

**Protests a baptism of fire for Gandhi family scion**  
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EW DELHI, Aug 19 — Huge anti-corruption protests and a fumbling government response have catapulted India's family scion and prime minister-in-waiting Rahul Gandhi into a baptism of fire and exposed a leadership vacuum in the world's biggest democracy.

"Where is he now?" said Manish Kumar Singh, a protesting 42-year-old state employee protesting outside the jail holding activist Anna Hazare, reflecting a sense of leadership vacuum.

"If Rahul is called the crown prince of Congress, he should come out and take up his responsibilities."

Only a fortnight before the arrest of self-styled Gandhian activist Hazare and then a U-turn to release him, an undisclosed illness of Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi had led her to nominate her son to take charge.

It was a transition that coincided with India's most widespread and spontaneous social demonstrations in decades, leading to more than 2,600 peaceful protesters being arrested in Delhi alone, and the worst-ever crisis to face the Congress government now in its second term.

But since Rahul returned from visiting his ailing mother in the United States on Sunday, the 41-year-old heir to the Gandhi-Nehru dynasty that has run India for most of its post-independence era has not said a word in public and may have been sidelined in government.

It underscores what may be an unstable succession to Sonia Gandhi, India's most powerful politician, who has run the country from behind the scenes since handing the post of prime minister to economist Manmohan Singh in 2004.

"The complete incoherence of government strategy is not something that he (Rahul Gandhi) can distance himself from," said political analyst Swapan Dasgupta. "The dynasty may be the glue that holds Congress together but there are times when events just overtake you and you become an election liability."

For seven years Sonia Gandhi has provided the strategy for the Congress-led coalition, leaving day-to-day running in the hands of her ministers but providing the overall, pro-poor and often populist direction of the left-of-centre national party.

The widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and daughter-in-law of assassinated prime minister Indira Gandhi, she was the designated — if reluctant — successor, winning two successive general elections in 2004 and 2009.

For years Rahul has been groomed, hidden from the limelight, as Sonia's successor.

While Rahul has avoided government posts, the Congress youth leader has travelled across India, staying in poor hamlets and preaching the cause of the poor and joining protests for farmer land rights.

Criticised as too young, he grew a beard. Criticised as too lightweight, he met with intellectuals and economists, attended business conferences and was photographed with international figures such as Bill Gates.

But the sudden announcement his mother had handed reins to a quartet including Rahul threw him into leadership of a party that is as notoriously bureaucratic as any ministry.

Returning from visiting his mother, Rahul attended government meetings before the arrest of Hazare — a detention that proved a costly political mistake — but he also may have been key in persuading the government to release Hazare.

It was a sign that Rahul was not fully in control, allowing more hardline politicians such as Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram to crack down on protesters.

“Rahul was catapulted to leadership even faster than he imagined. And to that extent he was not ready,” said Siddharth Varadarajan, editor at The Hindu newspaper.

“He seems to be far more aware of the political implications than ministers like Chidambaram,” said Varadarajan. “But he has always been reluctant to use his position to second guess the government.”

Rahul also appears to have had little control over his own spokesmen, who inflated the crisis by claiming Hazare and his followers had fascist and anarchist links and that the United States had a hand in driving the protests.

When Singh spoke to parliament over the crisis, Rahul, who is a lawmaker, sat stone-faced, silent and with his arms folded. But even though he appeared not to agree with the government, he has failed to take matters in his own hands.

Yesterday, he travelled to western India to meet victims of a land dispute with police — a noble cause but hardly leading from the front in a massive political crisis.

“We people were not expecting this level of problem,” said a senior Congress official and former cabinet minister. “Whatever he can do he will do. But to expect — he came, he has seen and he conquered — it will not happen.”

The crisis has also thrown into question the dual role that Sonia introduced after the 2004 election — nominating Singh but running strategy from behind the scenes.

The system has accentuated different centres of power, with ministers and Congress officials battling each other over key economic reforms like a food security bill and foreign investment in the modern supermarket sector.

The system has so far helped the Gandhis, creating a mystique and ensuring they are not focus of public ire that often is directed at Singh and his ministers. There were, however, small signs this week of cracks in that system.

“Sonia has always stayed above the fray even if people criticise the government, and that’s the same with Rahul,” said pollster Yashwant Deshmukh in New Delhi.

“That is changing. Anger is being directed at Sonia and Rahul. What I haven’t seen in seven years has now happened in the last 72 hours.”

But the real test for Rahul may not come with the corruption protests. His party faces a state election in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 that could provide crucial for the party's fortune in the 2014 general election.

"The real metric to judge him will be the electoral outcomes," said Varadarajan. "And he still has time on his hands." — Reuters

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