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The Indian Election: Prospects and Implications



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An Intelligence Assessment

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*NESA 84-10315
December 1984*

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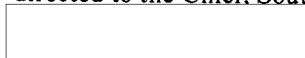
An Intelligence Assessment

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directed to the Chief, South Asia Division, NESA, on



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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 26 November 1984
was used in this report.*

Rajiv Gandhi's succession to the prime-ministership after his mother's assassination in late October will make India's parliamentary election a referendum on dynastic continuity and on Rajiv's leadership. Rajiv's initial conduct in office probably has improved his party's electoral prospects, and Indira's death has deprived the opposition of its one common goal—her defeat.

Opposition disunity probably will allow the Congress Party, which controls over two-thirds of the lower house of Parliament, to return to power with a reduced majority in the election to be held on 24 and 27 December. Rajiv will benefit from a sympathy vote among Hindus in the populous north and perhaps the west. Under his leadership, the Congress Party may regain some of the ground lost to regional parties in the south since the last national election. The postponement of voting in violence-ridden Punjab and Assam will not significantly affect the results of the election but could spark protests.

Even so, Rajiv's liabilities could still cost him a parliamentary majority. Congress-led state governments have performed so poorly that some voters—breaking with tradition—may reject it on these grounds, rather than judging it on its national image. The party's record in the states has contributed to the loss of support among Sikhs, Muslims, and untouchables.

With only a plurality, Rajiv would have to form a government in coalition with opposition parties—the regional All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK) Party and perhaps India's two major Communist parties. A slim majority or a plurality would imperil Rajiv's position in his own party and stymie the resolution of serious domestic issues, damaging political stability.

Only in the unlikely event that hurriedly reached electoral agreements among opposition parties endure until the election could an opposition coalition displace the Congress Party. An opposition victory probably would set off a struggle among the disparate parties over the composition of the government. The resultant government would be highly unstable.

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Major foreign policy shifts are unlikely under any Indian administration, but the election will have several implications for the United States. Rajiv favors warmer ties with the United States but—like any Indian leader—will be constrained by enduring differences over US policy in South Asia and India's reliance on the Soviets for trade, arms supplies, and diplomatic support. A coalition that included Communist parties would tilt toward Moscow and away from Washington. No administration is likely in the near term to make basic changes in India's recent policy toward Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Bangladesh.



