

India's reluctant young emperor, Rahul Gandhi
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BHAKURAI, India, Feb 7 — They call him the Yuva Samrat, or young emperor. Yet Rahul Gandhi has so far shown no inclination to claim the throne of the world's largest democracy.

The scion of India's Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty could be prime minister if he asked for it, according to many members of his ruling Congress party.

But instead he is focused on grassroots politics in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most politically vital state, which votes in local elections this month and where Congress struggles for support at the ballot box.

"Rahul Gandhi's obsession is not to be PM," the 41-year-old told a news conference while campaigning in the state yesterday. "Rahul Gandhi's obsession is to work for the people."

Party insiders and confidants say Gandhi is looking beyond the government's present troubles, and his strategy of building support from the ground up guarantees a long-term future for Congress and, by extension, for himself.

"Tomorrow if he gets up in the morning and wants to become prime minister, he will be sworn in," said a federal minister, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject. "It will take a few hours, only the procedural time."

But the minister added: "Rahul is not in a hurry, he does not want to grab any post; he wants to earn it. He is reluctant to do it any other way. He is a long-race horse."

Still, with the party mired in corruption scandals and in danger of being forced into an early general election or thrown out at the next scheduled poll in 2014, Gandhi may find he has no throne to ascend to. Pressure is mounting on him from within the troubled party to take charge because Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is seen as a lame-duck and an electoral liability.

Long apprenticeship

The Nehru-Gandhi family has ruled the country for most of its 65 years since independence, and many Indians seem to take it for granted that Rahul, the son, grandson and great-grandson of former prime ministers, will also one day be their leader.

Rahul Gandhi at the hustings: "Arrey bhaiyya (Hey, brother) ... I have learned more from you than I ever could have studying in America and Britain." — Reuters pic
He has studied at Harvard and Cambridge universities, worked under a false name at a London management consultancy, and has spent the past seven years as a member of parliament from a family constituency in Uttar Pradesh.

It has been a long apprenticeship, in the shadow of his Italian-born mother, Sonia Gandhi, president of the Congress party and — many say — the real centre of power in India.

Sonia underwent treatment overseas last year, reportedly for cancer, and while she has resumed party duties, there are doubts about how long she can maintain the pace. Given the risk of a leadership vacuum, it may soon be now-or-never time for her son.

But since 2004 when he first joined parliament, Gandhi has focused much of his political energy on Uttar Pradesh, which with 200 million people would be the world's fifth-most populous country if independent. It sends 80 members to the 543 elected parliamentary seats in New Delhi, making control of the state crucial to run the federal government.

The family is notoriously shy of the media and Gandhi did not respond to requests for an interview. But aides say he sees Uttar Pradesh as a microcosm of India and chafes at the fact that the state government is headed by an opposition party.

"He and his family belong to the state, and that is something the whole nation is aware of," said junior Communications Minister Sachin Pilot, who is often mentioned in the local press as part of Gandhi's "brigade".

"There is a need not just for a change in political leadership but more importantly to bring about a transformation in the lives of the people. That is a much more compelling theme behind his actions as opposed to just grabbing of power."

Indeed, Gandhi seems much more comfortable on the stump in the dusty plains of Uttar Pradesh than he is in parliament.

In Bhakurai, a village 5km down a dirt track off a state highway, more than 10,000 people gathered recently amid wheat and mustard fields to hear him speak, and cheered when he waved at them with a broad smile.

"I have learned more from you in these seven years than I ever could have studying in America and Britain," he said in the sing-song Hindi dialect of the region. "Arrey bhaiyya (Hey, brother) I haven't come to win an election, I have come here to help Uttar Pradesh stand up for itself."

"The elephant," he said, referring to the election symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party that rules the state, "is eating money. I have heard of an elephant eating grass, but this one eats money."

"The cycle has got punctured," he said referring to the symbol of another rival party.

The similes go down well with the crowd.

"There will be change this time," said Ramesh Tiwari, a middle-aged man watching Gandhi speaking from a rickety wooden stage festooned in Congress' orange, white and green colours.

Tiwari said he and many others had cycled more than 10km to hear Gandhi speak. Some, he conceded, had come to see the helicopter that would whisk him away but, he added: "He is talking sense. He knows what he is saying."

Not the nation's favourite

Supporters at Unnao district in Uttar Pradesh go to any lengths to catch a glimpse of Rahul Gandhi. — Reuters pic

Congress has not won a state election in Uttar Pradesh for 22 years, which largely explains its inability to take power on its own in New Delhi. It has won the past two federal elections with coalition governments, which have left it vulnerable to demands for cabinet posts and policy compromises.

