



PHOTO: AFP
An Indian pedestrian (R) looks over the shoulder of an autorickshaw driver as he reads a morning newspaper with news of Manmohan Singh becoming India's next prime minister on its front page in Bangalore yesterday. Manmohan Singh, the father of India's economic reforms, was designated prime minister on Wednesday after Italian-born Sonia Gandhi rejected emotional appeals to take the job.

Cabinet in the making

Party stalwarts, professional to get call

AFP, New Delhi

Stalwarts of India's Congress party are expected to dominate the cabinet of the new coalition government but the finance ministry could go to a non-politician, party sources said yesterday.

The top name for foreign minister was Kunwar Natwar Singh, a former junior foreign minister who attended most meetings between Congress president Sonia Gandhi and international dignitaries.

C. Rangarajan, chairman of the appointed Finance Commission

which guides economic policy, was being frequently mentioned in political circles as finance minister, party sources told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Incoming prime minister Manmohan Singh, himself a former civil servant and finance minister, was said to favour the "professional" Rangarajan but could keep the finance portfolio himself.

Other potential names for the post include former central bank governor Bimal Jalan and former finance ministers Pranab Mukherjee and P. Chidambaram.

Other potential home ministers include party veterans Arjun Singh, who held the post in the last Congress government that took power in 1991, and Ghulam Nabi Azad, the Congress leader in Kashmir.

Congress is ruling in a coalition with some 20 parties, which will seek posts in the cabinet.

But some top Congress figures were said to want to devote themselves to posts in the party, believing the power centre would remain with Gandhi.

Will Sonia hold sway over Indian premier?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

When Manmohan Singh takes oath as the prime minister of the world's largest democracy, it will herald a new stint in his 13-year-old parliamentary career but the real power will remain with Congress chief Sonia Gandhi who declined the top post, analysts said.

To reassure Congressmen disappointed with her decision not to take up the post of prime minister, Sonia issued a statement Wednesday, saying: "I am not going anywhere. I am still very much in politics."

"I will continue as the Congress president and chairperson of the Congress in parliament for as long as you want me to...I will always be here, working for the party. The Congress is my life. All of you are my family," she asserted.

In fact, one of the most important reasons why 71-year-old Singh, an Oxford-Cambridge educated economist, banker and bureaucrat, emerged as Sonia's choice as the man for the prime minister's post is his apolitical nature and lack of personal political base-qualities that have helped him survive the slippery turf of power in Congress.



When the nominee of the Congress chief is a political lightweight, it helps the party presidents to retain their full control over the power structure, analysts said.

Singh has not only survived but risen and risen under three Congress presidents of contrasting styles of functioning and personalities since 1991. P V Narasimha Rao, Sitaram Kesri and Sonia Gandhi.

What are the reasons for Singh's meteoric rise from a political greenhorn to the most powerful post, especially being the member of a party where people spend their lifetime toiling hard even to get a

toehold in the inner circle of power? Besides Singh's impeccable integrity and intellectual prowess as an economist, it is his unflinching loyalty the party boss that analysts said helped him to become the prime minister despite being a political lightweight.

Analysts said Singh has clearly signaled to his party bosses that they have no scope to nurture any fear about their supremacy. Given the power politics in Congress, conventional wisdom suggest that it would have been surprising had Sonia chosen leaders more senior to Singh in the party for the top job.

This is what explains the Congress decision to hurriedly amend the constitution of its parliamentary party yesterday that empowered Sonia to decide who will be the prime minister after she herself went into a renunciation mode, said the analysts.

As per the amended constitution of Congress Parliamentary Party, 58-year-old Italy-born Sonia will hold the posts of party chief and chairperson of Congress parliamentary wing, which is a joint body of MPs of upper and lower houses of parliament, as well as the leader of Congress group in Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

PM-elect pledges to defend minorities

AFP, New Delhi

India's incoming prime minister Manmohan Singh set the tone yesterday for his left-leaning government by pledging to defend the poor and make peace with Pakistan and between religious minorities.

Singh, who is set to be sworn in as India's first Sikh premier tomorrow to replace the Hindu nationalist Atal Behari Vajpayee, said he had "no doubt of the stability of this government" which will rely on communist support.

The economist is closely identified with ending decades of economic protectionism, incurring the wrath of the left, when he served as finance minister from 1991 to 1996.

Singh said his government will continue talks with separatists in insurgency-torn Kashmir and "explore all possible opportunities to bring peace and progress to this state."