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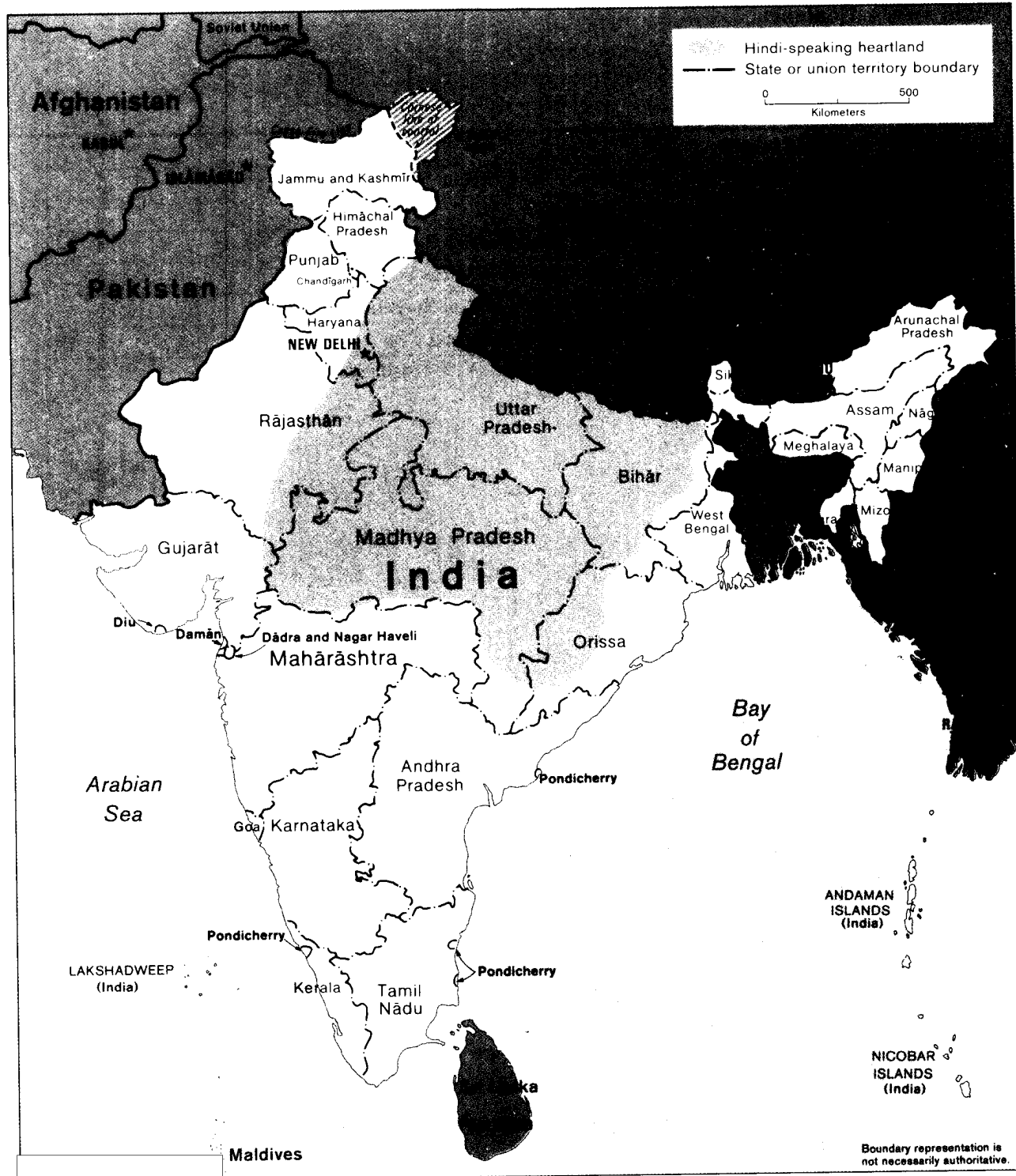
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**The Indian Election:
Prospects
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Rajiv Gandhi's installation as head of the Congress Party following his mother's assassination in our view has enhanced the party's prospects in the December national election. The party's hold on power for 35 of the past 37 years owes as much to opposition fragmentation as to the Congress's popularity. We believe that Indira Gandhi's death has stalled growing opposition unity by depriving the fractious opposition parties of the one goal they shared—her defeat. Many political observers expect the Congress Party to benefit significantly from sympathy voting for Rajiv by Hindus in the populous northern "Hindi belt" and possibly Maharashtra—certainly a factor in his decision to call elections immediately.

We judge that Rajiv's first steps as Prime Minister have established his credibility as a national leader and won him initial support from most of his party. His resolute actions and dignified comportment have dispelled much of the skepticism with which the Indian public greeted the installation of a novice with three years' political experience, according to the Indian press. In his early weeks of leadership, Rajiv restored order following his mother's death and moved judiciously to place blame for the assassination by appointing an investigatory commission and dismissing senior intelligence officials.

Rajiv also countered his reputation for indecisiveness and boldly asserted his prerogative as head of India's ruling party by calling an immediate election. He postponed voting in the violence-prone states of Punjab and Assam—a constitutionally permissible move that will still allow a government to be formed on the basis of election results from other states. When voting takes place in the two states, their combined total of 27 seats is unlikely to alter the parliamentary balance of power.

In our view, Rajiv so far has successfully balanced pragmatic concessions to his party's supporters against the need to establish his reputation as a fair and honest leader. For example, he has allowed his aides to highlight his reputation for personal probity



Rajiv Gandhi, son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, grandson of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

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in the election campaign. At the same time, press reports indicate that he has quietly moved to placate old-line Congress Party politicians by finding them positions on a Congress Party committee. Several of these politicians had been sidelined by his mother over the past two years for blatant corruption that threatened the party's image.

