

India: World's largest democracy at the

Barring unforeseen circumstances, the Indian people, an electorate of hundreds of millions, will go to the polls in early January to elect a new government. This election, a mid-term poll, comes less than three years after the 1977 elections that swept from power Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the Congress party which had ruled India since its independence.

At this moment the Janata party, which took over, is a shambles, broken up into the various constituent parties which originally came together to oust Mrs. Gandhi. Mrs. Gandhi is poised to reverse her defeat and reassume leadership of India.

The Contenders for power

The main contenders for power in the election are now divided into three groups: one is the Congress party of Mrs. Gandhi; the second is the remains of the Janata party, led by long time Indian political leader Jagjivan Ram, who was deputy prime minister in the post-1977 government of Prime Minister Morarji Desai; and lastly the grouping led by the current caretaker Prime Minister Charan Singh, who pulled out of the Janata. Charan Singh collapsed the Desai government in August and has since reformed his base into the Lok Dal party, which also has the support of the anti-Gandhi wing of the Congress party known as the Congress (U).

The only remaining major force in India is the Communists, the pro-Soviet Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Maoist-leaning Communist Party-Marxist (CPM), who de facto support the Charan Singh-Congress (U) combination.

Who then are these forces, what do they represent in this election? The position of Mrs. Gandhi and her Congress is best explained in the accompanying interview with the editor of the leading Indian newsweekly *New Wave*, Mr. Ganesh Shukla.

Both the Janata of Ram and Charan Singh's axis have made clear that they are running *against* Mrs.

Gandhi. Ram's position is perhaps the weakest. Ram himself is a figurehead with a personal appeal particularly to the untouchable caste, of which he is a member, but with a party which in reality consists almost entirely of the rabid Hindu chauvinist and communalist Jan Sangh party and his neofascist militia, the Rastriyo Sevak Sangh (RSS). The spectre of an untouchable running at the head of a party and organization with a history of castism and narrow sectional appeal is not what could be called a winning combination.

The Jan Sangh and RSS efforts to use the Janata as a cover for their attempts to seize political power during the Desai government was the issue that brought that government down. The frightening rise in communal—Hindu versus Muslim—violence during the past few years was correctly pinned on the fascist RSS, and it will be difficult for Ram to shake that association.

Charan Singh, for his part, has sought to cover his own thoroughly reactionary small-peasant outlook with a mantle of "progressivism," with the slogan of "anti-communalism, anti-authoritarianism." The former refers to the Jan Sangh-RSS while the latter refers to Mrs. Gandhi.

The Singh government at present consists of his own mish-mash Lok Dal, the anti-Gandhi Congress now led by Karnataka Chief Minister Davraj Urs (hence Congress "U"), and the remains of the Willy Brandt-allied Social Democrats led by George Fernandes.

Singh's own history and his declared election program makes him the foremost proponent of the World Bank's program for India—a rejection of industry-led modernization in favor of "small is beautiful" ruralism and austerity. In fact Singh, who had his name as the author of a book which scorned Nehru's policies for the industrialization and scientific development of India, now advocates that sections of India's vital public sector industry be auctioned off if they do not turn a profit. He has also proposed that strikes be banned, wages be

crossroads

suppressed—all to accomplish an austerity drive against the urban, industrial sector of the economy.

The Singh program rejects the idea that continued capital-intensive industry will bring development and calls for creating handicraft, “tiny industry” in the rural areas, while trying to appease the rich farmers who form Singh’s personal base, particularly in northern India. It is not clear whether those farmers, who are now benefiting from industrial inputs like tractors, fertilizer, and irrigation systems, would tolerate the implementation of such a policy for long.

This World Bank perspective has in the past few days forced a new crisis for Singh—the forced resignation of his Finance Minister H.M. Bahuguna, a respected progressive Congressman who broke with Mrs. Gandhi in 1977 to form the Congress for Democracy (CFD) and then joined the Janata. Bahuguna refused to join Singh’s Lok Dal party, preferring to re-establish the CFD as an independent unit in the elections, with the possibility of an arrangement in certain areas, particularly the crucial northern region, with Mrs. Gandhi’s Congress.

The departure of Bahuguna will result in a crisis for the left, who are now supporting a Singh without even the fig-leaf of a progressive cover. For the CPI in particular, which has traditionally aligned itself with the nationalist leadership of the Congress, this is a difficult dilemma.

Decision for the Electorate

Over the next two months or so the battle will be waged before the Indian masses, an amazingly politicized populace despite its mass illiteracy. The proverbial “largest democracy in the world” will exercise its mandate—despite persistent rumors likely coming from Singh’s people of a “postponement” of elections—in a vote which is sure to have great strategic impact on the international situation.

Exclusive Interview

New Wave’s Ganesh speaks about India

Ganesh Shukla, editor of the Indian newsweekly, New Wave, granted this interview to the Executive Intelligence Review. Although Mr. Shukla toured the United States—and now Europe—with an eyewitness report on the holocaust perpetrated in Kampuchea by the Chinese-puppet regime of Pol Pot, he focuses his attention here on the political situation in India.

Q: *With the downfall of the government of Moraji Desai and then his successor Charan Singh, India now faces national elections again, to be held in the end of December. How do you see the situation shaping up and what are the issues of the campaign?*

A: Now, after two and a half years of nongovernment by the Janata Party, the issue in India today that is being debated is whether India will have a stable national government or not. Right now, Mrs. (Indira) Gandhi has become the focal point of the national election campaign because the broad masses of the Indian people think that she alone is in a position to provide a stable and development-oriented government that will be able to restore the traditional Indian political system.

Q: *What do you mean by India’s traditional political system?*

A: This means that India returns to the policy of economic development, in a planned manner, returns to a policy of justice to the weaker sections of the populations, restores India’s foreign policy of independence, peace, and nonalignment, and takes its rightful role in the world again. This embodies the basic nationally accepted political system of India since Independence, as it was defined by Jawaharlal Nehru.

Q: *How do you see Mrs. Gandhi’s prospects for winning?*

A: The climate is very favorable for Mrs. Gandhi.

Q: *That’s quite a change since her defeat in 1977. What has happened since then?*

A: In 1977, Mrs. Gandhi was defeated not because of the emergency period that she imposed on the country, but due to the failure of the government to understand the World Bank game and to reject the policy framework that the World Bank put forward for India. This failure was reflected in the government’s giving second place to development strategy and giving first place to population control. The World Bank recipe was that