



Born to rule

But only sound political vision will help Rahul Gandhi in the face-off with Narendra Modi

From the time he entered politics, and won Amethi in 2004, Rahul Gandhi knew the leadership of the Congress was his for the asking. The only question was when his mother, Sonia Gandhi, would be ready to step down. The inevitable succession from mother to son is related to the very nature of the Congress. Unfortunately for the party, no one but a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family can hold its potentially fractious elements together. So, in the absence of some totally unexpected twist, the December election process announced will see Mr. Gandhi as Congress president. This will formalise his *de facto* position as the leader of India's largest opposition party, which is struggling to stitch together a national-level alternative to the resurgent BJP, under the Amit Shah-Narendra Modi combine. The timing of the elevation is significant. In the period immediately after the devastating defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the Congress did not want to push Mr. Gandhi to the top: that would have meant exposing him to unflattering comparisons with Mr. Modi, when the BJP was in its most dominant phase. Despite Ms. Gandhi's ill-health, Mr. Gandhi seemed in no hurry to take up the leadership. That he is taking on the responsibility just before the Assembly election in Gujarat, a State the Congress has not won since 1985, is a signal to the electorate that Mr. Gandhi is ready for the long haul.

The real challenge for Mr. Gandhi is not winning the Congress leadership, but positioning himself as a rock in the way of the Modi juggernaut. When his mother chose not to stake claim for the prime ministership in 2004, and instead invited Manmohan Singh to head the UPA government, he might have assumed that only youth and inexperience stood in his way. But in the years since then, Mr. Gandhi betrayed a sense of entitlement without showing a willingness to be part of the government. At no time was this more evident than when he wanted torn up an ordinance promulgated by his own government to negate a Supreme Court verdict on disqualification of legislators on their conviction by a trial court. What he projected as a stand in keeping with public opinion came across as an arrogant act by a dynast against a Prime Minister beholden to him for staying in power. More recently, Mr. Gandhi has shown greater political maturity. He has spoken up against the failings of the Modi government and refused to be cowed down by trolls on social media. Dynasty might have taken him to the top of the party, but if he is to lead a country of India's size, he will have to articulate a political vision people buy into. Nothing will be gained by waiting for Mr. Modi to mess up. Mr. Gandhi will need to show he is prime ministerial material, not just a reflexive critic of Mr. Modi and the BJP's brand of politics.

Helter Skelter

Charles Manson's murderous ways hold out a special caution for the America of today

Charles Manson, convicted for the brutal 1969 murders of nine individuals in California, has died a natural death at the age of 83. His passing, however, will not diminish the profound influence he and the "Manson Family", a quasi-commune comprising mostly of abused and broken young women, had on the popular culture of the 1960s, a troubled decade that witnessed an intensifying battle for civil rights, the peak of the anti-war movement, and the "counterculture" associated with hippies, drug abuse, and free love. Manson and his followers were regarded by some as symbols of the dark side of this counterculture movement. Their notoriety came in August 1969 when, acting on Manson's instructions, four of his followers, three women and a man, entered a posh Hollywood Hills home and slaughtered a heavily pregnant actress Sharon Tate — the wife of film director Roman Polanski — and four of her friends. One of Manson's followers, Susan Atkins, scrawled the word "pig" on the front door with Tate's blood, hinting at Manson's paranoid delusions about fomenting a race war by framing African-Americans for this killing spree. Manson's "family" went on to murder a wealthy couple in Los Angeles, Leno and Rosemary LaBianca, the following day, and they separately killed a Hollywood stuntman and another acquaintance of the group. Manson was convicted of first-degree murder in 1971, but escaped capital punishment after California outlawed the death penalty a year later.

