

# Indira Gandhi's political comeback

## How fast? How far?...

A tiny, rural parliamentary constituency in southern India named Chikmagalur made political history for the entire South Asian subcontinent on Nov. 4. During the March 1977 general elections Indian voters humiliated the Congress Party government and turned it out of power. This time a record 76 percent of the eligible population cast its ballots to return the controversial former Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to the national parliament. The election returns were not programmed in any scenario-producing computers in London or Washington. As Western newspapers have soberly acknowledged, Gandhi's presence as the unofficial head of the parliamentary opposition puts her one step from the office of Prime Minister.

It was the ruling Janata Party's intention to make any electoral contest against Mrs. Gandhi, big or small, a major test of its strength. So Chikmagalur became the scene of hectic showdown campaigning with the Janata Party deploying all its party power-houses, including even the Prime Minister, Mr. Desai himself, to campaign against Gandhi. The Janata put before the population its vision for a ruralized India, with Desai charging that a vote for Mrs. Gandhi was "a vote for authoritarianism." And the Janata Party lost.

Nov. 4 was Mrs. Gandhi's day. The election victory is the most crucial step thus far in her bid for a political comeback. As Gandhi herself stated this week on a private visit to London, "A political comeback? I never went anywhere." This was precisely the Janata Party's problem. Ever since her disgraced exit from office in March 1977, the opposition has attempted through false arrests, corruption commissions, criminal charges, and even threats to change the constitution, to seal Gandhi off from the public eye.

It is to the credit of a small group of political advisers and Mrs. Gandhi's own courageous fighting that the Chikmagalur election was a success. Her advisers, in particular the Karnataka State Chief Minister Devraj Urs (who also functioned as her campaign manager since Chikmagalur falls inside his state), refused Janata provocations to campaign on false issues. In mid-July, when disenchantment with the Janata Party's misrule was at a high point, Urs and Gandhi chose the electoral venue, the timing

(produced by the resignation of the seat Gandhi won by a Congress-I member of Parliament), and all the campaign issues. In all cases the Janata was out-manuevered. Gandhi started off with a strong pro-science, pro-industry campaign style and the largely rural population, much to the World Bank's chagrin, chose industrial development, despite the Janata's ruralist slogans.

### International ramifications

All eyes are now on Pakistan, India's neighbor. As the *Executive Intelligence Review* has documented, Henry Kissinger's threats and blackmail against former Pakistani Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto were aimed primarily at wrecking a historic detente and development perspective for the Indian subcontinent which Bhutto and Gandhi were in the process of consolidating. Bhutto today sits in a death cell, condemned to hang by the ruling bogus court and the dictate of a military junta. Pakistan's military strongman, Gen. Ziaul Hague, has gone to great lengths to appease India on the theme of "genuine nonalignment" and to enforce on his nation a policy of persecution, floggings, and political repression.

Repeatedly before the Chikmagalur campaign, Gandhi spoke out for Bhutto's life. She charged that there had been a foreign conspiracy against her government, and that the period of 1975-1977 saw the unfolding of a plot that removed the legitimate governments of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Gandhi, during the electoral campaign, outlined the method behind her foreign policy: "It is not merely having an Indian government but an Indian government which regards national interests, first, second and last, and which takes every decision in the light of long-term interest." The Desai government's new-found "detente" with a Pakistani junta which has exhibited overtly fascistic tendencies, its silence on the Bhutto case, and its effort to go all the way toward a meaningless India-China relationship will all come under heavy scrutiny with Gandhi in the parliament.

### Gandhi's campaign

Gandhi's campaign strategy was to take the offensive against the Janata government's policies. The ground for her programmatic fight was laid when Gandhi, at

the invitation of Urs, placed the foundation stone for the Mangalore steel plant. The plant is a few miles from Chikmagalur. Gandhi's action was directly scornful of the Janata government and the World Bank promoted back-to-the-villages movement.

