

India votes for unity behind Congress Party

by Linda de Hoyos

In the largest electoral mandate in history, the Congress Party of India, under the leadership of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, swept Indian national elections Dec. 24-27. The Congress landslide far exceeded even the most optimistic predictions. Prime Minister Gandhi began his new administration on Jan. 1 with an 80% majority in parliament.

The Indian 400-million-member electorate, the world's largest, voted overwhelmingly to give Mr. Gandhi the chance to realize his stated goal—to “bring India into the 21st century.” It is this, and not a sympathy vote for Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the great Indian leader and prime minister assassinated Oct. 31, 1983, which brought out the vote for the Congress Party. In many days of hard campaigning, Mr. Gandhi took his message to villages, towns, and cities: The murder of Mrs. Gandhi was an attempt by outside forces to destroy India; they will never succeed. The Indian population must rally to the nation, in a united fight for its integrity and sovereignty, and on this basis move this vast, rich land into the 21st century as an industrialized power.

Defying the predictions of those forces in London, Switzerland, and Moscow that Mrs. Gandhi's assassination would sound the death knell for India, the population rallied to this call. Observers who traveled throughout India during the campaign period report, this is not a vote for the status quo, but a vote for change. But in voting for change, Indian voters decisively rejected the plethora of regional, religious, and

sectarian opposition parties, and voted for change through the Congress Party, the party which brought India independence and has ruled the country for all but three years since 1947. Instead of disintegration, the Indian nation has risen with new-found hope and vitality to meet the challenge of the future.

The election victory for the Congress Party and its Prime Minister thereby arrests the manipulated process of breaking up India that began in earnest with the winter 1983 slaughter of Muslims in the state of Assam, rose to a high pitch with the Indian army invasion of the Golden Temple in June 1984, and took its worst toll with the murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The imperialists of the Russian, Anglo-American, and Swiss empires miscalculated because of their own complete inability to fathom the power of the concept of nation—the vehicle that mediates the individual's contribution to all humanity—and which is to them the chief hindrance to the full implementation of their anti-human designs.

As the linchpin nation of Asia, disintegration of India would have unleashed a holocaust of famine and political chaos that would threaten all of humanity. Conversely, in unifying around an aggressive leadership determined to bring it fully into the 21st century, in concert with other nations, the potentials for India's contribution to Asia and the rest of the world are infinite.

For the oligarchs, it's back to the drawing boards.

Rajiv takes command

On Dec. 31, Mr. Gandhi took his oath of office, noting in his short speech, delivered in Hindi, that it was the two-month anniversary of Mrs. Gandhi's death and that the most fitting tribute to her memory was to continue the work that she had started. His cabinet announcements later that day already displayed a boldness of decision for change that had inspired Indian voters during the campaign. The changes were less in the personnel than in changes in the structure of the cabinet. Signaling his priorities, Mr. Gandhi raised education to the level of a full cabinet-level ministry, appointing K. C. Pant, a Congress Party leader, to the post. In addition, Mr. Gandhi broke up the Energy Ministry, to create a Coal Ministry, a Petroleum Ministry, and a Power Ministry. Arun Nehru, close adviser and distant cousin to Mr. Gandhi, is the power minister.

In his first full speech to the nation on Nov. 4, Mr. Gandhi had pledged to clean out India's bureaucracy, modeled on that of the British Civil Service, which has weighted down the entire productive process of the country. Employment in government, he said, will be based on performance and efficiency—no one will be sacrosanct. On Dec. 31, Mr. Gandhi showed he meant business with this statement by declaring that the post of deputy minister no longer exists. Since each ministry is designated with a minister, a minister of state (who actually functions as a deputy minister), and a deputy minister, the third post is redundant and henceforth will no longer exist.

This decision coheres with the first act Mr. Gandhi took to change government, within a couple days of taking office after the death of Mrs. Gandhi. He relaxed the procedures for government licensing of industrial projects. Instead of going through two ministries, such licences need only be processed through one, thereby cutting the time down from over a year to no more than three months.

Mr. Gandhi also replaced the planning minister, appointing Mr. K. R. Narayan, the former ambassador to the United States, to this critical post, which is responsible for shaping the country's development policies. There are suggestions that the entire ministry will be overhauled.

Mr. Gandhi retained S. D. Chavan, former defense minister in the post of home minister, and N. C. Rao has been moved to the position of defense minister. However, he replaced Mr. Mukerjee, who had been mooted as the possible new prime minister in the hours after Mrs. Gandhi's death, with V. P. Singh, an economist who previously served as commerce minister and who has extensive experience in representing India with the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Also dropped was the minister for railways, Abdul Barkat Chowdhury, who has acquired a reputation for corruption.

These decisions cohere with decisions that Mr. Gandhi had already initiated in the Congress Party. In India, the party

candidates are centrally chosen by the national party leadership in New Delhi. Mr. Gandhi, Congress general secretary, eliminated some 80 people from the lists, particularly those who had been caught in corruption or who had not performed their function seriously. Especially eliminated were the corrupt leaders of that wing of the party that had been organized around Sanjay Gandhi, Mr. Gandhi's brother, who was killed in a plane crash in 1980.

