

# Death of a high flier

Sanjay Gandhi's fatal aircraft crash upsets political calculations and poses more than personal problems for his mother

By Arul B. Louis

New Delhi: The stunning death of Sanjay Gandhi as he performed aerobatics in a light aircraft over the nation's capital on Monday may well have destabilised its power structure. He was the mastermind behind the election strategy which brought his mother, Mrs Indira Gandhi, back as prime minister after January's general elections and consolidated her position in state elections last month.

And, though on paper only a humble MP of six months' standing, he had become under her wing the country's most important politician, with both his colleagues in the Congress (I) party and opposition leaders calculating their political moves on the "Sanjay factor." It is difficult for both to adjust now to a world without him.

The spotlight is again being focused on Mrs Gandhi, and much will depend on how she emerges from this personal trauma. So far she has coped well with the situation, displaying courage and determination. But now she has to grapple not only with long-ignored national problems, like a failing economy (page 36), but also a divided party organisation on the verge of being pulled apart by opposing political forces.

Sanjay had been in control of her party organisation since the Congress party split in 1978 and Mrs Gandhi formed her own party — the Congress (I). This control was formalised when he was made a party general secretary, barely 10 days before his death.

Mrs Gandhi re-inherits from her son a party organisation which is vastly different from anything she has managed before. It is probably more virile and active, unlike the flabby party structure of yesteryear. But managing the new forces unleashed by her son is not going to be easy. A similar situation applies in government — though Sanjay was not officially a part of it. He had begun planting his men in key posts, particularly those pertaining to internal security, industry and lucrative public undertakings like civil aviation, which wield considerable power.

He had also imposed on the government his free enterprise philosophy and tried to phase out the woolly-headed Fabian socialism by which a majority of Indian politicians swear. The business community now is keeping its fingers crossed as it waits to see which way the government tilts.

Things were still in a transitional phase, though it had become an accepted fact of political life in India that the prematurely balding young MP from Amethi, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, would ultimately succeed his mother in a dynasty founded by her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. The generational change

which Sanjay was heralding was not complete — the wily, older politicians in the Congress (I) were down but not out.

Similarly, in the administration and bureaucracy, his opponents had not yet been vanquished. Mrs Gandhi now rides a tiger. If she stops the process of change midway she may find her position endangered by intraparty squabbles, and to carry it to its logical end she



Pilot Sanjay: fatal disregard for the rules.

will need the utmost courage, determination and, more important, trusted lieutenants.

Sanjay's meteoric rise to power began in 1975 when the Allahabad High Court in Uttar Pradesh set aside Mrs Gandhi's election to the lower house of parliament. At the same time, his project to manufacture the Maruti, a low-priced Indian "people's car" of his own design, was in the doldrums because of technical problems which the former Rolls-Royce apprentice could not solve. Sanjay persuaded his mother to rewrite legislation retrospectively through an obliging parliament so that she could hang on to her position as premier and to muffle dissent through draconian Emergency laws.

Sanjay always displayed a contempt for the law, so it is perhaps ironic that he met his death in a red Pitts S2A two-

seater sports aircraft because he disregarded the rules prohibiting aerobatic displays at low altitude and over inhabited areas. In his zeal during the Emergency to strengthen the position of his family and to implement his ideas on slum clearance, ecology and population control, he did not hesitate to bend laws or break them. Although his mother had come to depend increasingly on his counsel, she ignored it when she called the 1977 parliamentary elections. And she paid the price with her massive defeat.

Soon after the 1977 poll, which was largely a display of protest against Sanjay's programmes — particularly population control, which had degenerated into forced sterilisations, and slum clearance — he was probably the most hated man in India. When the newly-elected Janata government launched investigations and prosecutions against the Gandhis, Sanjay advocated boycotting the commissions of inquiry and putting up a stiff fight against the legal suits. His mother fell in line with this.

Sanjay often carried the legal battles to the streets, and his Youth Congress followers disrupted the proceedings of the commissions and courts. This strategy began paying off and, aided by the Janata Party's hamfisted approach, the Gandhis soon began to acquire the aspect of martyrs. Then Sanjay was able to persuade his mother to split the Congress party. He reasoned that its only asset was Mrs Gandhi's newly-recovered charisma, which could be put to better use in a party with no rivals in its ranks.

But his political masterstroke came when he split the then-ruling Janata Party by promising to support the faction led by Charan Singh, who was then the deputy prime minister. The split resulted in Singh's emergence as prime minister, at which Congress (I) withdrew support for him, making a mid-term poll inevitable. The stage was then set for a Gandhi family takeover.

While a nervous Mrs Gandhi wanted to patch up relations with former party colleagues like the leftist Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna and Janata deputy prime minister and leader of the untouchable castes Jagjivan Ram, Sanjay opposed it. Bahuguna, who was admitted and made party secretary-general, quit the party in May this year protesting against Sanjay's role.

Sanjay kept tight control over the allocation of seats and ensured that a large number of his young followers won party nominations and entered parliament. Of the 351 Congress (I) MPs elected to the lower house, an estimated 180 were Sanjay loyalists.

While Mrs Gandhi hesitated to dissolve the state legislatures in the nine states where her party had not won sweeping victories, Sanjay prevailed. Dissolved in mid-February, they went to the polls late last month and the party won in eight states, losing only in Tamil Nadu in the south.

Sanjay, who kept a low profile in the January parliamentary poll, was after political legitimacy this time, the national mandate having cleared him of



Thai troops go into action: reverberations in Asean.

officials feel that representatives from the US, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the European Economic Community who were due in Kuala Lumpur might adopt a stronger line than that of the Asean-UN resolution calling for withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. And India, the Thais feel, may reconsider whether to recognise the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime.