When the Congress-I (I for Indira) announced her candidacy in mid-July, it was scoffed at, but within weeks the small constituency became a mini-India. Gandhi addressed seven or eight rallies a day, and visited the villages to discuss the impact of national policy and the need for industry and science with her audiences. She did not speak the language of the state, but refused to let this become a barrier. Gandhi spoke as a national leader in English or Hindi, and Urs translated her speeches to those gathered to listen. Gandhi chose a south Indian constituency (she is from the north) and stated repeatedly that she did not think, given the Janata government's policies against her, that she could have received a fair election in the north. She was well received on this basis. One rueful political analyst summed up the ambience of the Gandhi campaign: "A large section of the rural population thinks that in Chikmagalur they are voting for the next Prime Minister."

### The Janata strategy

On the scene observers described the Janata mud-slinging against Gandhi as "fascistic." This was not a characterization of Prime Minister Desai or for that matter Defense Minister Jagjivan Ram's wing of the party. But these leaders fell into line behind the left-right extremists within the Janata Party, as they have on many points of policy over the past months.

Industries Minister George Fernandes, an ally of Willy Brandt's Second International, and the Communist Party of India-Marxist ran the Chikmagalur campaign against Gandhi. Posters with skulls dripping blood and Gandhi's photograph in the background were plastered up all over the constituency; riots were stage-managed by provocateurs. To the last day, an attempt to provoke a law-and-order crisis in the Congress Party-run state was on the agenda. Fernandes' campaign issues were clear: cottage industries are India's future, Gandhi is a "fascist" and the Janata government means "democracy." The CPM took a more sophisticated approach. They charged that Gandhi was the worst of the evils that plague India. The landlords of the state, so often attacked by the CPM, this time rather liked the CPM's defense of their interests against Congress Party land reform programs.

The right-wing side of the Janata, usually led by the so-called cultural militias of the Rastriya Sevak Sangh (RSS) — the "saviours of the motherland" — abandoned Fernandes. The RSS, the military arm of the Jan Sangh wing of the Janata Party has been deeply implicated in provoking caste and religious (Hindu-Muslim) strife in the north. Gandhi has made them one of her consistent targets, charging that RSS

communalist actions serve the interests of those foreign powers who wish the decentralization and breakup of the Indian nation.

### The election outcome

Many of the diversities of India as a whole are present in Chikmagalur. Historically, it is a coffee-growing area, taken over by the British East India Company. When Britain gave independence after World War II, the coffee plantations were turned over to the 'brown sahibs' (brown masters) to run. Since the 1950s Congress Party governments have tried to break the back of this social structure through land reforms, rural debt moratoria, and special programs for the minorities, particularly the lower castes, which have functioned as virtual indentured and landless labor.

### Reason wins in Chikmagalur

*Under the headline, "Chikmagalur: Reason Wins...Turning Point in Subcontinent" former Indian Minister of Chemicals, K.R. Ganesh rated the Gandhi victory's international significance. Ganesh, one of the key political leaders nationally who campaigned for Gandhi, gave his analysis of the current issue to the Indian newsweekly New Wave.*

Indira Gandhi's commanding 77,000 margin victory is the first decisive breach in the strategic conspiracy of the Anglo-American-Chinese axis and their monetarist agencies to convert South Asia, extending from Iran to Vietnam into an Eastern extension of NATO, as an anti-Soviet area, by bringing about the destabilization of one after another nationalist and progressive regimes. Sheikh Majibur Rahman (of Bangladesh), Bhutto (of Pakistan), Gandhi (of India), Sirimavo Bandaranaike (of Sri Lanka) and even the Shah of Iran with all the complex interplay of social, political and religious forces in Iran, are glaring pointers to this strategy.

Their aim was to install dictatorial and obscurantist regimes, or seduce and encircle inept and weak governments. The internal situation in each of these countries and the omissions of the regimes no doubt facilitated the imperialist objectives. But to deny the existence of a conspiracy and keep one's eye shut to it is to neglect the strategic tasks in this crucial region of the world.

