

Amid Gandhi defeat, India greets new political star
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NEW DELHI, March 7 — It was supposed to be the crowning moment for Rahul Gandhi, the heir apparent in India's ruling Congress party, but he was thrashed in this week's state election results and another young man was thrust into the spotlight.

Akhilesh Yadav has won national acclaim by helping return his father to power as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous and politically key state where Gandhi had hoped to stage a revival for Congress as it prepares to contest national elections in 2014.

Socialist Yadav: Born Uttar Pradesh, educated Sydney. — Picture courtesy of businesstoday.intoday.in

Both men had taken charge of the campaigns to the Uttar Pradesh state legislature — Gandhi for Congress and Yadav for his Samajwadi (Socialist) Party.

A relative unknown outside his state until recently, Yadav proved a canny operator and an effective grass roots campaigner, travelling hundreds of kilometres around Uttar Pradesh on a bicycle.

It was a smart move, since the bicycle was the Samajwadi election symbol.

Samajwadi ended up with 224 out of the state's 403 seats, enabling it to form the state government in its own right. Despite Gandhi's energetic campaign that had him sleeping in the huts of villagers and joining farmers' protests, his Congress party got just 28 seats.

"Akhilesh Yadav queered Rahul Gandhi's pitch, by projecting a youthful modernist face, but with the added advantages of being seemingly rooted in local social circumstance," wrote analyst Pratap Bhanu Mehta in the Indian Express.

"He talked the language of aspiration."

Both Yadav and Gandhi had projected themselves as agents of change, but today it was Yadav's face that was splashed all over the front pages, feted for doing what Gandhi tried and failed to do.

Gandhi speaks with the media in New Delhi, March 6, 2012. — Reuters pic

Both men have been educated overseas — Gandhi in Britain and the United States and Yadav in Australia — but Yadav managed to maintain a distinct "man of the masses" image that went down well in the largely rural state.

He also managed to change his party's image of being peopled by strongmen and thugs.

In one landmark decision, Yadav insisted that an alleged criminal be refused a party ticket to contest the election, reportedly against the wishes of some party stalwarts.

The young man's view prevailed.

"People don't want old-style politics and this is something that Akhilesh understands, which his father Mulayam Singh didn't," said political analyst Amulya Ganguli.

"Akhilesh is more in sync with the new evolving world of an open economy and that is his appeal."

At a press conference on election day in Lucknow, the capital of the northern state on the Gangetic plains, Yadav said law and order was the party's top priority.

"Akhilesh has definitely become a phenomenon," said political analyst Kuldip Nayar. "The perception of the party as being a party of goons has definitely changed."

Football and laptops

Mulayam Singh Yadav, a former wrestler, first became chief minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1989, relying on the votes of farmers from his Yadav caste and Muslims.

His party has a colourful history. "Bandit Queen" Phoolan Devi, an outlaw who rampaged through Uttar Pradesh in the 1980s, joined the Samajwadi Party and was elected to parliament before she was gunned down.

But to many, the Samajwadi Party had become a tired brand that jarred with India's rise as a tech-savvy, English-speaking, emerging economic giant. It used to campaign against computers on the grounds that they destroyed jobs, and against teaching English in schools.

Akhilesh Yadav appears to have changed that. Born in Uttar Pradesh, Yadav finished his education in Sydney, and speaks fluent English, although he is still careful to answer media questions in Hindi.

In cricket-mad India, he loves football and supports the English club Manchester United.

In the run-up to the 2012 campaign, he admitted to mistakes the party had made in the past and commissioned a series of surveys on how the party was viewed in the state.

"Akhilesh Yadav was the poster boy for the Samajwadi Party in this campaign and he was the face that helped people to put behind them the unpleasant memories they had of the previous SP rule," said Siddharth Varadarajan, editor of the Hindu newspaper.

Instead of attacking technology, he promised free laptops to students. The party now has its own Facebook page.

At 38, Yadav is three years younger than Gandhi. He has been a member of the national parliament since 2000.

Based on this result he does seem the more politically astute of the two. But Yadav does not necessarily see it that way.

After the results, he said of Gandhi: "Politics is like that. We lost last time but won this time. We may lose again. Similarly Rahul lost this time but may win tomorrow." — Reuters

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