Despite the depravity of Manson's actions, his legacy has been a contested notion. The fact that he achieved pop culture infamy through a variety of antics during his trial, and that this spawned an entire genre of "true crime" books and television movies, has muddied the recognition of the true horror of his outlook. Manson had a hatred of Jewish people, African-Americans and women. Rather than the liberal counterculture movement of the 1960s, his bigoted philosophy bears a disturbing resemblance in some respects with the far-right or alt-right brand of neo-fascism that has mushroomed in pockets of U.S. politics recently. Take Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who also murdered, coincidentally, nine African-Americans in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. He too spoke of a "race war" and lapped up alt-right materials online, indulging in the very same apocalyptic race-rablings that Manson did. Manson was known for drawing inspiration from the Beatles song "Helter Skelter", which he interpreted as a description of an impending race war that his band of white heroes had to survive. This narrative of race hate is undergoing a revival of sorts in the U.S., and this has coincided with the vitriolic campaign and administrative tenor of President Donald Trump. Neo-Nazis such as Richard Spencer appear emboldened by Mr. Trump's wink-and-nod approach. The legacy of Manson should serve, if anything, as a poignant reminder to liberal America that the pillars on which their pluralist democracy was built must never be taken for granted.

Himalayan upgrade

The elections in Nepal will complete the democratic transition. India must play an enabling role



RAKESH SOOD

Elections on November 26 and December 7 in Nepal mark a historic moment in its tumultuous transition from a 240-year-old monarchy to a multi-party democracy.

The first general election to be held under the 2015 Constitution, it is also the first time that federal Nepal will elect seven provincial assemblies. Parliament and the provincial assemblies will in turn elect a new president and vice president. Coming after the elections to the 753 local bodies (municipalities, sub-municipalities and village development committees) held earlier this year after a 20-year gap, these will complete the political process and go a long way in consolidating hard-won democratic gains.

Beginnings of political change

Political transition towards multi-party democracy began with the Constitution of 1990, an outcome of the first Janandolan, which introduced constitutional limits on the powers of the monarchy. After a brief period of three years, the monarchy successfully reasserted itself largely due to the squabbling among political leaders and manipulations by the Palace, leading to frequent changes of government. The current Prime Minister, Sher Bahadur Deuba, who took charge in June, is the 25th Prime Minister in the last 27 years.

A Maoist insurgency erupted in the mid-1990s which lasted a decade and claimed nearly 15,000 casualties. Eventually, in 2005, the political parties and the Maoist leaders signed an accord which laid the foundations for a more formal agreement under which the Maoists came overground and joined mainstream politics. It was a difficult process, given the mistrust between the political parties and



the Maoist leadership, with both sides resorting to frequent brinkmanship.

Following elections in May 2008, a 601-member Constituent Assembly (CA) came into being with a two-year mandate to draft a new Constitution for a 'federal republic'. The 240-year-old institution of the monarchy was abolished. Two new political forces emerged, the Maoists with 229 seats in the CA and the Madhesi parties with 80 seats. Differences within the CA led to a stalemate. After 2010, the CA extended its life four times till, finally, the Supreme Court intervened and the CA lapsed in May 2012 without having completed its mandate.

A major problem was that the Maoists had come to power too soon without having fully disarmed or demobilised. The first Maoist government, led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', quickly set about infiltrating other state institutions, particularly the Army. Eventually Mr. Prachanda's coalition cracked and he resigned in May 2009.

Political leaders were busy playing musical chairs instead of addressing Constitution drafting issues. In the process, the new political forces underwent a process of fragmentation. The Maoists split twice and the Madhesi parties also fragmented. Importantly, the process of rehabilitation of the demobilised Maoist militants was concluded, removing the threat of intimidation that had cast a

shadow over the 2008 elections.

Elections for a new CA were finally held in November 2013, with significantly different results. The Maoists were down to 81 seats and the Madhesi to 40; the older parties, the Nepali Congress (NC) and the Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist (UML), emerged stronger with 201 and 175 seats, respectively. These two formed a coalition under NC leader Sushil Koirala on the understanding that the prime ministership would pass to UML leader K.P.S. Oli once a new Constitution was concluded.

