

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Rajiv Gandhi takes party command

The prime minister has cleaned 80 incumbents out of the Congress (I) slate due to their lack of service to constituents.

On Nov. 30 the preliminaries to the forthcoming Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament) elections in India were completed. The ruling Congress (I) and the opposition groups have nominated their candidates for the election to be held on Dec. 24, 27, and 28. The Congress (I) list of candidates, which retains most of the elected members, emphasizes the clean political record of the nominee as the criteria. This is exactly the image of the new Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi that reassures the Indian population.

The 378-million-strong Indian electorate will elect 496 members of the 524-seat Lok Sabha. Elections will be held in Punjab and Assam later because of internal insecurity and turmoil in those states. Of the seats scheduled to be contested, the ruling Congress (I) presently holds 336. Congress (I), the only party with a nationwide base, is the only party fielding a candidate for each seat.

The general elections will be held under the shadow of the ongoing investigation of the brutal assassination of former Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The new Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, who was elected by party officials to his present post within four hours of his mother's assassination on Oct. 31, will be seeking a fresh mandate from the electorate for a five-year term.

The first political challenge the premier faced was selecting the candidates. Unlike the United States, where primaries within each party de-

termine the candidates, in India the candidates are hand picked by the top party officials. State party officials prepare a list of candidates for each state constituency. This list is then scrutinized and finalized by the New Delhi-based Central Parliamentary Board of the party. During the week when the list is being finalized, all prospective candidates converge in New Delhi to exert their political clout as best they can to get the nod from the party leaders.

Since the party leadership imprimatur is direct, the list of candidates—those rejected as well as those included—provides the first hint of election strategy—how the new administration might function and where the power blocs, if any, will be.

The immediate result of the party slate is disgruntlement and possible rebellion. This year, it has become clear that the Congress (I) party bosses are not willing to tolerate any temper tantrums. Already a few of the former power brokers have been expelled and warnings have been sent to the rebels in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh to curb their voices or face the consequences.

The 1980 elections in which Mrs. Gandhi made her triumphant return to power after 34 months, having been swept out of power in 1977 following her emergency rule, were a watershed for the Congress Party. In 1978, Mrs. Gandhi had dissolved the old Congress party and formed the Congress (I) with the majority of party members behind her. The 1980 victory gave the

Congress a new lease on life.

In those elections, a large number of new, young Congress members were given tickets to contest the Lok Sabha seats. Most of these fresh faces were members of the Youth Congress (I), then a dominant party force under the leadership of the late Sanjay Gandhi, younger son of Mrs. Gandhi. The death of Sanjay Gandhi in June 1980 threw some of these young politicians into a quandry. Some, afraid that Sanjay's death would leave them powerless and with no route to advance within the party, left the Congress (I) and began exploiting his name. Others quickly pledged their allegiance to the new party leadership.

In June 1981, Rajiv Gandhi won the parliamentary election from Aamethi, a seat in Uttar Pradesh which was vacated by his younger brother's death, and the one he will be contesting in the coming election. It was a foregone conclusion then that he would play a dominant role in the party apparatus. In 1983, he became one of the four general secretaries of the all-India Congress Committee (I) and soon took over the Youth Congress (I) which had been Sanjay's political base.

In nominating the candidates for the Lok Sabha, Rajiv Gandhi has established the norm he demands others follow. Out of the 336 seats the party won in 1980, more than 80 incumbents have been dropped. This is a move to cleanse the party of those with poor records in serving their constituency. While the ax has come down in more or less all the states, the victims are uniformly those who won the last election coat-tailing Sanjay Gandhi and subsequently have done little or nothing in building the party in their respective constituencies. Some of those have also earned the distinction of being openly involved in corrupt activities.