Singh, an Oxford-educated former professor and civil servant who did little campaigning during the

election, was propelled into India's top job after it was turned down by Sonia Gandhi, the president of his Congress party.

Singh said India needed "a strong public and private sector" and rejected selloffs of profitable state-run industries including oil and gas firms.

"The interest of workers must be protected. A large number of workers have been added to the pool of unemployment. It is not good," Singh said.

He pledged new investment in rural areas to make "the 21st century India's century."

The Mumbai Stock Exchange slipped marginally on the comments by Singh, although industry has largely backed him believing he will manage the economy effectively.

The coalition is still thrashing out a common programme between the disparate parties to set the agenda for the government.

Singh later went to the home of Sonia, who remains the influential head of the Congress party, to work

out cabinet appointments.

The prime minister-designate, who will be the first religious minority to lead the country that is more than 80 percent Hindu, pledged that inter-community bloodshed would not be allowed to recur.

He expressed "concern" about "inordinate delays in court cases" over anti-Muslim riots that killed 2,000 people in the Hindu nationalist-ruled state of Gujarat two years ago.

"To strengthen development, we have to create an environment of peace," he said.

He also regretted anti-Sikh riots in 1984 following the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi, mother-in-law of Sonia Gandhi, by her own bodyguards amid a Sikh separatist campaign.

"We are the most tolerant civilization and we cannot divide people on the basis of religion and race," he said.

Security threat not the cause, says Rahul

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Congress President Sonia Gandhi's son Rahul has rejected suggestions that security threat to his mother prompted her not to take up the post of Prime Minister.

"If there had been a security threat, we would have closed our mother inside a room and told her not to venture out," Rahul told reporters here Wednesday night after Manmohan Singh, India's best mascot of economic reforms, was nominated by Congress as its next Prime Minister.

Rahul's remarks assume significance in the backdrop of former West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu's recent statement that Sonia's son and daughter fear that their mother's life could be in danger if she becomes the Prime Minister.

Rahul said his mother moved about freely during electioneering in spite of the security threats. "It's (security threat) like the cloth we put on," he added.

Asked if he and his sister Priyanka had advised Sonia against taking up the post of Prime Minister, Rahul said "after the recent elections were over, I asked my mother whether she wants to be the Prime Minister. And she said 'no.'"

I have not yet decided anything about marriage," said the 34-year-old foreign-trained financial consultant when asked about this aspect of his life. "I have not decided whom to marry. I will tell you the moment I decide it," he added.

Tigers insist on self-rule blueprint as basis for Lankan peace talks

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels are insisting their blueprint for self-rule in Sri Lanka, which was rejected by the government as a stepping stone to a separate state, should be at the core of a revival of the stalled peace negotiations.

A top rebel leader told reporters here that their "Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA)" plan must be the basis for fresh talks peace broker Norway has been trying to arrange amid conflicts over what should form the agenda for negotiations.

"It is the ISGA proposal that is going to be the basis for our talks," head of the Tamil Tiger "peace secretariat" S. Puleedevan told the Foreign Correspondents' Association of Sri Lanka late Wednesday.

However, he said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will send its members abroad to consult with international constitutional experts and the Tamil Diaspora on ways to mesh the self-rule plan into peace negotiations.

The LTTE last week announced that peace facilitator Norway was expected to announce dates and a venue to resume negotiations "within a day or two", but official sources said there were problems in finalising an agenda.

Puleedevan declined to say

when and where the talks would open, but said Oslo was working on several options following expressions of interest from Denmark, Italy and France to host talks between Colombo and the Tigers.

However, sources close to the peace process said Oslo was the likely venue for a face-to-face meet of the antagonists in July or August.

The previous government here and the Tigers held six rounds of talks in Thailand, Norway, Germany and Japan, but the Tigers suspended the negotiations in April last year after accusing Colombo of failing to deliver on promises.

However, President Chandrika Kumaratunga called snap polls after accusing Premier Ranil Wickremesinghe of conceding too much to the Tigers and her party narrowly won polls last month.

Puleedevan said they were not worried about the serious contradictions within Kumaratunga's Marxist-backed coalition as the president herself was giving leadership to the peace process from the government side.

Kumaratunga's main Marxist ally, the JVP or People's Liberation Front, had been staunchly opposed to Norway's involvement in the peace process. Both Kumaratunga and the JVP had described the Tiger self-rule plan as a stepping stone for a separate state.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepalese pedestrians look at the wreckage of a bomb damaged bus in Kathmandu yesterday. Maoist rebels are suspected of planting the device which exploded on the third day of a nationwide general strike, destroying the bus but injuring no one.

