

Is the Congress planning an early election?

India's ruling Congress party may go for early elections to the Lok Sabha after presenting a populist budget this month, informed sources say.

Although no final decision has been taken in this regard, the party is increasingly of the view that an early election will help it to check the growth of a rejuvenated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies. But before recommending a parliamentary election otherwise due in 2009, the Congress is expected to overhaul the party structure to meet the challenges of a nationwide ballot involving the world's largest electorate.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi is already engaged in this task, the sources told IANS in strict condition of anonymity.

According to Congress sources, a large section feels that an early election will mean a brighter outcome for the party. The Congress dramatically finished on top of a hung Lok Sabha in 2004, winning 145 of the 543 elected seats, and forming a coalition government under the banner of the Left-backed United Progressive Alliance (UPA).

But since some of the key factors that favoured it four years ago do not exist, the government is expected to present on Feb 29 a populist union budget for 2008-09 so as to give sops to every section of the population. The Congress, in consultation with its allies, may dissolve the Lok Sabha once the budget session ends May 3, the sources said.

Among the factors worrying the Congress, the sources say, are the projection of BJP star L.K. Advani as the prime ministerial candidate and the increasing acceptance in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of the man who not long ago was seen as an unacceptable hardliner in comparison to former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

'A ruling party should always be cautious when the opposition parties remain united. If they are coming under one leader, it is a bad news for the Congress,' a Congress leader pointed out, not wanting to be identified by name.

'Many of us feel that we should not give the opposition enough time to rally under one roof. We should go for early polls while there is still some disarray in the opposition ranks,' the leader told IANS.

Sonia Gandhi and her MP son Rahul Gandhi, now a general secretary, have chalked out plans to strengthen the party, which faces one of its bleakest moments in its long history. The Congress has become an also ran or a pale shadow of itself in many states.

The sources said that Sonia Gandhi wants Rahul to take on more responsibilities of the party because she feels she is overburdened.

Said one source: 'She has not been keeping well also. Although her health is not a matter of serious concern, she wants Rahul to share the responsibilities.'

There are good chances that the party may name Rahul Gandhi as working president, giving out a

clear signal that he is in the race to become the prime minister of India.

Sonia Gandhi also wants to ensure that most of the 24 Congress MPs retiring from the Rajya Sabha next month get re-elected. They include ministers like Murli Deora, Prithviraj Chavan and Suresh Pachauri. She is also likely to change state unit presidents as major states like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi go to the polls this year and where the party is desperate to defeat the BJP to show that it is alive and kicking.

The Congress is also concerned over the poor implementation of its pet development projects such as one under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the poor utilisation of central government funds meant for welfare schemes. The party had been expecting these policies to give a boost to its nationwide popularity.

The leaders admit that the Congress, whose strength in the Lok Sabha has risen to 152 according to the parliament web site, needs to improve its tally. This is crucial because some of its 2004 allies have parted ways.

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