Mr. Gandhi himself, as did his mother, retains the post of foreign minister. He has reaffirmed India's position as the leader of the Non-Aligned Movement dedicated to protecting the ability of the underdeveloped countries to steer an independent course against the colonialist aims of the Soviet or

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Anglo-American-Swiss empires. In his campaigning, Mr. Gandhi also noted that India has the task before it of mending fences with its neighbors. He announced that if invited, he would be glad to visit both China and Pakistan. He is expected to make a trip to the United States in April, which had been Mrs. Gandhi's intention also.

Opposition discredited

In the face of Mr. Gandhi's vision of India's future and his determination to realize it, the opposition parties were exposed across the board as the mewling and puking brats they are. With the exception of the Communist Party of India (CPI), none of the opposition parties are national parties. All are based on sectarian religious or regional interests, or, as in the case of the CPI, foreign interests. But what the opposition parties have lacked in support or ideas has been more than made up for by the publicity heaped on them by the Indian domestic and international press.

The two major forces to receive the full brunt of the Congress victory were the radical Hindu chauvinists and the communists. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the electoral arm of the Hindu paramilitary force, the RSS, received only three seats in the election, as the Congress Party swept through the Hindu belt of northern India. In New Delhi, a BJP stronghold because many New Delhi residents were refugees from Pakistan during Partitioning, the Congress Party took all seven seats. Congress also took every seat in Madhya Pradesh, the state of Bhopal, site of the recent chemical disaster.

The Communist Party of India ran into deep trouble, receiving only three seats out of 515 in the parliament, even

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though it fielded candidates in every state. This is compared to 12 seats in the last parliament, and 50 to 60 in the days of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, when the parliament was significantly smaller. The Soviet-instigated demands that India go to war against Pakistan and end its non-aligned stance to become a hireling of the Soviet Union were rejected by the population. The CPI campaign was vituperative in its attacks on the Congress, with CPI leader Biswanth Mukherjee declaring that "Rajiv's mother has died: Maybe the sympathy will pull him through in Amethi. But not all Congress-I leaders have lost their mothers."

Another group that received a drubbing from the voters was the so-called Sanjay Forum Party of Maneka Gandhi, the widow of Sanjay Gandhi with ties to the Bombay mafia. Campaigning on a program of "Small is beautiful," Maneka ran in the Amethi district of Uttar Pradesh opposite her brother-in-law, Rajiv Gandhi. She was defeated by 315,000 votes. Failure to win even 10% of the vote forced her to forfeit her election deposit.

The Communist Party (M), a split-off of the CPI, is

limited mostly to West Bengal, where it maintained its majority, but the Congress gained more seats in the election.

The Janata Party, which had ruled India after it swept out Congress after the Emergency in 1977, received only four seats.

In the south of India, where the Congress Party was expected to meet trouble against the regional parties, it instead picked up seats. In Tamil Nadu, the leftist Tamil-regional party was turned out by the voters, much to the relief of the Sri Lankan government. Only in Andhra Pradesh, where Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao had had a brawl with the Congress Party this summer, did an opposition party hold its own against the Congress landslide. Rao's state party, the Telugu Desam, received 28 seats, making it the largest opposition party in parliament.

The states of Assam and Punjab did not vote in the national elections; in Assam, the voter registration is being contested because of the influx of immigrants from Bangladesh; the state of Punjab is still under martial law. Sikh leaders in Punjab, however, expressed their confidence that Mr. Gandhi will act to settle the Sikh issue.

The Congress Party strategy was to field strong candidates and strong campaigns to knock out the leaders of the opposition. The strategy was extremely successful. Among the notables to bite the dust were:

- Atal Bihari Vajpayee, head of the BJP and a former foreign minister under the Janata government of 1977-80;
- George Fernandes, the Socialist International pal of Willy Brandt, and leader in the Janata government whose career has been based on drumming up Jacobin agitation against the central government.
- Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna, a leftist Social Democrat who has held a seat for decades. His Congress opponent, Amitabh Bachchan, will join the cabinet.

Charan Singh, the head of the Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party, another sectarian Hindu party, squeaked through the elections, with a margin much smaller than expected.

Looking toward the future

India has thus come out of the last harrowing two months with a strong mandate for its leadership and a strengthening economy. On the day after the elections, the government released figures showing a growth in industrial output of 7.5%, in agricultural output of 10% to 15%, and a decrease of inflation from 6.3% to 5%.

In a speech delivered on Nov. 19 to 200,000 people on the occasion of Mrs. Gandhi's birthday, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi declared: "We have to avenge her death, not by anger and rancor, but by sinking all differences and fighting, with all our might, against the forces of disunity and disintegration. . . . We are a real democracy. India cannot be broken. . . . Indira has been assassinated, but India is not dead."

To this call, the Indian people have answered with overwhelming support for its nationhood.