**Rahul’s test: Congressmen seeing changes in party as his vision for long term | The Indian Express**

Related. On December 4,as the curtain comes down on what are billed as the semi-finals before next year<U+0092>s general elections,both Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi would be keeping their fingers crossed. However,as results stream in four days later,the two know they would be judged differently. A setback to the BJP would reflect on its prime ministerial candidate <U+0097> and seen as the absence of any <U+0093>Modi wave<U+0094>. Conversely,BJP success would be attributed to its chief ministerial candidates and their personal charisma and appeal. On the other hand,while Congressmen would scramble to take the blame for any setback on December 8,a positive outcome would go to Rahul<U+0092>s credit. This time,though,Rahul could step up and claim this justifiably. For,since he virtually took over the party<U+0092>s reins after being made the Congress vice-president in January this year,Rahul has put his stamp on the party with his leadership style and election management. These polls are the first test of that. The candidate selection. If there is one area where the change is most visible and has caused the most heartburn,it is in the candidate selection process for the Assembly polls and the 2014 general elections. His team ran the operation from the beginning to the end. A profile of each constituency and potential candidates <U+0097> running into over a 100 pages each <U+0097> was prepared with the help of three independent surveys. The District Congress Committees sent their lists and then the Pradesh Election Committee sent the final list to the AICC Screening Committee. By the time it came to the Central Election Committee (CEC),headed by Sonia Gandhi,it came down to one candidate for each constituency in <U+0093>over 95 per cent cases<U+0094>. So while the CEC comprising party veterans formally took a decision on the candidates,the lists were virtually finalised before they came to the committee. Apart from the surveys to identify the candidates for each Lok Sabha constituency,Rahul sent AICC general secretary Madhusudan Mistry as a one-man army to prepare a separate list of candidates. <U+0093>The party already has a list of all constituencies,their profiles,potential candidates,etc. Many candidates have even been sounded out,<U+0094> says a party functionary involved in the exercise. The selection for the Assembly polls was done by the screening committees on the basis of a multi-page manual. It prescribed criteria like denial of tickets to those who had lost the last two consecutive elections or had lost their deposits in the last poll. Any exceptions could only be cleared by the CEC. The party posts. Rahul<U+0092>s team is in the process of preparing another manual for AICC general secretaries to define their authority and functions. Every quarter,Rahul holds a meeting with the AICC general secretary in-charge of a state,the PCC chief and Congress Legislative Party leader of every state and gives them guidelines and targets. Minutes of internal party meetings are kept for future references and to fix accountability. Besides,two email IDs have been given to AICC general secretaries and secretaries to keep him updated and to report to him their work by the 10th of every month. The Congress vice-president has also introduced a new system of appointments. The recent selection of the president and vice-president of the Mahila Congress was a three-month-long affair with a list of 150 contenders finally whittled down to two. Rahul himself met and interviewed all 150 contenders,who were asked about their experience in the Mahila Congress,the women<U+0092>s issues they had taken up and the response they had received from the party and the public. The list was pruned to 50 and then 35,who were then called to Delhi. A group discussion was held at his Tughlaq Lane residence with Rahul<U+0092>s team,in his absence,evaluating their performance. At the last stage,eight were identified and Rahul held a three-hour-long meeting with them asking about their vision for women<U+0092>s politics,their views on the status of women and how they could reshape the Mahila Congress. He wanted to know how they proposed to change the system. Four people were selected and they were asked to meet Sonia. Finally,two of them were appointed president and vice-president. The party. The appointments process is the progression of a change that has been felt in the party for some time. Once a Cabinet-rank government functionary,accompanied by his wife,came to 10 Janpath to discuss certain issues of governance with Rahul. As they were asked to wait under a tree along with a host of other Congressmen,the senior government functionary protested,<U+0093>But I have an appointment!