
Supersonia (Indian politics)

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EARLY on March 14th a clutch of powerful Indian politicians, including the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, lined up outside the front-door of the most powerful one—Sonia Gandhi. Their task was to congratulate Mrs Gandhi on the tenth anniversary of her accession to the throne of the ruling Congress party, formerly occupied by her assassinated husband, Rajiv, his assassinated mother, Indira, and his grandfather, Jawaharlal Nehru. In a formal address to their leader, the politicians assured her of their “deep gratitude”.

<http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/1208AS1.jpg>

And well they might. A reluctant politician, like her murdered husband, Mrs Gandhi was persuaded to take charge of the party after a seven-year spell of mourning for him. During that time—its longest without a Gandhi in command since 1947—Congress had been reduced to a dreadful state. The fortunes of its main rival, the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), had soared. In an election in 1999, Congress's first under Mrs Gandhi, who was then perhaps best known for her Italian birth and bad Hindi, the party won its lowest ever number of seats, 114.

It is now in better shape. Having scored a surprise election victory in 2004, its government, a coalition including another dozen parties, has surpassed (admittedly low) expectations. It has so far held together, despite several mutinies. It has presided over high economic growth, despite having brought little of the economic reform that is often demanded of India. And it has at least tried—if not always wisely—to avoid the main mistake of its BJP predecessor, which is considered to have trumpeted high economic growth but done too little for the rural mass of Indians whose lives remained wretched.

For two of these achievements, Mrs Gandhi can take some credit. Her standing, both within and outside Congress, received a huge boost in 2004, when she passed up an opportunity to become prime minister in favour of Mr Singh. This and her growing competence in political scheming have helped Mrs Gandhi impose discipline within her schismatic party. With a reputation for relative rectitude, in India's rotten polity, she has also won grudging support from potentially troublesome coalition allies.

What is more, several grandstand schemes for the poor have her handprints all over them. These include a debt waiver for 30m small farmers announced in the budget last month; and a massive job-creation scheme for rural paupers which will go nationwide this year. Spendthrift though these schemes are, many in Congress consider them their best hope of surviving an election due by May 2009.

And yet if Congress does win the election, it will not be with an outright majority: in 2004 it won only 145 parliamentary seats out of a total of 543. Moreover, another Congress victory in the teeth of a political culture of anti-incumbency would owe more to a complicated election cycle and to the failings of the BJP governments running several important states than it would to Mrs Gandhi's own skills. And even with Congress's burgeoning reputation for managing a coalition, the party could perfectly easily come first in the next election but fail to make a government. This makes its revival look somewhat over-hyped—as indeed is the slavish reverence of the party faithful for a dynastic leader whose Hindi remains dicey.

Perhaps the best that can be said for Congress's cult of the Gandhi family is that it is no worse than the dynastic practices favoured by most other Indian political parties. The Gandhi name no doubt contains an additional seductive whiff of nostalgia, for the freedom and hopefulness of India's first independent decades. But this will not make up for the party's flaws, including a lack of leadership in many states, or reverse Congress's losses there. Indeed, the latest bearer of the name, Mrs Gandhi's 37-year-old son Rahul, who is being groomed as a future party leader (perhaps even in time for the next election), suggested as much last week.

On a visit to the eastern state of Orissa, Mr Gandhi lambasted all of India's political parties, Congress included, for lacking internal democracy. Instilling some of this, though unimaginable now, might indeed augur a renaissance in India's grand old party. Alas, Mr Gandhi, another reluctant politician (and one who has so far done little to impress), might not survive the cut.

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