

Indian voters to choose between Gandhi, and no government at all

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

On Oct. 17, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi brought months of speculation to an end with the announcement that the ninth elections to India's lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, would be held on Nov. 22, 24, and 26. The announcement allowed the Election Commission sufficient time to issue notification to the parties and give the contestants the stipulated 31 days notice. Gandhi also said that all Lok Sabha seats will be contested on those three days, except for the 14 seats in the state of Assam, because its electoral rolls are not ready.

In all, 529 Lok Sabha seats are up for grabs. Assam, with 14 Lok Sabha seats, will go to the polls in the first or second week of January. A number of states, including Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, will also have legislative assembly elections along with the Lok Sabha elections.

The alternative facing Indian voters is between Gandhi's Congress-I party and no government at all, since the opposition consists of an unviable amalgam of dissimilar and contending political forces and constituencies. An opposition victory would increase the instability of the nation, thereby weakening India's sovereignty, its defenses, and its domestic programs.

It is widely acknowledged that Gandhi's announcement caught the opposition on the wrong foot. Apart from the fact that the tenure of the present government would expire by the end of the December in any case, for the last two years, as a corruption scandal involving the Bofors gun deal bubbled around the administration, the opposition leaders have been demanding the instant resignation of Rajiv Gandhi. One would hardly expect such demands to be made without some preparations for going to the polls at a short notice. This is, it must be said, illustrative of the elementary credibility problem that continues to dog the opposition.

In spite of the halting start, however, by Oct. 31, the last day for filing nominations, the opposition had managed to unify at the top level, a qualification of some significance as we shall see—leading to a two-party contest in most of the Hindi belt. The final list of candidates showed that the Janata Dal will be contesting 240 seats, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 205 seats, Janata Dal's other constituents of the National Front (not a party) 75 seats, and the Communists (of two kinds—CPI-M and CPI) 122 seats. In about 400 constituencies, electoral contests will be one-to-one between the Congress I and the opposition with electoral alliances.

The Janata Dal, a combine of the Janata Party and the

Lok Dal, minus their respective rumps, has found it extremely trying to keep both the Communists and the Bharatiya Janata Party within an electoral alliance (the BJP is the party of the Hindu zealots who proclaim the need for a *Hindu Rashtra*, a state that follows the precepts of Hindu religion.) Janata Dal leaders were goaded by the fact that the BJP has been gaining ground significantly in Madhya Pradesh (40 Lok Sabha seats), Rajasthan (25 seats), Gujarat (26 seats), and Maharashtra (48 seats). But even if electoral arithmetic made the seat adjustment with the BJP a priority, the Janata Dal could not afford to let the Communists ally with the Congress-I because of the Communists' decisive strength in West Bengal (40 seats) and Kerala (20 seats). Thus, it became evident from the outset that the Janata Dal would have to make as many seat adjustments as possible in the Hindi belt, because it has been historically proven that whoever wins big in the Hindi belt controls New Delhi. Support of the Communists in the east and south is more important in a negative way—to prevent their alliance with the Congress-I.

The ideological differences between the Communists and the Hindu zealots have been a subject of much dismay to the opposition leaders, who were eager to proclaim "opposition unity," and may yet sink the opposition effort. CPI-M leader and chief minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, and the veteran CPI-M leader from Kerala, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, have repeatedly made speeches targeting the BJP as enemy number one. Speaking from the other side of the mouth on other occasions, the same leaders proclaimed that the first priority was to oust the Congress-I and Rajiv Gandhi. Confusion was further enhanced when the Congress-I, buoyed by Basu and Namboodiripad's anti-BJP speeches, began to woo the Communists by raising their attack on the BJP one more decibel. The BJP, for its part, has been enjoying its place under the sun, and has not hesitated to make perfectly clear to the Janata Dal that the party is willing to discuss seat adjustments, but if such talks fail, are quite happy to go it alone.

A case in point is the NJP's stance on the Ram Janambhoomi issue. In Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, it is said that Lord Ram was born there. Hindu fanatics claim that the first Mughal emperor, Babar, in the 16th century had leveled Lord Ram's temple and built a mosque instead at that location. The dispute is an old one, although very little historic documentation exists to back up the Hindu claim. British rulers, by means of court orders, had to cool the issue out. But the

