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INDIA : GENERAL ELECTION

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SUMMARY

1. RAJIV GANDHI'S CONGRESS (I) PARTY LOOKS CERTAIN TO WIN THE FORTHCOMING GENERAL ELECTION. CONTRARY TO EARLIER EXPECTATIONS, HE MAY NOW DO SO BY A SUBSTANTIAL MAJORITY.

DETAIL

- INDIA WILL ELECT A NEW LOWER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT ON 24, 27 AND 28 DECEMBER. 510 SEATS ARE AT STAKE OUT OF A NORMAL TOTAL OF 544; ELECTIONS HAVE BEEN POSTPONED IN PUNJAB AND ASSAM ON SECURITY GROUNDS AND IN A FEW OTHER SPECIAL CASES, EG BHOPAL. THE RESULT SHOULD BE KNOWN ON 29 DECEMBER. THE NEW PARLIAMENT WILL MEET EARLY IN THE NEW YEAR.
- OVER 5,000 CANDIDATES ARE CONTESTING THE ELECTION. THE ONLY PARTY WHICH IS A SIGNIFICANT FORCE THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY IS CONGRESS (I). OTHER CANDIDATES COME FROM A WIDE VARIETY OF PARTIES, SOME STILL HEADED BY THE REMNANTS OF THE JANATA COALITION GOVERNMENT OF 1977-79, SOME PURELY REGIONAL, SOME CASTE OR RELIGION-BASED, SOME COMMUNIST. THERE ARE ALSO MANY INDEPENDANTS.
- THERE IS REALLY ONLY ONE ISSUE BEFORE THE ELECTORATE: TO CONFIRM RAJIV GANDHI AS PRIME MINISTER IN SUCCESSION TO HIS MOTHER, OR TO REJECT HIS PARTY FOR ITS MANY FAILINGS UNDER HER STEWARDSHIP. IN EFFECT IT IS MRS GANDHI'S LAST ELECTION, FOUGHT FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE.
- NO-ONE DOUBTS THAT CONGRESS (I) WILL DO BETTER BECAUSE OF MRS GANDHI'S DEATH. UNTIL 31 OCTOBER, THE MOST EFFECTIVE LINE OF ATTACK FOR THE MAIN OPPOSITION PARTIES WAS TO CRITICIZE HER CORRUPT, OVER-CENTRALISED AND INCREASINGLY AUTOCRATIC SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT. THERE WAS WIDESPREAD FEELING THAT IT WAS TIME FOR A CHANGE. RAJIV GANDHI WILL NOW BENEFIT FROM THAT FEELING, AS WELL AS FROM THE NEED FOR CONTINUITY FELT BY THOSE WHO WERE STILL LOYAL TO HIS MOTHER. YOUNG AND STILL NEW TO POLITICS, HE IS NOT HAUNTED BY ENEMIES OR ILL REPUTE FROM THE PAST: AND HE OFFERS THE PROSPECT OF A NEW EMPHASIS ON MODERNITY, EFFICIENCY AND HONESTY. DESPITE UNCERTAINTIES IN SOME QUARTERS, EG THE SIKHS, HE HAS ALSO STEPPED INTO MRS GANDHI'S SHOES AS THE LEADER THOUGHT MOST CAPABLE OF DEFENDING THE UNITY AND INTEGRITY OF THE COUNTRY AGAINST FORCES THREATENING TO DESTABILIZE IT FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

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6. THE OPPOSITION, EVEN MORE DISUNITED THAN FOR SEVERAL ELECTIONS PAST, CAN OFFER LITTLE APPEAL. ITS MAIN LEADERS ARE STILL THOSE WHO FAILED ABYSMALLY IN THE JANATA COALITION OF 1977-79. THEIR INABILITY TO CONCLUDE ANY ELECTORAL PACTS EXCEPT LOCALLY IS REMINISCENT OF THEIR CONSTANT WRANGLING THEN. THE OPPOSITION PARTIES MAY WIN SOME SEATS FROM CONGRESS (I) BY PLAYING ON LOCAL ISSUES AND REGIONAL LOYALTIES. BUT ON THE NATIONAL LEVEL THE OPPOSITION HAS FAILED TO PROJECT COHERENT POLICIES OR A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP.

7. BEFORE MRS GANDHI DIED SHE LOOKED LIKE WINNING MORE SEATS THAN ANY OTHER PARTY AND REMAINING PRIME MINISTER BUT PROBABLY HAVING TO RELY ON ALLIES OR CONVERTS FOR HER PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY. WHEN THE OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN BEGAN IN MID-NOVEMBER THE SYMPATHY WAVE WAS EXPECTED TO SECURE RAJIV GANDHI AN ABSOLUTE MAJORITY BUT STILL NOT MORE THAN 300 SEATS, IE 10 PER-CENT OR SO LESS THAN THE PARTY WON IN 1980. BY EARLY DECEMBER THERE WERE FEARS THAT THE SYMPATHY WAVE HAD SPENT ITS FORCE: AND THAT HE FACED MORE SERIOUS LOSSES COMPARED WITH 1980, PARTICULARLY IN THE SOUTH. TODAY, BY CONTRAST, THERE IS A FEELING THAT IT IS BEING REPLACED BY A RAJIV WAVE, IE A POSITIVE SENSE OF CONFIDENCE THAT HE IS THE BEST LEADER IN SIGHT: AND THE LATEST POLLS SUGGEST THAT THE VICTORY MAY ACTUALLY BE 10 PER-CENT OR SO LARGER THAN IN 1980. THAT WOULD GIVE THE PARTY AROUND 350 SEATS AND WELL OVER 2/3 OF THE TOTAL.

8. INDIA IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S GENUINE DEMOCRACIES. BUT SHE IS FAR LARGER, MORE VARIED AND MORE BACKWARD THAN THE OTHERS. SO NO POLLS ARE RELIABLE AND WE ARE ALL GUESSING IN THE DARK. THE VOTERS' TRUE MOOD CAN ONLY BE GAUGED BY THE RESULTS. BUT MY OWN HUNCH, WHICH MANY SHARE, IS THAT RAJIV GANDHI IS SURE OF AN OVERALL MAJORITY AND THAT HE COULD EVEN END UP WITH A LANDSLIDE.

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PLANNING STAFF

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SIR W HARDING

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