

India ponders prospect of a new Gandhi at its helm.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Feb 13 (Reuters) - The resemblance to Indira Gandhi is eerie -- the sari draped over the head, the dark glasses, the high-pitched oratory, the imperious wave of the hand.

Even her signature "Jai Hind!" (Victory to India) at the end of every campaign speech is modelled on her mother-in-law.

Sonia Gandhi has travelled a long way from Orbassano, the sleepy Italian town north of Turin where she was born in 1946. The question many Indians are asking is: is her next stop the prime minister's official residence near Delhi's racecourse?

The Hindu newspaper, in a commentary titled "Crowds, Curiosity and Charisma", wondered if the huge crowds Sonia Gandhi is pulling will translate into votes in the polling booths.

In the dusty Gangetic heartland, the crowds chant slogans like "Desh mein ek nayi aandhi, ek nayi Indira Gandhi" (a new tempest is blowing through the nation, a new Indira Gandhi).

The latest "Mrs Gandhi" hit the campaign trail a month ago, and has already yanked her late husband Rajiv Gandhi's Congress party out of a steep decline brought on by several heavyweight defections from its ranks.

Attended by spin doctors and speech writers, she has travelled tirelessly and spoken at more than 80 election rallies.

Ageing Congress president Sitaram Kesri has vanished from sight, and the party is now tipped by a string of opinion polls as winning the second-largest number of seats in parliament's lower house in the elections on February 16, 22, 28 and March 7.

After Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991 his widow stuck to her bungalow on a street called Janpath in New Delhi.

Unkindly labelled "the Sphinx of 10 Janpath", she enjoyed a special status with the government and was a fixture in the itineraries of visiting foreign leaders.

But Sonia's December 29 announcement that she would "accede" to the pleas of Congress supporters who were passing through a "crucial period" and campaign on behalf of the party has proved that the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty is alive and well.

Sonia, who came to India as Rajiv Gandhi's bride in 1968 and acquired Indian citizenship in the early 1980s, is still uncomfortable with the Hindi language. Her speeches are written out laboriously in Roman script; her diction is unsure.

She has hit out frequently at critics who attack her foreign origins. "I am an Indian and the wife of that great soul who laid down his life for the nation," she told a crowd in Rajiv's former constituency of Amethi earlier this month.

Her declaration that she will not stand for election herself "for now" has been taken to mean she may not be unwilling to lead Congress if the party gets a shot at forming a government.

Various opinion polls predict the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will win the most seats in parliament's lower house, but even with its allies will not muster a clear majority.

That would pave the way for Congress, with the help of the United Front coalition it toppled in November, to stake its claim to power -- and for Sonia Gandhi to take the helm.

"There is little doubt that as far as rank and file sentiment is concerned, Sonia Gandhi is the only pebble on the beach," The Statesman wrote in an editorial on Thursday.



"The fact that a disintegrating Congress has been imbued with new life, that a resurgent BJP has been halted in its tracks...and that an alternative, Congress-led government is possible -- all this is Sonia Gandhi's doing," Business Standard newspaper said.

But other commentators chose harsher words. "Congressmen have over the years got used to a life of obsequiousness to the (Gandhi) family without realising that continued dependence on its perceived appeal has sapped all energy from their veins," H.K. Dua wrote in the Times of India.

Political scientist Rajni Kothari said Sonia's campaign would not help repair its rift with India's underprivileged minorities.

"Her entry into the fray in fact has led to the re-emergence of a clash of personalities," Kothari told Reuters.

"Personalities have always mattered to the Indian electorate right from Nehru's days and Sonia and (the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Atal Behari) Vajpayee are clearly the personalities who matter in this election."

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