

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

An abyss opens in Tamil Nadu

Any idea that the political vacuum left by the late chief minister might be quickly filled, has been shattered.

The death of the popular chief minister of Tamil Nadu, the former movie actor M.G. Ramachandran ("MGR"), on Christmas Day elicited a gasp from the Indian body politic. But the full impact only hit recently, as this key southern state lurched into ungovernability.

On Jan. 28 the successor government headed by MGR's wife Janaki—who had never involved herself in politics before—failed miserably to prove its majority in the reconvened state assembly, and at this writing, the imposition of President's Rule in the state appears imminent.

Besides being immensely popular with the people of Tamil Nadu, MGR had in 10 years as chief minister proved himself a competent administrator and able politician. MGR had held a centrist course in a regional-ethnic party, the AIADMK, well known to be seriously split, and with a strongly chauvinist wing. Moreover, his administration was based on a coalition at the local level with the Congress (I), a cooperative relationship that was developed to good effect at the national level as well.

Perhaps most critical, certainly in the recent period, was MGR's pivotal position in Delhi's efforts to come to grips with the ethnic war between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka. That crisis sent hundreds of thousands of civilians and Tamil militants streaming across the Palk Straits to Tamil Nadu for refuge. This situation continues to pose a severe challenge to leadership in both Tamil Nadu and Delhi.

But MGR's stature in the state and

his good relations with Sri Lankan Tamils, including some of the leading protagonists, eased many a delicate moment and was invaluable in the steps that led to last year's Indo-Sri Lankan Accord, not to mention keeping support for the beleaguered pact over the past year.

The first eruption of fissures in the post-MGR regime was handled with deceptive efficiency by Tamil Nadu Governor Khurana. When Janaki stepped forward to stake her claim over Mr. Nedunchezian, the senior minister in MGR's cabinet to whom power had been routinely transferred Dec. 25, the hand of Mr. Veerapan, a politician well known as one of the more intemperate factional leaders of the AIADMK, was clearly visible.

Nonetheless, Khurana honored the claim virtually on the spot, and Nedunchezian was summarily removed. He threw in his lot with the grassroots base of the party associated with MGR's party propaganda secretary and leading lady in many an MGR film, the tough young actress Jayalalitha. Meanwhile, Janaki was installed Jan. 4, after being elected leader of the split AIADMK, and was informed she would have to prove her majority.

The Jan. 28 debacle in the Tamil Nadu Assembly chambers, where the Janaki government secured a "vote of confidence" of 99-8, with 3 abstentions—out of 224 assemblymen—after twice adjourning on patently frivolous pretexts, ordering a police attack on the opposition, and finally locking out 124 members of the combined opposition, buried the last illusion of a smooth transition and a

"united" AIADMK with it.

These illusions rested on certain assumptions about what stance the Congress (I) would take toward the AIADMK crisis—if the ruling party, which holds 64 assembly seats, backed Janaki or even abstained, the Janaki government would have held. It was a prospect widely anticipated—not only by Janaki herself, as she bitterly complained Jan. 28—even at the Jan. 27 eleventh hour when Rajiv Gandhi issued the quixotic statement that the Congress (I) could only support a "united" AIADMK.

In the event, the Congress (I) high command issued a whip to the state party to vote against Janaki on the claim that her forces had tried to buy support of 12 Congress assemblymen. Behind the high-minded anti-corruption sentiment is a patently partisan calculation.

During the expected period of President's Rule, the state will presumably prepare for fresh Assembly elections. With the AIADMK now split open and ulcerating, it can be expected that this party will be consumed by fratricidal warfare at the polls. The DMK and other opposition parties will cash in to some extent on the AIADMK-Congress (I) rupture, but are not likely to be able to make a serious bid for power. That would leave a clear field for a Congress (I) victory—or would it?

It is impossible at this point to foretell. What is clear is that a fresh election mandate, whatever the outcome, is a better bet than the instability of limping along with a de facto puppet government in this important state. The campaign will likely center on one issue: Who can carry the MGR mantle? From this standpoint Congress (I) made its first move Jan. 25, when the central government posthumously awarded MGR the *Bharat Ratna*, the highest honor in the land.