The devastating earthquake in 2015 which caused nearly 10,000 casualties and inflicted economic losses of over \$7 billion on an economy still recovering from a decade-long Maoist insurgency compelled the political parties to rush through the long-delayed Constitution. One reason was that the international community which had collectively pledged \$4.4 billion of reconstruction assistance made it clear that disbursements could only happen if local systems were in place so that the relief and rehabilitation funds were not siphoned off.

The hastily concluded Constitution enjoyed the support of the NC, UML and the Maoists but left the Madhesi and the Janjatis deeply unhappy. Mr. Oli was quick to claim the prime ministership in October 2015 but did little to pacify the protesters in the Terai. Nearly 50 lives were lost in the violence. Sympath-

etic to the Madhesi cause, India declared that unless peace was restored in the Terai, normal movement of goods across the border was not possible, leading to shortages of critical items such as petrol, diesel, liquefied petroleum gas and medical supplies. Instead of starting a dialogue with the Madhesi, Mr. Oli accused India of imposing an "economic blockade" and reverted to the age-old tactic of flirting with China to expand supply systems across the Tibetan plateau.

Eventually, his coalition collapsed and Mr. Prachanda pulled back his support in order to join with the NC in July last year. After a tenure lasting 10 months during which he conducted the first phase of the local body elections, he handed over power to NC leader Sher Bahadur Deuba, who became the tenth Prime Minister in Nepal's nine years as a republic.

Keeping on track

The new Constitution provides for a National Assembly of 160 directly elected members (first-past-the-post system) and an additional 110 through proportional representation (PR), making for a more manageable House compared to the earlier 601. Further, in order to gain a PR seat, a political party must have 3% of the national vote, which has forced smaller parties to consolidate.

Once certain that the elections were on track, Mr. Prachanda announced a tie-up with the UML, creating a left alliance and extracting 63 out of 160 seats. If the Maoists — Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) — manage to win in 35, it will enable Mr. Prachanda to emerge as kingmaker, and he could well return to the NC, depending on the deal. The UML is hoping to ride the wave that propelled it to the top position in the local body elections earlier this year. The NC has managed alliances with the Rastriya Janata Party-Nepal (RJP-N) — a Madhesi grouping — as well as the two conservative factions of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), led by Kamal Thapa and Pashupati Rana.

This is presented as the democratic front and if the NC manages 60 seats, it will have better prospects of cobbling together a coalition than the UML. Much will depend on how the Madhesi candidates fare in the Terai.

Retrieving lost ground

One of the important challenges for the new government will be to revive the constitutional amendment to address Madhesi grievances; Mr. Deuba had pushed it through in August but failed to muster the necessary two-thirds majority. Having realised that its overt support to the Madhesi cause in 2015 had hurt India-Nepal relations and was being exploited by the UML, India softened its position. For the last year, it has been urging the Madhesi leadership to work through the political process rather than through agitation or boycott of elections.

The anti-India sentiment generated in 2015 was exploited by Mr. Oli in wooing China, which is interested in expanding its presence as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. The first ever visit by a Chinese Defence Minister, General Chang Wanquan, to Nepal took place earlier this year, followed by a joint military exercise. Two major hydel projects, West Seti and Budhi Gandaki, were awarded to Chinese companies though the latter was cancelled subsequently. China is exploring a rail link to Nepal as well as opening a new road link at Rasuwagadhi while expanding the existing Arniko highway.

Once the new government takes charge in Kathmandu, it is likely that the new Prime Minister will visit India, perhaps in early 2018. A reciprocal visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, focussing on connectivity and project delivery, later in 2018 would help in reviving the positive sentiments generated by his first visit in 2014, and in keeping with the spirit of the 'neighbourhood first' policy.

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Stepping up to the job

Rahul Gandhi's biggest challenge will be to retrieve the can-do spirit for the Congress



SMITA GUPTA

An era in the Congress will end in early December when Sonia Gandhi, its longest serving president, steps down to make way for Rahul Gandhi and the next generation. In 1998, she had taken up the position more out of a desire to preserve the family legacy in the Congress, rather than to wield power. She was the dowager queen who would keep the seat warm for her son. But in the end, she did much more than that: she grew into the job, led the party and its campaigns from the front and ensured the 10 uninterrupted years in power at the Centre — no mean achievement.

