

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

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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.

On liberal estimates, the Congress-I could have got 20 (as against 8 in the dissolved Lok Sabha) in Madhya Pradesh; six or seven (as against nil last time) in Rajasthan, and some 10 (as against 3) in Orissa. It looked it would make marginal gains in West Bengal (8 against 4 last time), Bihar (10 against 4), UP (15 against 14), Himachal Pradesh (2 against 1). The total of all these could not have made up for the losses in the South, and thus the Congress-I would have remained almost at the same figure, if the tenth general election would have been gone through as originally scheduled, and with Rajiv Gandhi still on the scene. The Congress-I would have been the largest party, followed by the National Front-Left Front with 140 or so seats, the BJP some 125, and Chandra Shekhar's BJP some 20.

All these calculations seem to have been totally upset after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. There is little doubt that there is a tremendous surge of sympathy for the slain Congress-I leader, and that his party would be the beneficiary of a sympathy wave, in the same manner that Rajiv Gandhi was the beneficiary in 1984 of a sympathy wave following Indira Gandhi's assassination. It is impossible to calculate how much the Congress-I would benefit, and put it in statistical terms. But it looks as though the Congress-I will secure a majority in the Lok Sabha, and that it would secure a large enough number of the remaining 303 seats for which polling is due on June 12 and 15.

The picture has radically changed. For the other parties, it does not matter if the poll is held earlier than June 12 and 15, but the Congress-I is asking for polling as early as possible, so that it can get the maximum political advantage. If Rajiv Gandhi was alive and if the Congress-I had lost the elections a second time, Rajiv Gandhi's and the Congress-I's position in politics would have been untenable. Rajiv Gandhi would certainly have been removed from the leadership by his dissidents, who would have blamed him for a second defeat and the Congress-I could have disintegrated and split in factions under State leaders. The situation has now been averted for the Congress-I.



BUT at the same time, a serious situation has developed in the Congress-I on the issue of finding a new President to replace Rajiv Gandhi. It was Rajiv Gandhi who had spoken at the Bombay Congress Centenary celebrations of "power-brokers" operating in the party, and had vowed to crack down on them. The reference then was to the caucus of his younger brother, Sanjay Gandhi, killed earlier in an air crash. Instead of being able to eliminate the "power-brokers", Rajiv Gandhi had ended up by having a much bigger and more powerful "caucus", some of whom had earlier not even been in the Congress-I, but were operating and running Rajiv Gandhi's politics from his earlier Prime Ministerial house at 7 Race Course Road, and later, 10 Janpath, New Delhi—by

keeping important Congress-I leaders at bay.

It is this "caucus" which surfaced promptly on May 22, the morning after Rajiv Gandhi's killing, with the proposal to make Mrs Sonia Gandhi the new President of the party. They had broached the matter to Mrs Sonia Gandhi just before she was leaving for Madras in a special plane to fetch her husband's body. The game plan was simple: Mrs Sonia Gandhi, now President of the party, and later logically the Prime Minister, for the party was now going to get the majority in the Lok Sabha, and thus behind her, it is they who would control the levers of power, as they did in Rajiv Gandhi's time.

When the Congress Working Committee met on May 23 to condole the death, the issue of a new President came up almost at the fag end. Arjun Singh, a former party Vice-President, reportedly suggested that Mrs Sonia Gandhi be elected President, so that the people would vote for her in sympathy. Senior leaders like P.V. Narasimha Rao, Karunakaran and others were reportedly taken aback by the suddenness with which the name of the next party President had been proposed and they sat quiet, almost dumb-founded. N.D. Tiwari was said to have been denied entry into the Working Committee meeting by one of the "caucus" members. Earlier in the day, the "caucus" had organised demonstrations right inside the Congress-I headquarters at 24, Akbar Road, some so-called "Congress workers" thumping the tables and demanding: "We want Sonia Gandhi; we want Rahul Gandhi" and so on. Arjun Singh's proposal was taken as unanimously adopted by the Working Committee. The party seemed to have been completely captured by the "caucus".

It was only the next morning that Rahul Gandhi arrived from the USA. He reportedly advised his mother against becoming President of the party. Possibly, Amitabh Bachchan, the family friend, was also in favour of Mrs Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi remaining in the background if for nothing else but their personal safety. The senior leaders were also understood to have viewed the scenario with suspicion and reportedly felt that if Mrs Sonia Gandhi was projected the Prime Minister, the Congress-I might not be able to win the election despite the current sympathy wave. It was only then that Mrs Gandhi wrote a letter to the CWC declining the offer.

However, the "caucus" has not altogether given up attempts and is pursuing its course of installing Mrs Gandhi as party President, at least till elections are complete. Fortunately for the party, good sense is dawning and senior leaders have been meeting each other since May 25 and are suggesting that Narasimha Rao, the seniormost leader, be designated Working President until the election, and then the AICC-I should meet and formally elect a new President. It seems Narasimha Rao's name is gaining more and more acceptance. The other contenders, N.D. Tiwari and Arjun Singh, are presumably thinking of throwing their hats into the ring at the time of actual selection. □

(May 26)

(Courtesy: *The Statesman*)

aus: Mainstream, 1.6.91