Statewise Lok Sabha seats: 1989

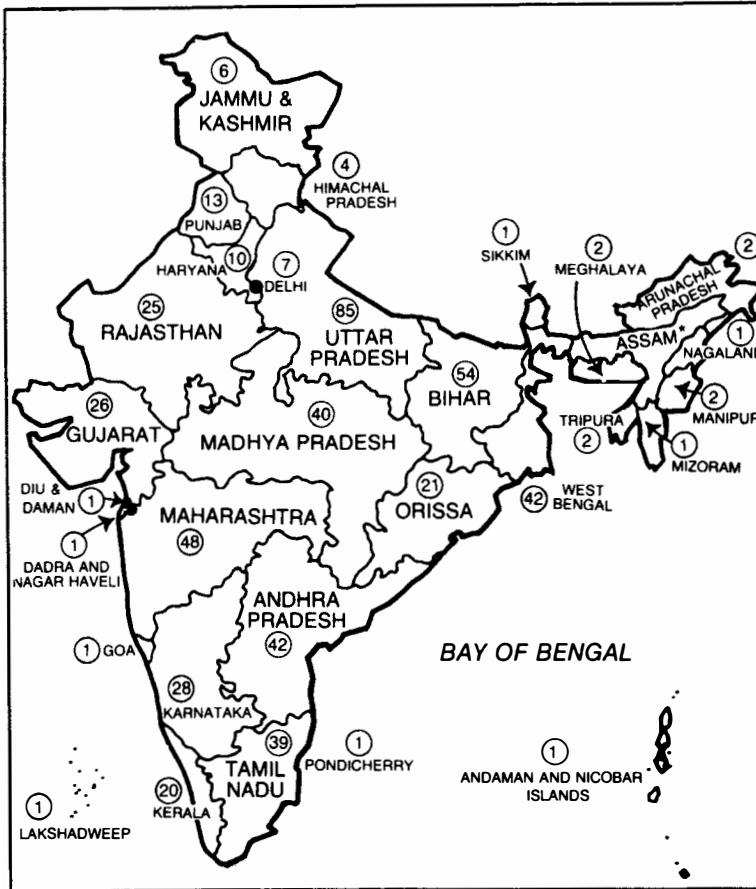


TABLE 1
How the Hindi Belt voted in previous elections

State	1967	1971	1977*	1980	1984
Haryana					
(C)	7	7	0	5	10
(O)	2	2	10	5	0
Uttar Pradesh					
(C)	47	73	0	51	83
(O)	38	12	85	34	2
Bihar					
(C)	34	39	0	30	48
(O)	19	19	54	24	6
Rajasthan					
(C)	10	14	1	18	25
(O)	13	9	24	7	0
Madhya Pradesh					
(C)	24	21	1	35	39
(O)	16	19	39	5	1

(C)=Congress/Congress-I

(O)=Non-Congress/Non-Congress-I

*In 1977, there was an electoral sweep by the Janata Party—a combine of Bharatiya Lok Dal, Jan Sangh, Congress (O), and the Socialist party.

*Assam has 14 Lok Sabha seats, but will not be going to the polls at this time due to unsettled conditions in the state.

subject was opened up in 1986. Hindu fanatics demanded that the mosque be demolished and Lord Ram's temple set up at the same location. BJP provided the political backing and began using the issue to organize its backers. The dispute, since 1986, has unleashed waves of communal violence throughout the Hindi belt, killing hundreds of people.

Although the Hindu zealots have since given up their demand to demolish the existing mosque, they are now in the process of setting up Lord Ram's temple less than 100 yards from the mosque. The BJP has used the issue as a political campaign and has thrown all the opposition leaders into total disarray.

Who is in the fray?

The ruling Congress-I party, which has controlled India's central government since 1947 for all but a brief three years, is perhaps the only national party in the country. Formed in 1885, Congress Party was in the forefront of the independence movement against the British colonialists. Since the

early years, the party has been able to attract individuals with differing ideologies into the party, because of its relaxed organizational structure and ability to respond to almost all segments of India's population. Since independence in 1947, the party has gone through a transformation and particularly so during the tenure of the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, India's third prime minister, when the party split twice and the mainstream came to be known as the Congress-I ("I" for Indira).

Yet some basic characteristics of the party remain the same as before. The party still appeals to the minority communities—be they religious or within the Hindu caste system, individuals with a progressive outlook and with a mild dose of populist ideology—and also the poor. The Congress-I organization is controlled from the top, but because of its massive size, many local barons and powerbrokers have continued to flourish as always. In some states such as West Bengal, the CPI-M has made it a minority party; in the south, regional parties, such as the Telegu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, DMK and ADMK in Tamil Nadu, and ideology-cen-

tered parties such as Janata Party in Karnataka, have pushed the Congress-I from the premier position. Still, the Congress-I remains a force to reckon with in all these states with a 25% vote bank which just does not seem to go away.