And it is seen losing ground. An opinion poll by the India Today weekly said that Congress would win only about 110 seats in parliament if national elections were held now, its lowest tally ever, and against the 206 it won at the last elections.

"There is clear public dissatisfaction over the manner in which the government has responded to charges of corruption," the magazine said. "The government's economic mismanagement, reflected in stalling growth and persistent inflation, is also taking a toll on its electoral fortunes."

Gandhi's slowly-slowly strategy and his decision to stake so much on Uttar Pradesh could go horribly wrong if Congress fails to make a good showing in the state assembly elections and at least become part of a coalition government there.

Nationwide, the India Today poll had Gandhi favoured by only 17 per cent of respondents to be the next prime minister, bested by 24 per cent for Narendra Modi of the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who has an image as a hardline Hindu leader.

It doesn't help that Gandhi has not made much of a mark in parliament in his seven years as a lawmaker. His speeches have been lacklustre; he rarely initiates debate, and a much-awaited statement when the country was riveted by a hunger-striking anti-graft campaigner last year did not rise above the mundane.

"We still have an inadequate understanding of him to form an opinion," said Arun Jaitley, leader of the opposition BJP in the upper house of parliament. "Unless people interact beyond a point with different sections of society and are open for grilling and questioning, their real worth is not known. Politics is a lot more than merely photo opportunities.

"I have just heard him making some unilateral statements and those statements have pedestrian sentences like 'We give money to the states and the states don't spend them' and 'I want youth to get into politics'."

India's Kennedys

No one in the family has been as good an orator as Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Still, they are perhaps the only politicians whose appeal cuts across caste and religious lines, which decide most elections in the country.

Moharram Ali shows a newspaper cutting of him presenting a garland to Rahul Gandhi. — Reuters pic

The political lineage, likened to the Kennedys in the United States both for the power it has enjoyed and the tragedies that have befallen it, started with Motilal Nehru, a Brahmin from Kashmir who practised law in Uttar Pradesh in the early 20th century and gave up a Western lifestyle to become president of the Congress party.

His son, Jawaharlal, was independence hero Mahatma Gandhi's closest confidant and prime minister from 1947 until 1964. Jawaharlal's daughter, Indira, married a Gandhi who was no relation to the Mahatma, but the name was certainly no handicap in politics.

Indira became prime minister in 1966, but was voted out in 1977 after imposing a harsh internal emergency on the country, becoming the first of her family to lose a national election.

But the mystique of the dynasty brought her back to power within three years and her son Rajiv took over after she was shot dead by two bodyguards in 1984. Rajiv Gandhi served one term as prime minister and when he was campaigning for a comeback in 1991, he was assassinated by a suicide bomber.

Those killings have made Rahul, his mother Sonia and sister Priyanka among the most protected people in the world. Armed men in suits and dark glasses guard them at public functions and, for security reasons, Rahul even used a false name at university and when he worked in London at the turn of the century.

But the family tries to balance the security constraints with campaigning and regular public appearances.

Big gamble on state election

Sonia, who took over the presidency of the Congress some years after her husband's death but refused to become prime minister, gets much respect in public — for eschewing office, her faultless Hindi and conservative Indian dress, and also for staying on despite the tragedies.

Sister Priyanka Gandhi Vadera turning out for her brother at Rae Bareilly district in Uttar Pradesh. — Reuters pic
Priyanka Gandhi attracts large crowds when she campaigns for her brother, partly because of her uncanny resemblance to her grandmother, Indira, but she is staying away from a wider role.

In the end, what Rahul Gandhi does or is able to do will be decided by the Uttar Pradesh elections. A poor performance by Congress may embolden the opposition and force an early general election; a good showing will give the party more space to put its house in order and allow Gandhi to take his time.

"The Uttar Pradesh election result is very pivotal," said junior Parliamentary Affairs Minister Rajeev Shukla, who is close to the Gandhis.

The Congress party won a miserable 22 seats out of 403 in the state's last polls. If this is increased to even 80, Gandhi would have succeeded, since his party would be in a position to join a coalition government.

However, party insiders dismissed suggestions that Gandhi might take a role in the Uttar Pradesh administration: they would much rather he become prime minister.

"My vote is he's up to it and he should take on the role as soon as possible depending on what timing he is comfortable with," said Pilot, the communications minister. "As far as I see it, he has all that it takes to lead from the front. But he is not thinking of power — that's not a priority." — Reuters

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