

India's dynastic politics

Must it be a Gandhi?

Whatever the young heir's merits, modern India surely needs a broader choice for its effective ruler



she has not resumed full duties since receiving treatment abroad for an undisclosed illness, probably cancer. Her son, Rahul, has long been cultivated to take charge of the family firm. But there is a problem with the mild-mannered heir.

Mr Gandhi, a quietly clever 41-year-old free of the accusations of graft that dog so many Indian politicians, is popular. But he seems neither enthusiastic about the job of leading a billion people, nor especially well-equipped to manage India's feuding politicians (see page 59). He has spurned the front-line, preferring to confine himself in youth and rural politics. Two years ago he turned down the offer of a cabinet post from the prime minister, Manmohan Singh. He hardly ever speaks in India's boisterous parliament. When helping deal with a populist anti-corruption campaign this summer he seemed diffident. Some dream of one day persuading his sparkier sister, Priyanka, to come into politics instead, though she has ruled that out (and also comes with a somewhat controversial business-tycoon husband in tow).

To be fair to Rahul, the Gandhi clan has often produced slow starters. Even Indira was tongue-tied and bashful early in her career. The more timid of her two sons, Rajiv, Rahul's late father, was desperately reluctant to enter politics. His Italian-born widow, Sonia, took years of cajoling before becoming the force behind Congress and India's most powerful person. She has turned shyness into an art form, wielding power from the shadows. If Rahul brings a victory for Congress next year

in crucial regional elections in Uttar Pradesh, a vast state of 200m people, his critics would no doubt forget about his sister rapidly. He could then ascend to the prime ministerial job after elections in 2014.

But the apprentice's time is running short—and not just because of the worries about his mother's health. India's politics is also ailing. In the face of slowing growth, high inflation and awful corruption, the government is looking increasingly fossilised. No notable legislation has passed since the general election in 2009. Next year Mr Singh turns 80. He needs bright new talents to rediscover his sense of purpose. A big reshuffle is long overdue, yet Congress seems wary of promoting any young ministers, for fear of outshining the crown prince.

There are a billion other people

Anyone who wants India to succeed should hope that Mr Gandhi turns into the leader the country so desperately needs. Yet for Congress and India, it is a sorry choice. The consequence of being in thrall to a bloodline is a weak party that lacks shared policies or common values. Promotions are made not on merit, but on closeness to the ruling family. Burgeoning India is hard enough to govern without disqualifying almost the entire population from becoming head of the country's biggest party. India needs the best possible Congress party, under the control of the best available leader.

As it happens, Mr Gandhi is a rare voice willing to admit some of this. He says he wants to change a system where "politics depends on who you know or are related to." As Indians shift to the cities and become more literate and informed, they will surely want to hold their government to account—over corruption, economic performance, social security and more. They will care ever less about bloodlines. Eventually dynastic rule will have to give way to something more openly contested and democratic. Let it be sooner rather than later. □