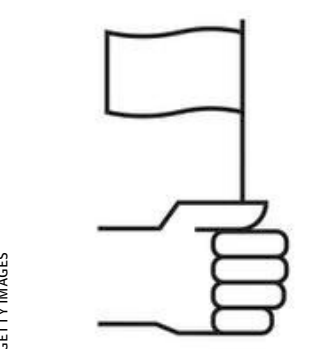
Highs and lows

In 2004, Ms. Gandhi chose not to become Prime Minister, lest it give the Opposition a rallying point. Instead, she nominated Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister, earning herself a place in his

tory. Even though her style was consensus-driven, she proved she had sharp political instincts. She also worked hard on her speeches, carefully chose her policy interventions, and today has the respect of the entire political class.

On the flip side, though the Congress remains intact — despite some noteworthy departures — it is at a historical low. The party has not just conceded political space but it has been hollowed out ideologically. It now rules in six States/Union Territory. This includes Himachal Pradesh that went to the polls earlier this month, with counting of votes on December 18. Worker morale continues to be low, and apart from the initiatives like the Professionals' Congress or the Adivasi Congress, and the appointment of some new functionaries, there has been no major organisational upgrade.

It is against this backdrop that the 47-year-old Mr. Gandhi is to take over the Congress. Over the last few months, he has begun to sound better on the stump, while campaigning in Himachal Pradesh and currently in Gujarat, giving his followers hope that he may emerge as the man who can take on Mr. Modi in 2019, even though that will



have to be at the head of a Congress-led coalition. He is beginning to get a more favourable public reception, not merely because people are now beginning to look for an alternative but because his speeches appear to be better thought out, with a sprinkling of one-liners that have easy recall. This, in turn, has been a confidence-booster for Mr. Gandhi and is beginning to get reflected in the social media, a space that the Bharatiya Janata Party had been dextrously occupying. There is a fightback, so much so that BJP president Amit Shah warned the youth of Gujarat in September "to beware of the Congress's social media propaganda against the party". But beyond the optics Mr.

Gandhi needs to get down to the task of not just strategising to win elections, but of seizing the initiative and anticipating the big issues, and this includes in Parliament where he has tended to take a back seat. He has yet to make a difference in parliamentary debates with substantive speeches on the economy, foreign affairs and other key policy issues. He can no longer afford to give the impression that he sees politics as a day job — politics today is 24x7 work.

Rebuilding the party

Mr. Gandhi's biggest challenge will be rebuilding the party organisation and giving the Congress a new storyline with which to take on the might of the Modi machine. For this, he will have to connect with workers at the block-level, restore confidence in them, and be transparent in his selection of both party functionaries and candidates for elections. He has promised to make his new team a mix of the old and the new, but he needs to ensure that he takes members of the old guard he retains seriously. He has also shown an inclination to corporatise the Congress and surround himself with apolitical persons in a bid to break the old way of

functioning. But he needs to remember that the Congress is a political party.

Finally, he will need to reach out to other political parties, especially because he requires their help in 2019, as well as to BJP seniors for better functioning of Parliament. His friendship with the National Conference's Omar Abdullah is well known, and he recently had a much publicised lunch with the Rashtriya Janata Dal's Tejashwi Yadav; he is also in touch with the DMK's M.K. Stalin and Kanimozhi. But he is yet to emulate his mother's initiatives in being seen to go out of her comfort zone and approach potential allies.