<U+0094> <U+0093>They also have an appointment,<U+0094> came a curt reply. Rahul turned up after half an hour and gave everybody,including the high-profile couple,a hearing for about two minutes each. In the subsequent weeks and months,stories about how ministers and senior leaders had to try for months to get an appointment and then wait for hours to have rather brief one-on-ones with Rahul stopped evoking mirth. This image of the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family was building up when his tearjerker speech as the newly crowned party vice-president in Jaipur changed everything. Even as Congressmen rallied around him,Rahul set about changing <U+0093>the system<U+0094>. While this alienated quite a few in the party,his loyalists use it to portray a leader genuinely interested in changing the system,with an eye on the long term. <U+0093>Elections may come and go,but what Rahulji is focusing on is to strengthen the institutional mechanisms of the Congress party in a scientific and systematic manner,<U+0094> says Congress general secretary and communications department chairman Ajay Maken. Mistry,one of Rahul<U+0092>s close aides,is expansive. <U+0093>Rahulji has come up with fantastic ideas to strengthen the organisation and to build a new leadership right from the grassroots,<U+0094> Mistry says. <U+0093>He is busy doing whatever is needed to build an organisation,to make the system more effective and to create a young force in the party. His goal is not limited to one or two elections.<U+0094> Many of Rahul<U+0092>s associates say they also have <U+0093>reasons to believe<U+0094> he is treating the current round of Assembly elections as a test case in the context of his India-versus-Bharat prognosis. When he was preparing his CII speech,many of his close aides had,for a change,expressed reservation about his emphasis on the rich-versus-poor divide,arguing that he was going to address a different kind of audience. <U+0093>He refused to change it saying that he would speak what he believed in and it did not matter whom he was addressing. So,it<U+0092>s not that any election results would change his thinking,but he may be forced to take a re-look at his strategy,<U+0094> says a senior party functionary. The electoral potency of the Nehru-Gandhi family<U+0092>s sacrifices and the BJP<U+0092>s allegedly divisive ideology <U+0097> the central theme of Rahul<U+0092>s speeches <U+0097> would also be tested in these polls. While there could be no challenger to Rahul<U+0092>s authority in the party,failure or success in the Assembly elections would certainly have a bearing on the acceptability of his ideas and experiments in the party. The leader. At an interactive session in Jammu recently,Rahul was confronted with a stock question: <U+0093>Are you ready to become the prime minister of India?<U+0094> The Congress vice-president replied with a smile,<U+0093>Do you want me to be the PM?<U+0094> That smile got broader as he was answered with a yes. <U+0093>Will you go in for an alliance with Omar Abdullah in the next elections?<U+0094> asked another one. Rahul paused and,in a measured tone,replied,<U+0093>Omar is a good friend of mine. But you cannot combine friendship with politics.<U+0094> Senior party functionaries see that interaction,and other ones recently,as examples of the famously reticent leader publicly taking charge. <U+0093>Rahul knows what he wants. He is not ruling himself out of the prime ministerial race but he does not believe in putting the cart before the horse. At the same time,he is doing a lot of new things to win elections,<U+0094> says a senior party functionary. Rahul<U+0092>s controversial act of publicly denouncing <U+0097> and thus stalling <U+0097> the proposed ordinance on convicted MPs and MLAs as <U+0093>complete nonsense<U+0094> was supposed to be a loud statement of his commitment to probity in public life. Sources said that even Sonia had supported the ordinance to shield long-time friend Lalu Prasad. The evolution. In 2007,when he took over as general secretary in-charge of the Indian Youth Congress and NSUI,Rahul<U+0092>s constant refrain was that he would end the role of <U+0093>money,patronage and family<U+0094> in politics. He went around the country promising to <U+0093>change the system<U+0094> and telling youth that he would bring them into mainstream politics. Since then,Rahul has evolved as a leader,making that crucial balance between <U+0093>idealism<U+0094> and practicality. Winnability ruled as AICC treasurer Motilal Vora<U+0092>s son,who lost the last three elections,was allotted a party ticket in Chhattisgarh in violation of the guidelines. The list of Congress candidates in Rajasthan includes at least 20 relatives of veteran leaders. They include relatives of those accused in the Bhanwari Devi murder case and the brother of former minister Babulal Nagar accused in a rape case. The decision to give tickets to kin of leaders accused in criminal cases flew in the face of Rahul<U+0092>s intervention on the proposed ordinance on convicted MPs and MLAs. Over 20 relatives of Congress leaders are also contesting in Madhya Pradesh. In Chhattisgarh,former chief minister Ajit Jogi<U+0092>s wife and son and family members of party leaders who had been killed in the Darbha Naxal attack have been fielded. Former BJP minister Harcharan Singh Balli,who left to join the Congress only last week,was rewarded with a party ticket in Delhi. <U+0093>Rahul Gandhi has to accept certain facts. I don<U+0092>t think he