International complications aside, however, some Thai military officers think the real motive behind the Vietnamese attack was to disrupt a programme of voluntary repatriation begun on June 17 for Khmer refugees in Thai holding centres who want to return to Kampuchea. Vietnamese propaganda reacted fiercely to the plan. The day after it was officially announced on June 12, SPK

denounced the scheme as a "vile manoeuvre" which would be crushed. "Do not play with fire because the Kampuchean revolutionary armed forces will not allow such an importunate violation of Kampuchean territory," it said.

Thai military men link the new, menacing tone in Hanoi's propaganda with what they claim were unexpected and unprovoked attacks, first by Lao troops firing on a Thai naval patrol boat on the Mekong on June 15, and four days later by Vietnamese naval vessels firing on Thai fishing trawlers. Just before the scheduled beginning of the repatriation programme, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) chief representative in Bangkok, Zia Rizvi, flew to Hanoi and Vientiane. He denies discussing the Thai pro-

gramme in Hanoi. But diplomats suspect the Vietnamese tried unsuccessfully to get him to call it off.

Visitors from Phnom Penh say the Vietnamese are outraged at what they view as plans by the Thais to send back into battle Khmer Rouge and other anti-Vietnamese combatants who, they feel, have been given sanctuary for nine months in Thailand, subsidised and endorsed by international relief agencies in the name of humanitarian aid.

Hanoi is particularly suspicious of the 24,000 refugees at Sa Kaeo camp. Last October the Thai Government and UNHCR created this holding centre to accommodate starving and malaria-ridden Kampuchean under Khmer Rouge control after they were pushed into Thailand to escape a Vietnamese assault along the Thai border. Although they were disarmed, the Khmer Rouge cadres managed to retain their political monopoly with the help of a 300-man "police force."

The UNHCR insists that the repatriation is perfectly correct — despite the dangers of war in Kampuchea and the unremitting hostility of the Phnom Penh authorities to the plan — as long as refugees have a free choice to stay in Thailand or return to Kampuchea. After conversations with many refugees in Sa Kaeo who chose to stay in Thailand, this correspondent was convinced that the UNHCR's procedures had created a choice — for those bold enough to withstand Khmer Rouge pressure to return to the battlefield. □

share in a future coalition government in Phnom Penh. But as they could not do this in Kampuchea they needed refugee bases in Thailand. He charged that the relief effort for Kampuchean refugees was partly aimed at attracting millions of people to Thailand and giving Vietnam's opponents in Kampuchea a big share in a coalition government.

Thach claimed anti-Vietnamese elements in Kampuchea could be wiped out in a few days if Vietnam chased them over the Thai-Kampuchean border. He added, however, that Vietnam was committed to respecting Thai sovereignty and cited Thailand's rejection of a non-aggression treaty as evidence that it saw no threat from Vietnam.

The other noteworthy element in Thach's remarks was a strong complaint about Asean's "very hostile policy" towards Vietnam, based on the organisation's continuing call for a Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea. Thach alleged that Asean wanted Vietnam to pull out without wishing China to stop its threat. He added, less than candidly, that "our military presence in Kampuchea is a bilateral problem between us and Kampuchea."

Thach's warning of the dangers posed by China would have struck a sympathetic chord here. Jakarta has long been convinced that it is China rather than

Vietnam which posed the greatest long-term danger to non-communist Southeast Asia. Indonesia also believes, privately at least, that it is the best equipped of the Asean countries to deal with Hanoi because of its long-established relationship with the Vietnamese.

Mochtar appears, however, to have been a model of caution in his dealings with Thach. As the Asean foreign ministers' meeting was only days away, Indonesia was anxious to demonstrate its commitment to Asean unity, especially after the flurry caused by the earlier enunciation of the so-called Kuantan principle (REVIEW, Apr. 4) with its suggestion that Indonesia and Malaysia might agree to a less than total Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea.

Mochtar rejected the charge of Asean hostility. He told Thach that the call for a Vietnamese withdrawal from Kampuchea was a matter of principle and that Asean had taken a similar stand when China attacked Vietnam. Afterwards he suggested to the press that Vietnamese talk of Asean hostility at least suggested that Vietnam was beginning to accept the organisation as a regional entity.

Probably the best example of Indonesian caution concerned a comment by Thach that Mochtar understood the connection between China and the Kampuchean crisis. During a separate press conference shortly after Thach's,

Mochtar made it clear that this was Thach's own understanding rather than a result of anything that was said. Mochtar added he had merely noted the Vietnamese complaints about China.

The fact that Mochtar took the unusual step of calling a press conference at all underlined his apparent concern to get Indonesia's view across about the outcome of the Thach talks. Choosing his words carefully, Mochtar praised the friendly atmosphere of the meeting but noted that the talks ended "by concluding that there was no agreement between the two sides."

Mochtar commented: "I wouldn't say it [the meeting] was entirely devoid of anything positive. But if you say there was a concrete suggestion there was none." This probably best captured the negative quality of the meeting.

Thach's talks in Jakarta coincided with a reported statement by the Indonesian Ambassador in Bangkok, Hasan Habib, that Asean may eventually have to shift its emphasis from economic co-operation to defence matters. Asked about this, Thach said that during a courtesy call on President Suharto he had been assured that there was no intention of doing this. Mochtar subsequently noted that Habib had been speaking personally and that his remarks had not been cleared with Mochtar beforehand. □