But it is in the Hindi belt where the strength and weakness of the Congress-I are exposed to the full. In 1977, the year Congress-I lost control of the seat of power, the party secured only two of the more than 200 seats it contested. In 1984, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi came riding on the back of the Hindi belt to a triumphant victory, the party captured 212 of the 221 seats. It is in this Hindu belt that the Congress-I has strength. While Orissa and the northeastern states have strong Congress-I bases, the CPI-M is expected to give it a bloody nose once again in West Bengal. Similarly, in the west, Maharashtra will vote overwhelmingly Congress-I. Gujarat, however, may not do the same. Gujarat is another state where the BJP has grown significantly in the last few years.

Congress-I will face its strongest opposition in the Dal—a party which, with the exception of the state of Karnataka, has focused its entire strength in the Hindi belt. The Janata Party, part of which joined the main segment of the Lok Dal to form the new Janata Dal, consists of socialists who left the Congress Party when they realized that the Congress Party would not allow any ideological group to dominate the party. In 1977, the party saw its best days; since then it has been all down hill. In 1984, Janata Party could muster only 10 Lok Sabha seats (4 of which came from Karnataka) and its top leaders such as Chandra Sekhkar and George Fernandes were soundly beaten in and outside of their turf. Its present incarnation as the Janata Dal is based on the support of the north Indian farmers and certain castes such as Rajputs and Thakurs, in addition to the worn-out socialists. While the party leaders swear allegiance to the socialistic form of economy, it is more than likely that what they mean is to enhance rural allocations through the existing planning process.

Lok Dal, the Janata Dal's other constituent, is a party of well-off farmers with a strong rural bias. The party lost all but two seats in 1984 and was heading toward oblivion after splitting into Lok Dal (B)—captured by a socialist, the late H.N. Bahunguna—and Lok Dal (A)—under an MIT-educated computer scientist, Ajit Singh, whose father, the late Choudhury Charan Singh, was an old Lok Dal patriarch and prime minister of India for a few weeks. But the rise of Devi Lal in Haryana following his sweeping victory in the state assembly elections in 1986 gave the party a second lease on life.

There is no doubt that Devi Lal, a rustic farmer with a militant posture and higher ambitions, and V.P. Singh, once the number-two man in the Gandhi cabinet, until he resigned from the party in 1987 protesting government corruption, have brought life back into the opposition. Their initiatives and spade work helped in the formation of the Janata Dal.

The third force is the BJP, which has grown significantly since 1984. Backed by a highly motivated and organized cadre formation, the RSS, the BJP has promoted Hindu supe-

riority in the Hindi belt, making minority communities uneasy. In recent years, it seems, it has been able to rouse the Hindi chauvinists, and if noise and din are indicators, BJP will do well in the coming elections.

BJP cadres and organizers, more than the leaders, are ideologues who believe and preach that India must be a nation whose socio-political setup reflects Hindu ideology. Using Hindu mythology effectively, the BJP tries to evoke the memory of the "superior" Hindus and their innate relationship with the glories of ancient India.

The economic issues at stake

The 1989 elections seem to be a hodge-podge, at least, to observers of the campaign. The opposition is vociferously complaining that the Rajiv Gandhi administration is the most corrupt that ever governed. In retaliation, the Congress-I is accusing the opposition of being soft toward communalism and terrorism, which are tearing the country apart. While the population neither condones corruption, nor likes anyone being soft on terrorism and communalism, people generally believe that what they are hearing is simply election rhetoric.

The economy is the real issue, but it is not as straightforward as one might think. The Rajiv Gandhi administration took a strong stand to enhance the growth rate of the country's economy. This has been achieved as the GNP growth rate has gone up significantly and so has the growth in the industrial sector. This was done by liberalizing import of various finished and intermediate products, modernizing some industries and deregulating and de-licensing a whole range of industries. However, due to an inadequate infrastructure, which has continued to remain inadequate, and an inadequate rise in productivity in the public sector and in the large agricultural sector, the country's economy is far from healthy, faster growth notwithstanding. India's foreign debt has gone up quickly and steadily; foreign exchange reserves have come down to 15 weeks of import costs; and the prices of some basic food items, in spite of the fact that the country experienced two bumper food crops in a row, have gone up significantly. More importantly, because of weak infrastructure facilities, wealth generated through the increased growth of the GNP continues to be accumulated among a few. The result: a widening gap between rich and poor.

