

On the constitutional and legal consequences of Rajiv's death in the midst of a tight timetable for the Lok Sabha elections, the Election Commission's swift decision to postpone the polls slated for May 23 and 26 to June 12 and June 15 has had the salutary effect of short-circuiting unhealthy argumentation over available options. There is no doubt that it is the right decision. It shows, in the midst of surrounding gloom, a robust conviction that in a democracy, political life must go on, no matter how crippling the blow dealt to it.

As for post-electoral problems and anxieties over the time needed for the passage of a "regular budget" (which determined the original desire, now shattered, of the President for a new Lok Sabha in position by June 5), these bridges can be crossed when we come to them. In any case, it is not beyond the ingenuity of our constitutional experts to find answers for them — such as the invocation of the "doctrine of necessity" — when the time comes, what is unthinkable is the aborting of the electoral process already set in motion on specious grounds of expediency and seductive alternatives.

Remains the question of political choices, particularly by the Congress Party. There is no doubt that Rajiv Gandhi's death has altered the configuration of Indian politics more decisively than even Mrs Gandhi's. All kinds of possibilities and combinations of forces across the board of Indian politics have been opened up. Indian politics has been thrown into a melting pot as never before. It is too early to say what will be the nature of the realignments. Immediately, all the psephological punditry of the last few weeks has been rendered totally irrelevant and the outcome of the elections is very much an open-ended affair as a consequence of Rajiv's death. More fundamentally, present party formations, particularly at the Centre, are likely to undergo chameleonic changes in the coming weeks and months. Every political party barring the BJP and perhaps the Communists will be churned up as never before with identities of the recent past eagerly shed. But the most crucial decisions will be for the Congress Party to make. It now has an opportunity to rid itself of its burdens of the past and order its affairs on the lines of a modern democratic party free at last of "dynastic" trammels.

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India After Rajiv

A thoroughly bewildered India bade farewell to Rajiv Gandhi on Friday. It will be a while before the nation recovers from the sheer horror of his brutal end. Before this happens, however, it is bound to be assailed by ominous doubts about the future. Already the question has been raised in certain circles, both at home and abroad, whether India can survive as one nation, let alone as a democracy, in the wake of the assassination. While the question cannot be dismissed lightly, it cannot also be allowed to condition our reflexes. Unfortunately, the rumours and proposals which were floated in the capital within hours of Mr Gandhi's death appeared to do precisely that. It was easy to ignore the whispers about the imposition of an emergency and even about an impending military coup: these were clearly the products of an overheated imagination. It was equally possible to reject the talk about the possible cancellation of the elections. But the proposal to form a national government, or to convene a fresh constituent assembly, falls into another category altogether. The idea is a non-starter to begin with. Since the political forces in the country are polarised along sharply antagonistic lines, it is inconceivable that they can come together and function effectively even for a day. However, this is not the main reason why the proposal is objectionable. The fact that President R. Venkataraman reportedly aired it is what makes it appear to be truly galling. With the election still to be completed, how could the President, who is otherwise so punctilious about his role as the custodian of the Constitution, assume that the elections will result in a hung Parliament and then proceed on the basis of that assumption to invite political leaders to consider the idea?

The fact of the matter is that this proposal, like the other suggestions, insinuations and rumours, displays an astonishing, not to say dangerous, lack of faith in the electoral process. It is just as well that all political parties, with the exception of the

BJP, made it clear in the most unambiguous terms that they would have nothing to do with the idea of a national government. The BJP voiced its reservations too but these appeared, for reasons that are difficult to fathom, somewhat ambivalent. Be that as it may, at a time when the country is plunged in grave crisis, it is incumbent on all those who are involved in public affairs to ensure that the democratic will prevails without let or hindrance. This must not and cannot mean that we should be oblivious of the flaws in our democratic system.

Indeed, a calm appraisal of the legacy that Rajiv Gandhi bequeaths to the nation would provide useful pointers to chart our future course as a sovereign independent, secular and democratic nation. The legacy as is only to be expected, is a very mixed one. He inherited a huge and amorphous party which had exercised power for so long that it had lost its moorings. He himself admitted as much in his celebrated speech at the Congress centenary session held in Bombay in December 1985. He denounced the "brokers of power and influence" who only "dispensed patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy." He was appalled by the fact that Congressmen talked of high principles and lofty ideals but they obeyed no discipline, no rule, followed no principle of public morality, displayed no sense of social awareness, showed no concern for the public weal. It is in this speech, which was widely acclaimed at that time for its refreshing candour, that Rajiv Gandhi promised to reorganise and revitalise the party, break the nexus between political parties and vested interests, amend the electoral law and conduct a vigorous war against all those who exploited the poor in the guise of caste and religion.

Most of these promises turned out to be hollow. It is true that one of Rajiv Gandhi's first achievements as Prime Minister

was the passing of the Anti-Defection Act. But the much-touted party elections were postponed over and over again. Before long the "brokers of power and influence" were back in business. Congress chief ministers were changed at will and the Union council of ministers reshuffled nearly thirty times. Vested interests ruled the roost. Far from waging a war against casteism and communalism he appeared at critical times to compromise with them. His flip-flop on the Shah Bano case, his decision to allow the *shilanyas* to be performed in Ayodhya in November 1989 just before the election, his ambivalent stance on the Mandal Commission report — all these were indicative of the fact that while he could not change the system he was quite helplessly yielding to it.

