

Congress's great dynastic hope

Rahul Gandhi, progeny of prime ministers, kicks off his campaign for India's general election.



To the buzz of an approaching helicopter, 30,000 people arise in Wardha, in the dead centre of India, and start waving at the sun-bleached sky. Rahul Gandhi—the 38-year-old heir to India's great political dynasty; son, grandson and great-grandson of prime ministers; and leader in waiting of their Congress party—is coming.

On landing, in an ugly yellow dust-storm, Mr Gandhi climbs a small dais and, after some little-headed words from Congress's chief minister of Maharashtra, opens his campaign for the general election that is due to begin on April 16th. Speaking in a soft voice, and with deliberate, north-Indian-accented Hindi, he promises to fight poverty and for national unity. He makes bold claims for the outgoing Congress-led coalition government—especially for several welfare schemes that it has launched, including a massive debt write-off for small farmers. The crowd is hushed. In a desiccated cotton-growing region of Maharashtra, where rates of indebtedness and suicide among farmers are high, this was a popular measure.

Then "Jai Ho!"—the Oscar-winning theme-track to the film "Slumdog Millionaire", which Congress has adopted for its campaign—blares through the speaker. And Mr Gandhi is up and off. Within 20 minutes, but for a few children combing for plastic water-bottles and other sellable rubbish, the rally-ground is empty.

This is a hopeful election for Congress, India's closest approximation to a party with national appeal. Led by Mr Gandhi's mother, Sonia Gandhi, and her chosen prime minister, Manmohan Singh, it has presided over a coalition government for the first time—and more skillfully than many expected. Coinciding with a run of unprecedentedly high economic growth, which provided bumper revenues for the open-handed schemes that Mr Gandhi boasted of, it also seems less unpopular than outgoing Indian governments often are. Because of this, and the weakness of its main opponent, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress seems to have a decent chance of retaining power, at the helm of another coalition.

Buoyed by its success, the party that led India for three decades without a coalition is even dreaming it may one day do so again. Under Sonia Gandhi, who took over in 1998, seven years after her husband Rajiv was assassinated, it hopes to have arrested its long decline. At the last election, in 2004, it won 145 of India's 543 parliamentary seats; in 1999 it won only 114. Under Rahul Gandhi, who lacks his mother's handicap of foreign (Italian) birth, Congress plans to rebuild its eroded base.

It has therefore spurned possible electoral alliances in the populous northern states it once dominated, and which it must regain if it is to win a parliamentary majority. On March 21st Congress announced it would follow this strategy in Bihar, where it won just three of a possible

40 seats in 2004. This will mean fighting against two coalition allies, a party dedicated to low-caste Hindus and another to dalits, Hinduism's former "untouchables", that it will again want support from after the election. And on March 26th, the Samajwadi Party, which Congress had been negotiating a pact with in Uttar Pradesh (UP)—a state where it won 12 of 80 seats in 2004—said negotiations had failed because of Congress's excessive demands.



This is a risky strategy, with Congress counting on winning enough seats to take the lead in forming a coalition, which its currently-piqued allies will then join. In the longer-term, it hopes that fighting alone in Bihar and UP will begin the process of rebuilding there, which Rahul Gandhi will lead. If Congress does retain power in the election, which will run until May 13th, many would expect him to take over as prime minister within a year or so from Mr Singh, who is 76 and frail.

Given that Congress stood to gain only a dozen or so extra seats from electoral tie-ups in UP and Bihar, its gamble looks reasonable. Fighting the election unencumbered will also give it a wider choice of allies after the poll, in which several of its erstwhile allies may fare poorly. For alternative—or additional—partners, Congress may have its eye on one or two current friends of the BJP. Underpinning its strategy, indeed, is a calculation that even if the Hindu nationalists win more seats than Congress in the election, they would be less able to build the necessary coalition.

Several former BJP allies—including the biggest prop of the former BJP-led government, Andhra Pradesh's Telugu Desam Party—consider their association with the Hinduist party to have cost them crucial Muslim votes. And the BJP's prime-ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, is more divisive than his predecessor, Atal Behari Vajpayee. To reassure potential allies—and the many secular Indians who share its free-market agenda—the BJP is therefore trying to downplay its Hindu-chauvinist one. But this irks the party's saffron-hued base.

A controversy stirred by Mr Gandhi's estranged 29-year-old cousin, Varun Gandhi, who is standing in UP for the BJP, illustrates its dilemma. On March 16th a television news channel broadcast a recording of a speech in which Varun promised India's 160m Muslims that he would "cut their throats after the election". He has since been arrested and charged with attempted murder and other crimes. To appease the party's livid stalwarts, Mr Advani has felt the need to back Varun's claim to have been mis-recorded. He has also promised to campaign on Varun's behalf. Meanwhile, an important BJP ally, Nitish Kumar, has said Varun must be prosecuted.

Congress's more distant hope—for a national revival under Rahul Gandhi—looks dicey. Its Gandhi cult unites a party that would probably fracture without it, as happened after Rajiv Gandhi's death. Yet Congress's relentless shrinkage under Gandhi leadership—including in the

last election, when its overall vote-share actually fell—is evidence of the family’s diminishing appeal. It will take more than a new Gandhi to woo many people back from regional and caste-based parties, which are more obviously devoted to dispensing the patronage poor Indians crave.

Mr Gandhi, who can seem an awkward politician, though he is clearly well-intentioned and no fool, knows this. In an interview in Delhi on March 30th, the day before he launched his campaign in Wardha, he was keen to discuss his ambitions—and fledgling efforts—to make Congress more democratic. His vision is a party in which “it doesn’t necessarily matter who your mother is or who your father is but how many supporters you have in the district.” That would be good, and may one day transpire. But if Congress wanted to be like that now, as Mr Gandhi must also know, he would not be about to inherit it.

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