

The Indian parliamentary system: how it works

The Indian parliament, set up as a cross between the British and American models, consists of the Lok Sabha ("House of People" or lower house) and Rajya Sabha ("Council of States" or upper house). Members of the Lok Sabha are elected directly by the people every five years, unless the ruling party or coalition loses its majority. In such a case, elections for a new Lok Sabha are held following the collapse of the government. In 1980, only three years after the general election of 1977, the Janata Party lost its majority in the Lok Sabha and a new election was held.

Apart from several which the President appoints, members of the Rajya Sabha are elected (on the basis of population) by the elected members of the state legislative assemblies. Every two years, one-third of the Rajya Sabha is reconstituted. The Rajya Sabha functions as the representative of state interests in the center. Unlike the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha cannot be dissolved. In case of

differences on pending legislation with the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha has to have a joint sitting with the Lok Sabha and iron out the differences. Although the members of both houses have one vote each, the Council of Cabinet Ministers is made collectively responsible for the Lok Sabha. As against 542 seat in the present Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha has 246 seats.

The prime minister, leader of the Council of ministers elected by the elected parliamentary body of the majority party or coalition of parties, is responsible for the day-to-day running of the government. Like the British prime minister, the Indian prime minister is highly visible. Nonetheless, the power that the Indian President wields is extremely broad. Included among his functions is the power to appoint the prime minister, cabinet ministers, judges of Supreme Court and the High Courts, and other important central officials and members of commissions. The President is also required to approve or disapprove all bills passed by parliament, including money bills, and bills passed by state legislative assemblies under specified conditions. The President, who is elected indirectly by the elected members of both Houses of Parliament and of the State legislative assemblies, is vested with all executive powers, including the supreme command of the defense forces.

the rise in prices, the Congress-I has unleashed strong attacks on the opposition for blocking the legislation which would have transferred "power to the people."

Who will win?

While the price rise and charges of corruption are serious and may sway some voters, the Congress-I can more than counter this by exploiting the deep-rooted fear and suspicion the people harbor about the Janata Dal leaders, who in 1977 involved themselves in a spectacle so bizarre and so dangerous that most of them lost completely the respect of the people. The spectacle was the intense struggle, following the overwhelming defeat of the Congress-I, by almost every Janata Party leader to pull the other down so that he could sit on the Delhi throne. People remember that some of those leaders are now actively promoting the Janata Dal unity. This is one of the ABCs of Indian politics that makes mincemeat of much overexcited analysis.

The foreign media's pronouncements, for example, that corruption charges against Rajiv Gandhi by the opposition, and that Defense Minister K.C. Pant's refusal to accept the seat he was offered instead of the one he wanted to contest, are major indicators that the Congress-I is in trouble, are to be dismissed out of hand. Corruption is a serious enough charge,

but the voters are also aware of the large-scale corruption involving some of the opposition leaders.

In fact, there are hundreds of factors that account for the election of a particular candidate from any constituency in India: The candidate's personal reputation, his or her family connections, the caste the candidate belongs to, religious and caste composition of the voters, candidates' contribution to economic development in the constituency, the party the candidate represents, are only a few. More importantly perhaps, in rural areas, which make up 70% of India, the village headman decides on election eve how the village should vote. His words carry a lot of weight. All these factors can be negated by a burning issue—such as the policy of forced sterilization adopted by the Congress-I during the period of emergency rule, which decided masses of votes in 1977, or the public display of power greediness by Janata Party leaders in 1979 that sealed their fate in 1980. Under such circumstances, the Indian electorate, particularly in the Hindi belt, acts in a unified manner, and it is this that constitutes the "wave" that the opposition wishes to set into motion today.

But the people's lack of interest in the election campaign shows that no "wave" has yet formed. And there is a reason for it. It is not certain at this point that the seat adjustments made by the opposition leaders in the quiet of the back room