

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Battle for stability in Punjab

The terrorists are escalating in a desperate bid to prevent elections, but so far their efforts have backfired.

The terrorist effort to break the momentum for political stability in Punjab has been disappointed so far. Two weeks after the murder of Sant Harchand Singh Longowal, the moderate leader of the Akali Dal party in Punjab with whom Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had negotiated a historic agreement for social peace and new elections on July 24, the moderate Sikhs and the New Delhi government have set the stage to bring back parliamentary democracy in that troubled state.

The leading political parties, the Congress (I) and the Akali Dal, have submitted their lists of candidates to contest for 117 state assembly and 13 parliamentary seats on Sept. 25. It has been nearly two years since the elected government was dismissed and Punjab was put under direct rule from New Delhi.

But fanatic Sikh secessionists have pulled out all the stops to sabotage these developments, starting with the assassination of Sant Longowal on Aug. 20. The radical United Akali Dal, a breakaway group under the control of fundamentalist Sikhs and a Maoist faction, simultaneously called for a boycott of the elections.

Contrary to terrorist calculations, however, Sant Longowal's murder alienated the majority of Sikhs and generated a wave of support for a moderate path. On Sept. 1, the funeral of Sant Longowal brought almost a million Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims into the small village in Punjab where the Sant was born, to pay homage to a man who had had the courage to stand

up against the terror in an effort to find a constitutional settlement to the crisis.

Comparing the fallen leader to Mohandas Gandhi, the leader of India's independence movement and fearless opponent of sectarian violence, who also fell victim to an assassin's bullet, Surjit Singh Barnala, the new leader of the Akali Dal, told the mourners, "Sant Harchand Singh Longowal became an apostle of peace and love, and a second Gandhi of the 20th century."

In a personal message, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi said that it is "our responsibility" to carry out the unfinished work that Sant Longowal had set out to accomplish. The prime minister has repeatedly stressed that his government will not bow down to terror.

It is this determination which the terrorists hope to break. At this writing, they have escalated their deadly campaign with the assassination on Sept. 4 of Arjun Das, a young Congress (I) member of the Metropolitan Council of New Delhi and close associate of the prime minister.

Das, like the youthful Congress politician and trade union leader Lalit Maken, gunned down in late July, had been targeted by a "civil rights" cabal in New Delhi presided over by one Rajni Kothari, a liberal academic and a darling of the international "human rights" mafia. Kothari and Co. published a "hit list" of 16 politicians whom they accused of inciting violence against Sikhs during the riots

that followed Mrs. Gandhi's assassination.

The prime minister, surrounded by armed guards, led thousands of mourners at the funeral as police arrested hundreds of extremists in Punjab, and new security measures were drawn up to protect candidates during the poll.

There is no doubt that Gandhi is out to conduct a major cleanup. Three years of political chaos and the rise of the secessionist forces within Punjab had corrupted and destroyed the political process in the state. The Congress (I) was affected no less than the Akali Dal.

In fact, the corrupt factioneering of the Congress (I) leadership was crucial in repeatedly frustrating the efforts of Mrs. Indira Gandhi (who was gunned down by Sikh extremists in October 1984) to reach a negotiated settlement with Akali leaders. It is widely known that the Punjab police had also fallen victim to the rot. In recent months, evidence mounted that many Congress (I) leaders were collaborating with the secessionists, wittingly or unwittingly.

In a bid to usher in a new generation of politicians, nearly 70% of the Congress Party's candidates are new and under 45 years of age, according to Secretary General Srikant Verma. Among the notables dropped is former Punjab Chief Minister Darbara Singh and several of his ministers. Darbara Singh's recent affiliation with the pro-Soviet faction within the Congress (I) party, and his outspoken opposition to Rajiv's decision to hold the elections, may have had something to do with his downfall.

Indian officials are also acting to preempt potential disruption of the elections by separatists who have fled to Pakistan. The Army took over responsibility for securing the border with Pakistan on Sept. 1.