

Op-ed: When Rahul Gandhi says he can't alter his ancestry

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Rahul Gandhi's first television interview is a big political story of the week. In any democracy, the thought that a front-ranking leader of the ruling party would not give a single television interview for a decade would be counted as an intensely puzzling political horror. Gandhi's core claim is that he was quietly working on organizational matters and on "fundamental issues of politics", such as people's empowerment. Most political leaders would do both: work on what is politically critical, and deal with the press.

The press may not have the same interest as political leaders do. But political leaders have to find a way to communicate with the press, answer the questions posed, respond to criticisms, and present their political case. Modern democracies require such interaction.

It is also clear that if Gandhi had given more interviews, he would have been a more confident interviewee by now. Few are born to excel on airwaves; most cultivate the art. There is no escape from jumping into the journalistic fire and dousing it with a plucky and skillful fight.

Gandhi said with pride that the youth wings of the Congress party were now entirely elected, and no other major political party in India could claim that. This is true. But the bigger question is why the mainstream of the Congress party remains unreformed. Perhaps that reform will come after the May

elections.

Can a dynast, unelected by the party, introduce elections within the party? This question persistently crops up. Both in the famous press conference of April 2009 and the TV interview this week, Gandhi's answer was identical. He can't alter his ancestry, he said, but he can use the dynastic leverage to bring about significant change.

This argument has a Nixon-in-China quality. And it is right. Nixon could reopen US relations with China because, given his fervent anti-Communism, no one could contest his credentials. Gandhi, as an unquestioned dynast within his party, has the legitimacy to introduce a principle that can go against the dynasty. What he has done for the Youth Congress needs to be taken to its logically necessary culmination. The Congress needs restoration of a principle that used to produce legitimate party leaders and mobilize new energy. It has undergone severe organization emaciation. An organizationally revitalised Congress will be good for Indian democracy.

Now that Rahul Gandhi has subjected himself to intense questioning on TV, will Narendra Modi do the same?

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