Rajiv Gandhi's Italian widow, Sonia, who was by that time the matriarch of the Congress Party, as she remains today.

The Future

Mr Mukherjee brings remarkable qualities to the presidency. Near the centre of power for 40 years, he has an unrivalled knowledge of India's power-elite and gets on with a wide variety of people. He has the reputation of a wary Minister, a fixer with a memory for detail and an ability to protect reputations with meticulous paperwork.

In getting the Congress Party's support for the presidency – and this seems to have meant, crucially, Sonia Gandhi's support – Mr Mukherjee had other desirable qualities. He lacks characteristics of an effective demagogue: it is hard to imagine him giving a rousing speech or leading the masses to the barricades. In earlier years, he had trouble winning elections and had to be brought to parliament through the indirectly elected upper house.

India's political environment makes it likely that the President is going to have big decisions forced upon him in 2014, if not before. The current government, in which Mr Mukherjee was Finance Minister, is on the skids with the electorate, mired in corruption allegations and bereft of policies or the ability to implement them. The government is unlikely to fall in the 20 months remaining in its term because no parliamentarian of any party wants to face the uncertainties of an immediate election.

However, it is highly likely that the Congress Party will lose heavily in the elections scheduled for 2014. What also appears likely is that no party will win enough seats to be an obvious leader of a coalition government.

In India's states, a number of Chief Ministers, able to command regional support, are preening and preparing for a call to the prime ministership in 2014. They base their hopes on the knowledge that in the mid-1990s India had two short-lived Prime Ministers who got the job through the compulsions of chaotic coalition politics, though they were far from being household names.

In a hung parliament, the President decides who gets first chance to form a government and at what point new elections need to be called. Mrs Sonia Gandhi, authority-figure of the Congress Party, who becomes ever more mysterious like her late mother-in-law, is said to harbour an apprehension that in such circumstances, Mr Mukherjee might not be the totally loyal President that Indira Gandhi required.

For his part, Mr Mukherjee can keep his counsel. If he has to make major decisions in 2014, he will draw on a wide and deep knowledge of India's political circumstances and a keen awareness going back to 1969 of the influence that a President of India – dead or alive – can exercise on politics.

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