After three and a half years of the Modi government, there are voices of discontent. The attacks by right-wing elements on Muslims, Dalits and rationalists, the downturn in the economy, exacerbated by demonetisation, the haphazard implementation of the goods and services tax and failure to create jobs, have resulted in a gradual change in the national mood. The time is politically opportune for Mr. Gandhi: he must take advantage of it.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

March to the top post

As anticipated, the schedule for the Indian National Congress's presidential elections has been announced which will result in the elevation of Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi ("Decks cleared for Rahul's elevation as Congress chief", November 21). The development is nothing to be surprised about as the issue has been in the pipeline for quite a while now. There is unlikely to be even a single candidate in the fray against Rahul Gandhi, which shows how far the culture of sycophancy has marred the party. In the last general election, it was battered by allegations of large-scale corruption. This time round, it will be the looming shadow of dynastic politics. It is time for the Congress to introspect on whether it is following internal democracy or pulling the wool over our eyes.

BINDIYA AGNIHOTRI, Mumbai

After much vacillation and false starts, the grand old party is all set to elect its next party president. The line of thinking is that the Gandhi family alone can save the party from sinking. The reality is that there is no free and frank discussion in the party, as one would expect in a party with a legacy. Any voice of dissent is looked upon with disdain. Ever since Mr. Gandhi was elevated as the party's vice-president, the party's fortunes have only declined. His shallow remarks betray his inadequacies. Despite all the wishful thinking within the party, not much can be done to stop the Modi juggernaut.

L.R. MOORTHY, Mumbai

The elevation was a foregone conclusion and the "election schedule" is only to give it a semblance of a democratic process. The Congress has failed to synchronise itself with

changing moods and aspirations of the people. Sadly, for the many and talented veterans, the Gandhi tag, a mystical term, is what still keeps them tied to the dynasty, unmindful of its diminishing charm.

C.R. NARAYANAN, Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu

Rahul Gandhi is expected to take over the reins of the party at a time when both the party and nation are at a low point. The nation is now burdened with imposed difficulties which it did not ask for three and a half years ago when it voted for change in good faith. The Congress suffered then because of its meekness and its failure in a perception battle. Rahul Gandhi has to win this battle first before looking for a chance to resurrect the nation. He has been honest to his cause, and must remain unwaveringly so. In the coming months, he will be deliberately drawn into a debate of 'him versus Modi'.

This requires a much superior and different presentation than what he has attempted so far. Confidence and pride are key here.

As a central policy on offer by his party, he must work out an enlarged, superiorly implemented, high result-oriented and people-centric MGNREGA. He must make 2018 the year of campaign for this. His mother has been his biggest influence in his political life and MGNREGA must become the manifestation of this influence.

M. BALAKRISHNAN, Bengaluru

Winter session politics

The 'hijacking' and/or delaying the winter session of Parliament without giving us a proper reason is improper and smacks of political highhandedness ("Sonia alleges sabotage of winter session", November 21). Congress president Sonia Gandhi is right when she says that sabotaging the

session is a black spot on our democratic system. Finance Minister Arun Jaitley's retort that the ruling party will expose the Congress party in the session sounds more a threat than a proper response to her statement. Parliament is not a platform for mud-slinging activities. What people expect is healthy debate and intellectual discourse on key issues of public interest. Right now, there is worry about the leak of Aadhaar details from the government's own website. Is it not a serious issue which should be discussed in the winter session?

MOHAN MENON, Arimboor, Kerala

Curtains for Mugabe

When at the helm of affairs in Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe had the stature of a quintessential anti-colonialist at the beginning. Quite sadly, he evolved into a run-of-the-mill tyrant. The fall of this leader, from

being the voice of the colonised to a controversial dictator, should make us ponder. His term as the undisputed head of state has been marked by crimes against humanity, financial mismanagement and corruption. Mr. Mugabe's fairytale saga teaches us a lesson that absolute power corrupts ("World" page - "How Mugabe's reign came crashing down in a day", November 21).

SREERAJ V.V., Malappuram, Kerala

The Czech winner

The report on the passing of former tennis champion Jana Novotna comes at a time when women players are achieving great success on the global tennis circuit ("Sport" page - "Novotna passes away", November 21). We will miss a champion who was human but also a great fighter.

JAYANTHI S. MANIAM, Mumbai

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