Not unaware of this disparity, the government has made many gestures which have resulted in channeling more money into the rural sector, without necessarily creating productive assets. These measures perhaps more than any other single factor, have fed the inflationary flame. Two more populistic programs, the Jawahar Rozgar Yojana and the Nagar Palika Bill, which would have funneled a little more money to the rural sector, got bogged down by the intransigence of the opposition and did not make it through the parliament. In this confused milieu, both the Congress-I and the opposition are trying to exploit each other's failures. While the opposition is keen on blaming the Congress-I for

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

India's senior politicians in the election fray

Congress-I party

Rajiv Gandhi: Contesting his old seat in Amethi, a rural eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) constituency. He is going to win big.

P.V. Narasimha Rao: a political lightweight from Andhra Pradesh who has chosen to contest from Ramtek, eastern Maharashtra, the seat he won last time. Congress will do well in the state, and that is his hope.

Vasant Sathe: A strong politician from eastern Maharashtra. Sathe will win his old Wardha seat but with a reduced margin.

Balram Jhakar: A weak politician who has been further weakened by corruption charges. He is being challenged by the Haryana strongman, Devi Lal at Sikar. A toss-up.

Sheila Dixit: Belonging to an old Congress family, Dixit is contesting from the historic Kannauj in central UP. She won this seat last time and will win again.

Sheila Kaul: A member of the Nehru family, Kaul is contesting from Rae Bareilly, UP—a seat of Mrs. Gandhi and later, of Arun Nehru. She is a winner.

Rajesh Pilot: Contesting from Bharatpur where Congress-I is in trouble, Pilot's ability to put together a strong campaign may win him this difficult seat in Rajasthan.

Madhavrao Scindia: Scion of the Gwalior royal house, Scindia is a sure winner.

H.K.L. Bhaqat: The "uncrowned king" of Delhi

Congress, Bhagat is known for his capability to wield money and power. He is expected to win big from East Delhi.

Buta Singh: Another political lightweight who has left his traditional state of Punjab and is seeking votes in Jalore, Rajasthan. He may win because the opposition has failed to back the candidate they had chosen.

A.R. Antulay: The former chief minister of Maharashtra was in the wilderness for a while after he had left Congress-I. He is expected to win the South Bombay seat.

The opposition

V.P. Singh: The projected prime minister if the Opposition wins, Singh has left the Allahabad seat he had won in 1988 and has found a safe seat in Fatehpur, UP. Excuse: so that he can campaign for others and spend little time among his own constituency. He will win big.

Arun Nehru: A member of the Nehru family and a political lightweight. Left his seat to Sheila Kaul and went to the adjacent constituency of Bilhaur where Brahmin votes may see him through.

Chandra Sekhar: A perennial loser from Balia, eastern UP. He is now contesting from Balia as well as from another constituency in Bihar. A big win for opposition in the Hindi belt may carry him through.

George Fernandes: A member of the Socialist International, the evergreen George is a loser. He lost two elections between 1984 and 1989. He is contesting from Musaffarpur, Bihar, a traditional stronghold of the socialists. Still, no hope.

Devi Lal: The "Haryana supremo" is contesting from three seats: Sikhar in Rajasthan, Rohtak in his home state, Haryana and Ferozepur in Punjab. Devi Lal's venture into neighboring states is to establish himself as a regional leader and not simply a leader of a small state. Devi Lal will win at least one seat, if not more.

will receive the enthusiastic support of the volunteers of each party on the ground. In many cases, particularly in the Hindi belt, wherever the Janata Dal contests the Congress-I in a straight fight, a significant chunk of BJP votes may not go to the Janata Dal candidate, but to the Congress-I. Similarly, where the Janata Dal has given up the seat to the BJP to contest the Congress-I, a large section of the Janata Dal supporters, who strongly resent the Hindu zealots, will cast their votes in favor of the Congress-I candidate. This has happened before, and in the absence of a wave, will certainly happen again. It is quite likely that the Congress-I will gain from straight fights as much as the opposition.

So far, neither the opposition nor the Congress-I's campaign has touched any real chord among voters. People are

warily watching the show, not quite sure whom to vote for. In the absence of last-minute surprises—not to be ruled out—such indifference is going to help the Congress-I and make the task of the opposition that much more difficult. In the present Lok Sabha, the Congress-I has a majority of about 143 seats (415 of 542), which is more than the entire opposition has at present. The opposition will have to win these 143 seats, which means it will have to do better than doubling its score. Under the circumstances, the Congress-I can afford to lose as many as 130 seats and still come out with an absolute majority. Since the opposition has not clicked with its campaign, the task is uphill and time is too short. It is more than likely at this point that the Congress-I will enjoy another tenure of five years in Delhi.