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Congress party elects first non-Gandhi head in 24 yrs

Kharge faces mammoth challenge of winning next national election

NEW DELHI: India's Congress party on Wednesday appointed an octogenarian ex-minister as its first president in 24 years not from the Gandhi dynasty, in an effort to reverse its apparent decline into political oblivion. Mallikarjun Kharge, 80, was elected by members to replace Sonia Gandhi as president of the once-mighty party that helped win India's independence from Britain 75 years ago.

The Indian National Congress governed India for decades after independence in 1947 but is now a shadow of its former self next to the electoral juggernaut of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "Today, India is facing challenges of inflation, unemployment and growing economic disparity and the ruling party's divisive agenda," Kharge told reporters during his first press conference as party leader. "We have to protect the constitution that is under attack and together fight the forces trying to finish our democracy."

The Gandhi family is not related to India's independence icon Mahatma Gandhi, but descended from the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was the father of prime minister Indira Gandhi, assassinated in 1984. She was the mother of Rajiv Gandhi, killed by a suicide bomber in 1991. The party was last in power nationally from 2004 to 2014 under prime minister Manmohan Singh.

The BJP thrashed Congress in the last two elections, with Modi deriding party president Rahul Gandhi - son of Rajiv

and Sonia - as an out-of-touch princeling and playboy. After the latest defeat in 2019, Rahul Gandhi resigned as party president and handed the reins back to his Italian-born mother Sonia, now 75, who was first appointed to the role in 1998.

Kharge, a former railways and labor minister who is from the low-caste Dalit community, was born five years before independence and is widely believed to have the backing of both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi. Rahul Gandhi said Wednesday that Kharge is now the supreme authority in the party and that he "will decide my role in the party". But despite stepping back, Sonia and Rahul Gandhi are expected to continue pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

Kharge, who is four months older than US President Joe Biden, now faces the mammoth challenge of winning the next national election, due in 2024, and contesting two state elections before the end of this year. Kharge faced off against Shashi Tharoor, 66, a former under-secretary-general of the United Nations who campaigned for "change" in the party. The successful author has been scathing of British colonialism and said in 2017 that Winston Churchill "has as much blood on his hands as some of the worst genocidal dictators of the 20th century".

Tharoor conceded defeat on Twitter and said that being Congress president was a "great honor & a huge responsibility", wishing Kharge "all success in the task". The party was reduced to just 52 seats in the 543-member lower house of



NEW DELHI: India's Congress party's newly-appointed president Mallikarjun Kharge receives a garland from his supporters after addressing a press conference on Oct 19, 2022. — AFP

parliament after the last national election, which was swept by the BJP with 303 seats.

Electing a non-Gandhi president showed that Congress was "weary of criticism from BJP and Modi", Rasheed

Kidwai, a fellow at the Observer Research Foundation and close watcher of the party for years, told AFP. He added that there was a "fair chance" that Kharge would turn around the party's fortunes. "He may be 80 but is in good

health and a workaholic. He meets party leaders about state and regional issues. He can provide a healing touch to the party ranks," Kidwai said. "But ultimately, in an electoral democracy what matters is winning elections." — AFP

UN chief chides India on human rights record

MUMBAI: UN chief Antonio Guterres chided India during a visit Wednesday over its human rights record, which critics say has regressed under Hindu nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Since Modi came to power in 2014 in the Hindu-majority nation of 1.4 billion, campaigners say persecution and hate speech have accelerated against religious minorities, especially for India's 200-million-strong Muslim minority.

This is particularly the case in Indian-administered Kashmir since the Modi government in 2019 imposed direct rule on the restive Muslim-majority region where it has half a million troops stationed, activists say.

Pressure has also grown towards government critics and journalists, particularly women reporters-some have suffered relentless campaigns of online abuse including death and rape threats. "As an elected member of the Human Rights Council, India has a responsibility to shape global human rights, and to protect and promote the rights of all individuals, including members of minority communities," Guterres said in a speech in Mumbai.

Though he praised India's achievements 75 years after leaving British rule, Guterres also pointedly said that the understanding that "diversity is a richness... is not a guarantee". "It must be nurtured, strengthened and renewed everyday," he said.

Citing independence hero Mahatma Gandhi and India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru-both of whom have become hate figures for some in Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party-Guterres said their values need to be guarded by "condemning hate speech unequivocally".



MUMBAI: Handout photograph shows United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres (C) being greeted upon his arrival at the airport in Mumbai. — AFP

India must do this "by protecting the rights and freedoms of journalists, human rights activists, students and academics. And by ensuring the continued independence of India's judiciary", he said. "India's voice on the global stage can only gain in authority and credibility from a strong commitment to inclusivity and respect for human rights at home," he said, adding that "much more needs to be done to advance gender equality and women's rights".

"I urge Indians to be vigilant and to increase your investments in inclusive, pluralistic, diverse communities and societies," Guterres said. In February UN rights experts called for an end to "misogynistic and sectarian" online attacks against one particular Muslim woman journalist who was a fierce critic of Modi.

Media rights group Reporters Without Borders (RSF) places India at a lowly 142 in its World Press Freedom Index, saying that under the premier, "pressure has increased on the media to toe the Hindu nationalist government's line". — AFP

Tehran saying it wants talks with Ukraine. But the European Union said Wednesday it had confirmed that Iran has supplied the drones to Russia.

The Ukrainian military said Wednesday that it had shot down more than 220 Iranian-made drones in little more than a month, although a drone bombardment on the capital Kyiv on Monday left five people dead.

Nabila Massrali, spokeswoman for EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, said that the bloc had "gathered our own evidence" and would prepare "a clear, swift and firm EU response." EU diplomats told AFP there was work under way on Wednesday to draw up a list of Iranian individuals and entities linked to the drones who would be added to the bloc's sanctions blacklist.

The United States has charged that the drones, formally known as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), violated UN Security Council Resolution 2231 of 2015 that blessed a now moribund nuclear deal. The resolution's ban on Iran's conventional arms sales expired in 2020, despite attempts by the then-US administration of Donald Trump. But the resolution still bans through October 2023 any transfers that could benefit nuclear-capable ballistic missiles unless there is permission from the Security Council. — AFP

West pushes Russia at UN on Iranian drones in Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS: Western powers will raise alarm Wednesday at a UN Security Council session over Russia's attacks in Ukraine with purported Iranian drones, as the European Union prepared sanctions.

The United States, France and Britain requested the discussion, which will take place behind closed doors at the Security Council, diplomats said. Russia holds veto power at the Security Council and would be sure to kill any resolution. But the United States and France have warned that Iran is violating a Security Council resolution by arming Russia in its war in Ukraine.

Ukraine has for weeks reported attacks by Russia with Iranian Shahed-136 drones-unmanned aircraft whose warheads explode in kamikaze landings-and has moved to cut relations with Tehran. Iran and Russia have both denied the use of the drones, with



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