

Fiery exchange at Rahul Gandhi's talk

Visiting Indian political scion fields questions on his country's growth and his party's role

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A preview of the pitched battle that is certain to grip India when it goes to the polls next year played out before an audience at the National University of Singapore yesterday, when Mr Rahul Gandhi took questions from the floor.

Mr Gandhi, the son, grandson and great-grandson of a line of prime ministers from India's storied Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, is in Singapore to court the influential Indian diaspora, as his Congress party gears up to challenge the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party in elections due to be held by May next year.

At times, questions at the dialogue organised by the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP) veered towards the combative.

"Why is it that during the years that your family ruled India, India's per capita income grew at less than the world average, but has grown faster since your family relin-

quished power," charged a man who introduced himself as an economist and the writer of a book on the economic history of Asia.

As the audience of nearly 300 people strained to hear Mr Gandhi's response, he seemed to take a measure of the questioner before shooting back: "And what is your hypothesis? Do you agree that India is a success today? And you are saying I have no role?"

Even as the moderator, LKYSPP acting dean Danny Quah, tried to keep the exchange cordial, the next questioner turned the tables.

"My India is lost, I can't find India on the map anymore," he said, asking Mr Gandhi to "restore" India to what it was before Mr Narendra Modi came to power in 2014.

Mr Gandhi, 47, seized the moment to try to rise above the fray and define himself as the moderate, liberal alternative to the nationalistic Prime Minister.

"This conversation shows you the polarisation. That gentleman thinks nothing worthwhile has ever been done by the Congress party.

This gentleman thinks everything has been done by the Congress party. Let me tell you what the truth is: India's success is hugely because of the Indian people...

"Anybody in this room who thinks that the Congress party is not part of that success... needs to write a new book."

As the audience broke out in applause, Mr Gandhi, who is often portrayed as a reluctant politician and was once derided as an "empty suit" in a leaked cable from the United States Embassy in New Delhi, ticked off his party's achievements in the nearly four decades it was in power.

They range from leading the independence struggle to achieving self-sufficiency in food production to liberalising the economy.

"I feel no animosity towards somebody who says I have achieved nothing," he added.

"I respect your opinion.

"I will contest it, I might even be able to convince you. But notice something else. You would never have the ability to say what you said to me in front of Mr Modi.

"You are very important to me because you represent an opinion. And I respect that opinion."

During his three-day visit that concludes today, Mr Gandhi is expected to call on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam. Yesterday, he met Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and also held discussions with Temasek Holdings chief executive Ho Ching, as well as with entrepreneurs of Indian origin.

His next stop is Malaysia, where he is slated to meet Prime Minister Najib Razak, as well as members of the Indian community. The trip comes a week ahead of a plenary session of his party which will chalk out strategies to thwart Mr Modi's bid for a second term in office.

After suffering reverses in recent legislative elections in north-eastern Indian states, the Congress party is faced with a tough fight to retain its hold in the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

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Congress party chief Rahul Gandhi with Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy acting dean Danny Quah and graduate student Pallavi Rachel George at the dialogue yesterday.
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