45 killed during 3-day of Maoist strike in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 45 people were killed and millions of dollars were lost in revenue during a three-day Maoist rebel strike across Nepal that ended yesterday, officials and industrialists said.

In the latest fighting, at least eight Maoists and a soldier died in the western Kailali district in a gunbattle that broke out after rebels attacked troops defusing a landmine planted by the guerrillas, police said.

Thirty-one more Maoists and five troops were reported dead on the first two days of the strike, according to police and military officials.

The Maoists, who are fighting to overthrow the monarchy, ordered all

shops shut and all traffic off the roads across the Himalayan state of 25 million people.

In the capital Kathmandu Thursday, rebels bombed a bus and a taxi that defied the strike, although no one was injured as passengers were allowed to get out first, police said.

Nepal's fragile economy loses more than 21 million dollars each day it is shut down by a strike, said Chandiraj Dhakal, senior vice president of the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

Leaders of the tourism industry, which supports 1.25 million jobs in the land of Mount Everest, urged alternative forms of protest.

"Strike organisers should under-

stand that everybody is the loser as more than 60 percent of reservations are cancelled by tourists each day of a strike," said Tek Bahadur Dangi, chief executive of the Nepal Tourism Board.

"Many tourists are gradually abandoning the country," he said.

However, trade unionists close to the Maoists have called another nationwide shutdown from June 10 to 12.

The rebels called this week's strike in part to show solidarity with opposition parties that have held more than a month of noisy demonstrations in Kathmandu against the monarchy.

More than 9,500 people have died in the eight-year insurgency.

PROFILE OF MANMOHAN SINGH

Can the good doctor wield the scalpel?

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Even the most ardent follower of the Nehru-Gandhi brigade would, through moistened eyes perhaps, concede that after Sonia declined Prime Ministerial office there could have been no better choice than 71-year old Dr Manmohan Singh.

Indeed there would be an even greater number of Congress devotees who would, privately, regret that he had not been the first pick for the job. And that both he and the party had been spared the unseemly events that preceded his being inducted into the highest executive position in the land.

From acclaimed-academic, then accomplished-bureaucrat to the top political slot is indeed a long way, but from the day that he entered Parliament in 1991 Dr Manmohan Singh created the impression that the mantle of leadership draped itself comfortably around his shoulders. Inheriting an economic situation in which India's gold reserves had to be deposited in the Bank of England, he pulled the country back from the brink of financial disaster. Six years later the economy was almost on a one-way street 'Reform Road'.

That was not easy. During the election campaign the Congress had promised to roll back prices within 100 days, at his first press conference as Finance Minister the good doctor made it clear that such a transformation was wishful thinking. Instead he declared that "too much politics has been played with the economy." That was the move, which opened the door to economic reform. His task was not easy. Assistance from the Bretton Woods institutions was critical, yet meeting their "conditionalities" was seen as betraying the "garibi hatao" mantra that Indira Gandhi had bequeathed the party.

Pitfalls awaited him aplenty. The "big bull" played havoc with stock market, a joint parliamentary committee probed what would have been described as a politically-induced swindle had somebody else been calling the shots in North Block. For right through those troubled times no attempt was made to be smear him personally that was the kind of reputation that he created for himself. One which has endured, despite some obviously jealous detractors within and beyond the party ranks.

The economist did struggle to come to terms with political demands, he attained a certain balance when implementing reforms "with a human face." He



also realised that as the term of the Lok Sabha drew to a close and elections approached, his economic recipe had to given a populist political flavour.

As Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha he distinguished himself in fields beyond the economic.

He was calm, yet forthright and effective when taking on the government of the day on a host of issues.

Constructive criticism rather than rhetoric was his stock-in-trade. That experience should help him strike a balance as he leads the government in its myriad activities.

By accident or design, his elevation will help the Congress to regain some support from the Sikhs, support which had been threatened by the party fielding Tytler and Sajjan Kumar in Delhi. Manmohan Singh, of course, would never make pretence to being a Sikh leader, his is a larger constituency.

No special clothes for swearing-in

PTI, New Delhi

A simple man, Prime Minister-designate Manmohan Singh will wear his 'regular clothes' when he is to be sworn in by President APJ Abdul Kalam, possibly tomorrow.

Asked by reporters whether special clothes had been ordered for Singh for the swearing-in ceremony, his wife Gursharan Kaur said "he will wear his regular clothes."

"I think he will be uncomfortable if he has to wear special clothes," she said with a smile on her face.

Singh usually wears white pyjama-kurta and sports a light blue turban.