Still Rajiv Gandhi's instincts all along were sound. He realised early that India could never hope to enter the next century with a measure of confidence unless it massively inducted science and technology, accepted modern methods of management, opened up the economy to competition. The technological missions he set up to speed up development in such areas as water, edible oils and telecommunications were a daring innovation. His space programmes, like the nuclear energy ones, may not have met with resounding success. All the same he encouraged and was seen to encourage, endeavour on the scientific front. Similarly he may not have gone beyond certain peripheral innovations to liberalise the economy. Still, during his premiership, economic growth averaged over five per cent, tax revenues attained record levels, exports increased dramatically (as imports did too), employment was up. Above all, despite widespread and severe droughts, India did not

witness any starvation deaths. Indeed absolute poverty declined perceptibly.

A combination of idealism, lack of political experience and eagerness for quick-fix results explains why so many of his warmly applauded initiatives — notably the accords on Punjab and Assam and the power-sharing agreement with the National Conference in Kashmir — turned sour. As against this he was able to find a peaceful solution to the Gorkha and Mizo agitations. It is that same combination which accounts for the misadventure in Sri Lanka. On the foreign policy front as a whole, Rajiv Gandhi's performance was however most creditable and, on occasions, even brilliant. The six-nation, five-continent initiative, the Delhi declaration, the initiatives regarding South Africa, the positions on North-South issues all testify to his stubborn belief that India should speak with a distinctive voice in the concert of nations. This mixed legacy reveals much that can stand the country in good stead as it emerges from the trauma of Rajiv Gandhi's assassination. India yearns for order, stability, security and growth. These will be difficult to come unless our leadership is endowed with a dynamic and caring vision of the state and society, a clarity of purpose, an experienced understanding of how our system operates and how it can be changed, with decisiveness, flexibility, drive and energy. Rajiv Gandhi possessed some of these qualities in good measure. Some others he did not possess. But his qualities as well as his drawbacks, his achievements and his failures, his promises and his inability to deliver on them, all taken together, constitute a precious storehouse of insights and pointers to how India can survive and flourish in the future.

Congress Prospects After Rajiv

D.P. KUMAR

The entire political spectrum has changed overnight, and dramatically so, with the disappearance from the scene on May 21 of Rajiv Gandhi in the midst of the tenth general election—after 204 of the 507 constituencies had gone to the polls in the first phase on the previous day. Because of his assassination and the seven-day national mourning announced by the government, the poll for the remaining two phases, scheduled for May 23 and 26, were put off by the Election Commission to June 12 and June 15, so that polling for nearly two-thirds of the constituencies is incomplete.

This has led to an extraordinary situation. Never before have elections been put off half-way through and held in blazing heat in the height of summer. The only example so far is a poll for the State Assembly of Gujarat in June 1976. Also, although Rajiv Gandhi has been assassinated, paradoxically the Congress-I's fortunes in the elections have improved vastly and now the party stands a good chance of securing a majority in the next Lok Sabha and if it does, the nation can look forward to the "stability" that Rajiv Gandhi so ardently wished for—as against the prospect of a "hung" Parliament that had been apprehended before.

The other contending parties, especially the Bharatiya Janata Party which was earlier aiming high, have begun redrawing their strategies to meet the new situation. The BJP has held a two-day emergency session of its National Executive and pronounced that "a leaderless Congress-I party is not capable of bringing stability in the country". This is because five days after Rajiv Gandhi's death, the Congress-I has still not found a successor.

The Congress-I chances have now brightened, but it

is known that before the nation went to polls on May 20, the best that psephologists were giving the party was 224 out of the 507 seats. Some of their predictions were based on very unrealistic premises, such as price rise or unemployment, whereas in the general election the issues were emotional and based on caste, even sub-caste, and community. In a realistic assessment, perceptive observers never gave the Congress-I more than 195 seats that the party held in the dissolved Lok Sabha. It had looked that even this figure was difficult to achieve. Some hard-headed followers even of Rajiv Gandhi himself were estimating the figures at between 160 and 180. Outwardly, Rajiv Gandhi and other leaders were keeping up a brave face, but inside the party headquarters there was real apprehension.

On a rough estimate, it was seen that the Congress-I was going to lose between 40 and 50 seats in the South. Its tally in the last general election was 106 seats. It was impossible to attain that figure. In Kerala, it was impossible to retain 18 out of 20 seats. In Karnataka, similarly, it could not retain 26 out of 28 seats, and in both the States, the strength might be cut to half. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK was going to wrest at least one-third of the 39 seats. It had won no seats last time. In Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu Desam Party was threatening to come back in a big way, and the Congress-I could have at best secured 20 out of 42 seats. The situation looked utterly bleak.

Before the May 20 polling, it had looked impossible that the Congress-I would be able to make up in the northern States the seats that it would have lost in the South. The only northern States where it was going to make gains were in Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan.