

**Will India's Reluctant Prince Turn King?**  
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***Lackluster performance handicaps a Gandhi scion***

Rahul Gandhi, 42, the reluctant crown prince of Indian politics, is coming under the microscope of almost every Indian political analyst over speculation that he may finally be about to seek a defining role in the country's governing apparatus.

The Gandhi scion, son of the late former premier Rajiv Gandhi and ruling United Progressive Alliance chief Sonia Gandhi, recently acknowledged that he is ready for a "larger role" in politics, which analysts interpreted as possibly a plum cabinet position or even a leading role in 2014 national elections.

However, despite being in the hurly-burly of politics for eight years as Congress party General Secretary and then a Member of Parliament from the traditional Gandhi bastion of Amethi in northern Uttar Pradesh, Rahul's performance has been underwhelming. He eschewed a ministerial post offered by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2009) and has also shied away from being the party vice president, the official number two position after Sonia.

Instead, he appears content to be a fringe player, putting up carefully orchestrated "spontaneous" appearances at farmers' rallies and dinners at Dalit (formerly known as untouchables) huts.

By trying to establish a connect with the common man, Gandhi appears to have been hoping to avoid being straitjacketed as a quintessential Indian politician. But the ploy has apparently not worked and only triggered rancor. People are impatient that if he won't accept any position of authority, and eternally appears to be the party's premier-in-waiting, how will his political and administrative acumen be assessed?

A public comment last week by a senior Congress minister -- Salman Khurshid -- that it was time Rahul stopped playing "cameos" to take charge of the party, sent shockwaves down the 135-year-old party's rank and file. Notorious for their obsequiousness to the first family, party stalwarts were taken aback that a minister had the gumption to criticize the heir apparent in public.

One positive factor came out of it though. It galvanized the Congress enough to urge Rahul to step up his game although no one quite knows what "larger role" he is talking about. Is he taking over a ministry? Leadership of a specific state? Or a special post in the organizational hierarchy?

"His ratings are so low, that the only way he can go is up," cracked a functionary of the rightwing BJP, the country's principal opposition party.

Indeed Rahul has little tangible political accomplishments to date. He is an MP, but rarely speaks in Parliament. He has never aired his views on matters of national importance either, like the country's foreign policy, relations with Pakistan, economic management or the defense budget.

Nevertheless, the sense of entitlement has propelled him thus far into the turbulent waters of the polity. Rahul's great grandfather, Motilal Nehru was Congress president in the 1920s, as a leader of India's struggle for freedom. Motilal's son, Jawaharlal Nehru, succeeded him as party chief in 1929 and later became the country's first prime minister after Independence, remaining so until his death in 1964.

Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, became prime minister in 1966 and, except for a brief hiatus of two years, remained so until she was assassinated in 1984. Her son, Rahul's father, Rajiv Gandhi, then became PM for five years until he too was assassinated.

With such lineage, the clamor for Gandhi to lead the Congress campaign in 2014 is intense. No doubt, he is a national brand, comes with the redoubtable Gandhi charisma, has studied at elite institutes (Harvard, Cambridge) and is good looking to boot. In a political landscape peppered with geriatric politicians, not exactly known for their sartorial finesse, Gandhi stands out with his demeanor and deportment.

However at 42, he isn't exactly a youth icon, a handicap in a country defined by demographics of nearly 70 percent voters under age 35. Besides, Rahul's lackluster political performance has diminished his stature. His high-decibel campaign in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections this March, for instance, was a debacle.

The winner was the regional socialist Samajwadi Party, led by the young Akhilesh Yadav. The contrast between two dynasties -- Yadav is a second generation politician -- was stark. While Yadav, who has a master's degree in environmental engineering from Sydney, was humble and came across as a son of the soil, Rahul's combative posturing and theatrics didn't go down well with the electorate. At one stage in his campaign, he even tore up SP's election promises list while speaking at a rally.

The result? [Samajwadi Party](#) romped home with a whopping 224 seats in the 403-member UP legislative assembly while Congress trailed in fourth place with 28. The voters gave a thumbs up to the local bicycle-riding Akhilesh Yadav and booed the Gandhi heir with his security entourage and sophisticated choppers.

"People like to identify with their leaders," says Ram Pyare, a local farmer. "They don't like being patronized even if it is a member of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty."

Winning Uttar Pradesh, observers say, was vital for Rahul because the state has enormous historical significance for the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. During the past hundred years, six generations from the family have fought and won elections in the state, with three ruling India as prime minister, including Rajiv Gandhi.

Besides, the country's most populous state sends 80 MPs to the 544-member Lok Sabha, or lower house, and is regarded as a bellwether for national polls. "The route to New Delhi's throne," says a Congress party worker, "lies through UP."

A more sagacious choice than Rahul for Uttar Pradesh, say the locals, would have been his younger sister, Priyanka, 40. An eloquent speaker, she has a positive way with people and is known for her formidable organizational skills. But unfortunately for the Congress, she is a reluctant politician.

Analysts have now begun to predict that the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty might have to wait beyond 2014 for its next prime minister. With Rahul's political competence questioned in Uttar Pradesh, a creaky organizational structure on the ground, ideological disarray and a virulent anti-incumbency wave against the ruling UPA government there's little going for the PM hopeful at the moment.

The fact that Sonia Gandhi – regarded as her son's chief mentor -- is also not in good health (according to rumors she is suffering from abdominal cancer), is of no help either.

To declare Rahul a prime ministerial nominee for the Congress campaign in such fraught circumstances would be foolhardy, analysts say. "Mark my words," says a member of the BJP core committee, "Rahul will himself pull out of the race. People are not rooting for him because he doesn't seem confident. He is more like an apprentice who is still learning the ropes of administration and the nitty-gritty of government functioning."

Joining the government as, say as a Cabinet minister, wouldn't cut much ice either. It would only end up undermining the authority of an already embattled PM Manmohan Singh and endanger governance. Rahul, say insiders, will likely emerge as an "alternate power center" with every minister trying to cozy up to the man who carries the imprimatur of the future premier of the country.

As these theories circulate, the Gandhi family is doing what it does best – continue to be an enigma wrapped tightly in a mystery. Ironically, a politically weak Rahul has endowed Manmohan Singh with more power. The PM has more wriggle room for decision making without the Gandhi scion's shadow looming over the Cabinet's horizon. He will also be able to better execute policies that can augment his administration and revive India's moribund economy.

"The Congress should stop badgering the Congress to make Rahul prime minister," says a senior Uttar Pradesh Congress functionary. "His absence will fortify Singh's position and at this juncture this is what's best for the country."

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