The events in Afghanistan took the international conspirators by surprise. The unfolding scenario in India has thrown a spanner in their works.

Former Prime Minister Gandhi and her chief campaign manager, state Chief Minister Devraj Urs, more than any other leaders are associated with this effort. Gandhi's campaign slogan, "Black Money Turns Yellow" also hit at the heart of the brown sahib dirty money operations and the conversions into gold of drug-related and other illegal funds.

The returns spoke for themselves. Out of a total 450,068 Gandhi won by a margin of at least 77,000. In the constituency 25,000 Muslims were eligible, 167,000 oppressed castes. The Lingayats (the landowning and small business caste) were the backbone of the Janata campaign.

### Withering Janata

National political realignment is the next step. The Janata Party has two choices. Either it fights an unpopular anti-Gandhi battle merely on the issue of her alleged misrule during the State of Emergency (1975-1977). Or sane Janata elements will realign the party along issues the population feels are more important than the persecution of Gandhi. Desai, and a handful of other forces know that whatever the government delivers on is what will determine its future, rather than the bogus equation of whether Gandhi government misrule is better or worse than Janata government power vacuums. Both have played their roles in giving the World Bank and the Ford Foundation a foothold in India.

The Congress Party, led by former Defense Minister Swaran Singh, abstained from running a candidate against Gandhi in Chikmagalur. This was read as an indication in many circles that Singh is determined to make Congress Party unity and joint action with Indira Gandhi's Congress forces the basis for a united programmatic platform. Many "left radicals" have tried to undermine Singh's determination without success. While it is known that the CPM will continue its infantile radicalism tactics, its main focus is not Gandhi but the pro-Soviet Communist Party of India (CPI). The CPI opted for neutrality in the election, reflecting divisions in the party between those favoring an open door to collaboration with the Congress(es) and those calling for an ultraleftist "plague on both your houses" attitude toward the Janata and Congress parties. Which way the CPI and CPM go will be important in the realignment.

### Has Gandhi changed?

Efforts to decipher what is on Mrs. Gandhi's mind have been at the center of virtually all political developments in India for the last year. It is exactly a year since the then-Home Minister Charan Singh ordered Gandhi's arrest. Nobody has ever figured out why he made this move since Gandhi was out, under court order, in a matter of hours and on the road to an energetic, political battle. She charged that politics, more than criminal or corruption offenses, was at heart of the false arrest. Since then, every move by the Janata Party against Gandhi has carried the undercurrents of these charges. In January of this year the Congress Party split over whether Gandhi was its leader above all others. But since January, candidates running under the Congress-I banner have one after another smashed their Janata opponents.

Gandhi and her coterie have themselves undergone significant changes. There are no doubts now that in evaluating her humiliating March 1977 electoral defeat, Gandhi has figured out that an inside job was pulled against her. The infamous "Sanjay mafia" — the group of sychophants who attached themselves to her son and promoted full-scale sterilization programs — are today nowhere to be found. Even Sanjay is out of politics. Instead, prominent political figures such as Urs have promoted Congress unity from Gandhi's side and, during the last week of her campaign, the respected former Petroleum State Minister K.R. Ganesh campaigned for giving more weight to her programmatic efforts. Ganesh is identified in knowledgeable circles as the author of Gandhi government efforts during 1975 against black money and smuggling.

One crucial campaign tactic swung the voters behind Gandhi. She used the image of a united India and recalled the programmatic campaigns of her father, the late humanist Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The Janata was boxed into an anti-Nehru tirade, and to that extent lost the confidence of India. Even the lowliest Indian peasant, knowing little else, is aware that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who led India's freedom movement and pulled his nation into the modern world united, not as a collection of petty squabbling kingdoms. The Janata Party was given one year to follow those footsteps. Its year has gone by quickly.