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# After face-off with Trinamool, Congress faces internal conflict

Some in the Congress want a snap poll if it does well in assembly elections; others want UPA to finish the term

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The face-off between the Congress and key ally Trinamool Congress (TMC) is likely to precipitate an internal conflict in the ruling party after assembly elections in five states end early March.

A section of the Congress wants a snap poll if the party does well in the Uttar Pradesh polls and gains power in Uttarakhand and Punjab; others are keen to complete the tenure of the second United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government that ends in 2014.

Although some top ministers and senior party leaders are preparing a contingency plan to rope the Samajwadi Party into the alliance to dampen TMC leader Mamata Banerjee's mounting pressure on the Union government, others led by Congress general secretary Rahul Gandhi may oppose any such move as it would weaken their attempts to rebuild the party in the politically crucial Uttar Pradesh.

Gandhi, considered to be the party's future prime ministerial candidate, has been struggling to revive the Congress' electoral prospects and strengthen the organization at the grass roots. "Why should Congress support any party to form the government? We have been urging people to go for a change from the consecutive BSP (ruling Bahujan Samaj Party), (main opposition) SP and the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party)," said a Congress leader actively involved in the Uttar Pradesh election campaign. "After all, if Rahul has to lead the party in the next general election, we should have a strong hold over UP."

However, a senior cabinet minister, who did not want to be identified, said: "Why should we sacrifice Uttar Pradesh if his (Rahul's) hard work is yielding results? It will be suicidal to risk it for barely two years at the centre. A fresh mandate will be a better idea."

Five states—Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur and Goa—will elect new assemblies by 4 March. Congress is expected to do well in Punjab and Uttarakhand due to the anti-incumbency factor, and in Uttar Pradesh, where Gandhi is leading the campaign.

The growing tension between the Congress and West Bengal chief minister Banerjee's TMC seemed to have reached a point of no return with the two sharpening public attacks on each other. However, in an interview with NDTV news channel on Sunday, law minister Salman Khurshid tried to reach out to his warring ally, saying there was need for "better communication" and the two parties could re-build trust by ironing out disagreements within closed doors.

"I hope something like this will be worked out," he said.

Banerjee, who blocked the UPA government's initiatives on foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail, pension reform and the anti-graft Lokpal Bill, has irked the state Congress unit by attempting to rename Indira Bhavan, named after former prime minister Indira Gandhi of the Congress, to Nazrul Bhavan, after noted Bengali poet Nazrul Islam. With state leaders vociferously protesting against the move, Banerjee challenged the Congress to walk out of the ruling alliance in West Bengal. Congress reacted by saying the party would not quit the ministry in the state "as long as the people desire".

The chief minister and her party alleged the Congress was still cosying up to the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM)-led Left, which was ousted from government by TMC-Congress after almost 35 years. During 2004-08, the Congress-led UPA had been backed by the Left parties at the centre. According to a Congress leader, the party's top leadership as well as a majority of leaders are convinced the future of the party's alliance with the TMC is bleak.

"Banerjee may blow hot and cold till the *Panchayat* (local body) elections in the state (by the end of this year), in which she wants to finish the Congress and she may withdraw the ministers from the government eventually," he said, requesting anonymity.

The TMC also wants an early parliamentary election, in which "she expects to win more seats than the current 19, which may not be possible in 2014," the leader said. That's the reason the Congress leadership is keen on getting on board the SP, which had backed the party in the crucial 22 July trust vote in 2008 after the Left withdrew its support over the India-US nuclear deal.

However, three senior Congress leaders admitted Rahul Gandhi may prefer seeking a fresh mandate to take over the reins from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and is not likely to agree to such an arrangement. "However, the final call will be by Sonia Gandhi," said the minister quoted earlier.

To be sure, SP state president and party chief's parliamentarian son Akhilesh Yadav has repeatedly said there could be a Congress-SP alliance to keep the "communal forces" at bay.

Congress leaders from Uttar Pradesh have rubbished his proposal. "This is just to confuse the public, and such statements are being made eyeing on the Muslim votes," said Akhilesh Pratap Singh, a Congress leader from Uttar Pradesh.

Meanwhile, Gandhi, who is touring in Gorakhpur and nearby areas in eastern Uttar Pradesh, has stepped up his attack on the SP, saying the latter indulged in caste-based politics and blocked the state's development.

It will be natural for the ruling party to face such conflicts in the post-assembly poll scenario, a political analyst said.

"It's true that Rahul Gandhi is keen to build the party and has been succeeded in giving an effective voice to the party, in which the current Prime Minister and the party chief failed," said N. Bhaskara Rao, who leads the Centre for Media Studies, a New Delhi-based think tank. "But he will have to agree to the fact that the country cannot do away with coalitions. Ultimately, he will have to reconcile; otherwise it will not be able to form governments."

PTI contributed to this report.