will give up though. He is trying to see that the party adapts to his line of thinking. In elections,you have to consider the influence of a leader in a particular area. If somebody<U+0092>s son can win the election and only he can win,which political party will deny him the seat? The question is about changing people<U+0092>s mindset,<U+0094> reasons Congress MP and AICC secretary Shantaram Naik. During the ticket distribution for the Madhya Pradesh elections,the AICC screening committee got instructions from the vice-president<U+0092>s office to ensure that tickets were not given at the behest of any influential leader. Given that state Congress chief Kantilal Bhuria and CLP leader Ajay Singh,who were part of the committee,are perceived to be <U+0093>Digvijaya Singh<U+0092>s men<U+0094>,the panel held separate discussions with Jyotiraditya Scindia and Kamal Nath. Then some committee members went back to Digvijaya to seek his views. It was Rahul<U+0092>s way of balancing power equations. The changing dynamics. Nehru-Gandhi family loyalist Oscar Fernandes<U+0092>s induction as a minister,long-time backroom strategist Suresh Pachouri<U+0092>s sudden decision to contest the Madhya Pradesh elections,Ghulam Nabi Azad<U+0092>s removal as AICC general secretary and Captain Amarinder Singh<U+0092>s diminishing role in party affairs in Punjab are said to symtomatic of the change in the 128-year-old party. <U+0093>The Congress is changing silently,without making any noise. Leaders have started to realise it,<U+0094> said an AICC functionary. <U+0093>When Indira Gandhi took over,she brought a new team,new ideas. Sanjay Gandhi had his own team and so did Rajiv Gandhi. So when Rahul Gandhi has come,there is bound to be a sort of reshuffle in terms of power and responsibility. It<U+0092>s a natural process,<U+0094> says another leader. While Digvijaya remains a key party strategist and problem shooter,he has chosen to maintain a low profile in the new dispensation. Notwithstanding speculation about his role under the new regime,Ahmed Patel,political secretary to Sonia,remains her most trusted aide and,in that capacity,continues to play a key role in both party and government affairs. General secretary and in-charge of Congress president<U+0092>s office Ambika Soni is getting increasingly involved in party affairs and has been travelling with Rahul. The Congress vice-president has also effected a reshuffle in his core team,re-allocating work and upgrading or downgrading the roles of close aides. Jairam Ramesh,perceived and projected as Rahul<U+0092>s intellectual and political guru,is no longer the sole speechwriter,with Rahul himself writing his speeches or assigning the job to Mohan Gopal,director of the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Contemporary Studies. Union Minister Jitendra Singh has emerged as one of Rahul<U+0092>s principal aides in political matters. Though he still remains Rahul<U+0092>s confidant,Kanishka Singh<U+0092>s role seems to have diminished as he is not seen at the meetings of senior party functionaries presided over by Rahul at party headquarters. Party sources,however,said that he remains the <U+0093>biggest influence<U+0094> on Rahul and runs his <U+0093>Secretariat<U+0094> at Tughlaq Lane. The only difference,said sources,is that Rahul has inducted many other youngsters like Kaushal Vidyarthi and Alankar and they have also grown close to him. However,the backroom boys have not been tested in the electoral heat,and with results less than a month away,there are many who are looking to see how they fare up front. All the vice-president<U+0092>s men. Kanishka Singh : Though still Rahul<U+0092>s confidant,his role seems to have diminished of late as he is not seen at meetings presided over by Rahul at party headquarters. Sources,however,say he remains the “biggest influence” on Rahul and runs his <U+0091>Secretariat<U+0092> at Tughlaq Lane. Kaushal Vidyarthi : New inductee,he is an Oxford University alumnus. He has been conveying Rahul<U+0092>s missives to party general secretaries and other senior leaders. Alankar : Another new inductee,he is often seen travelling with Rahul or taking minutes of meetings. K Raju : An IAS officer earlier associated with the National Advisory Council,was recently appointed head of the party<U+0092>s SC department. Raju is credited as the brain behind Rahul<U+0092>s renewed and aggressive outreach towards Dalits. Sachin Rao : Oversees the party<U+0092>s internal surveys and research. Harish Choudhary : The Barmer MP has emerged as the main coordinator of Rahul<U+0092>s public meetings and programmes <U+0097> a job earlier done by Kanishka. Meenakshi Natarajan : Instrumental in the dissipation of the ambitious democratisation process in the Indian Youth Congress,she and Sachin Rao have been put in charge of the Rajiv Gandhi Panchayati Raj Sangathan. Suraj Hegde : The AICC secretary now looks after the Indian Youth Congress. Deepender Hooda : The Rohtak MP has been handling the party<U+0092>s social media outreach. Sandeep Dikshit : The Delhi MP leads the research team. (With inputs from Manoj C G in Delhi,Sweta Dutta in Jaipur and Milind Ghatwai in Bhopal.