

# India: Rajiv Gandhi asserts leadership

by Linda de Hoyos

Defying the international press commentary that he is weak and inexperienced, Rajiv Gandhi, the new Prime Minister of India, has demonstrated that he is firmly in command, and it is through his leadership that India has survived the grave shock delivered by the Oct. 31 assassination of Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

On the day that Mrs. Gandhi was murdered by members of her own security guard, Rajiv Gandhi was impressed into service as the next Prime Minister. On Nov. 8, he also took over as the president of the Congress (I) Party. On Nov. 11, he announced national elections for Dec. 24-27, a plan that should ensure him a mandate to follow through on his determination to "bring India into the 21st century."

Within his two weeks in office, Mr. Gandhi has taken swift action to end the destabilization of the country sparked by Mrs. Gandhi's assassination. When mass violence against Sikhs swept New Delhi Nov. 1-4, Mr. Gandhi issued orders to the army to quell the violence, and removed the lieutenant governor of the capital for his inability to maintain order in the city. Amid reports that the police were often lax in stopping the violence and that the riots were led by elements of the Congress (I) Party, Gandhi has declared that every person involved in the organized revenge killing shall be prosecuted, no matter what their political or religious affiliation.

To safeguard his own security, he has overhauled the entire security and intelligence apparatus, whose laxity was at least in part responsible for the brutal gunning down of Indira Gandhi at her own home. Mr. Gandhi is himself under the direct threat of assassination. From London, Jagjit Singh Chauhan, the self-styled president of "Khalistan" (the non-existent Sikh separatist state), has been delivering threats of Mr. Gandhi's imminent assassination by Sikh terrorists. "As Mrs. Gandhi invaded the Golden Temple [the Sikh holy shrine in Punjab June 6]," Chauhan declared to the press Nov. 8, "she would not be allowed to live. That is a fact of history." The same goes for her son, he added.

The Indian government has demanded that the British place Chauhan under arrest for incitement to violence; Chauhan's demands for the murder of Mrs. Gandhi and her family have been broadcast by the BBC since June. The British government has refused, instead placing Chauhan under 24-hour security protection against alleged Indian hit teams. Now, more than ever, the survival of India depends upon maintaining the security of its leadership.

The talk among the opposition to Mr. Gandhi in the Western press is that once the Congress Party is assured power, Mr. Gandhi will be swept aside. However, in the brief period he has been in office, Mr. Gandhi has made clear that he does not think of himself as a caretaker head of state—he has a strong commitment to India's moral purpose based on the striving toward full-scale industrialization and the realization of each individual. "Our greatest wealth," Mr. Gandhi declared in his speech announcing national elections in a challenge to the Malthusians, "is our people. We must enable individuals and families to realize their potential to the full."

From this standpoint, Mr. Gandhi declared that the "basic objective" of his government is the "speedy removal of poverty," and reaffirmed his adherence to socialism and planning. "Without planning," he said, "we could not have reached where we are. Our aim is continuous modernization, higher productivity, and rapid advance of social justice.

"The public sector has played a historic role in laying the foundation of a modern economy," he continued. "It has to shoulder greater responsibilities and to become more efficient to generate surpluses for investment." Mr. Gandhi lost no time in beginning to implement his drive for encouraging initiative in the Indian economy. One of his first acts in office was to streamline the procedures for acquiring licenses for new projects, thereby decreasing the waiting time by three to twelve months.

He has also declared war on the inefficiency of the bulky bureaucracy bequeathed to India by British colonialism. "I am committed to improving the quality of service to the people. . . . No quarter will be given to the corrupt, the lazy, the inefficient. Our administrative system must become more goal-oriented. A new work ethic, a new work culture must be evolved in which government is result-bound and not procedure-bound."

In answer to the ethnic and religious tensions pulling at the Indian state, Mr. Gandhi reaffirmed that "secularism is the bedrock of our nationhood. Vested interests, both external and internal, are inciting and exploiting communal passions and violence to divide India." Mr. Gandhi also pledged to uphold the tradition of non-alignment and commitment to peace that marked the foreign policy of Jawaharlal Nehru, the founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, and Mrs. Gandhi, the movement's most recent chairman.

As did his forebears, Mr. Gandhi has a vision of what India must become. On the day that he scattered the ashes of Indira Gandhi over the Himalayas, Rajiv explained: "Indira Gandhi loved and respected the Himalaya. . . . The Himalaya is not merely a mountain, it is part of India's mind. The immensity of the hills of the Himalaya helps us to discover ourselves. It reminds us how small we are in comparison to universal greatness, but at the same time that we can have an unbeatable will. This is what allows Man to transform the impossible into reality."