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**The Congress Party
on the Eve of the Election:
Rajiv's Liabilities**

We believe Rajiv has moved swiftly to capitalize on the circumstances of his succession because he is aware that organizational decay in the Congress Party would otherwise hurt his electoral prospects. Over the past few years, Indira Gandhi virtually destroyed the party's vital grassroots organizations. To ensure that its governing bodies would not again become power bases for political rivals—as they did in the 1960s—she eschewed party elections. She instead packed the organization at all levels with appointees who owed their status solely to her favor and challenged neither her policies nor her son's succession, according to Indian commentators.

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The Dominant Congress Party—A Profile

Dominance

With an estimated membership of 15 million, the Congress Party remains the largest, strongest, and most durable political organization in India, despite its difficulties in recent years. The party has dominated Indian politics since it helped achieve independence from the United Kingdom in 1947, shaping administrative patterns and governmental norms. []

Support Base

The Congress(I) could until recently count on traditional support inherited from the All-India Congress Party among untouchables, Muslims, many Sikhs, the urban poor, and landless labor. Voters of the elite Brahmin caste also tended to support the party. In elections since 1980, however, these groups have demonstrated a willingness to consider other alternatives. []

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Genesis

The Congress Party—known as the Congress(I) for “Indira”—is the result of three successive splits in the All-India Congress Party founded 100 years ago. After each split, Indira Gandhi successfully consolidated her strength within her segment of the party and eventually defeated or co-opted her opponents. []

The Congress Party's Electoral Record

The party has held power for all but two years since independence, although it has never secured more than 48 percent of the popular vote or less than 34 percent of it. The party owes its advantage to India's single-member constituency system and the fragmentation of the opposition. Congress candidates have been able to capture seats with only a plurality of constituency votes. As a result, the party returned to power in 1980 with two-thirds of the seats in Parliament but only 43 percent of the popular vote—a gain of only 8.2 percentage points from 1977, when it lost power to a coalition of opposition parties. []

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Ideology

Although formally committed to “democratic socialism,” a secular state, and a nonaligned foreign policy, the Congress(I)—like the All-India Congress Party before it—has garnered support from a range of religious, caste, and economic groups by avoiding a clear-cut ideological position. Its pragmatic policies—hitherto formulated by Indira Gandhi with little internal party debate—are often described as “centrist.” []

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Organizational decay in the Congress Party has resulted in ineffectual state governments—another serious liability for Rajiv. Indira Gandhi's practice of appointing state chief ministers with no independent popular base and then deposing those who lost her trust has fueled factional divisions in the party and corruption in the government. The perceived weakness of the state governments in turn has encouraged dissidence and strengthened the opposition. []

In our analysis, Rajiv and the Congress Party no longer can count on support from Muslims, Sikhs, and untouchables, largely because these groups have been alienated by the failure of inept Congress-led state governments to protect them. In addition, Indira Gandhi's efforts over the past two years to woo Hindu voters led many Indians to view New Delhi's crack-down against Sikh dissidents in Punjab last June as part of a tougher line against activist religious minorities. []

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[] In most states, the Congress Party faces a single strong opposition party capable of challenging its preeminence and can no longer expect to win state elections solely as a result of a divided opposition. These developments caused the Congress Party's humiliating defeat last year in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh—longtime party strongholds. []

Rajiv himself may now be identified with his mother's pro-Hindu image. Sikh leaders and some Hindus have publicly charged the Congress Party youth organization—closely associated with Rajiv—with inciting

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Charan Singh, founder of the Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party, served briefly as Prime Minister of the Janata government that ruled from 1977 to 1979.



A. B. Vajpayee, who heads the Bharatiya Janata Party, served as Foreign Minister under the 1977-79 Janata government.

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Hindu reprisals against Sikhs for Indira's death. His promise to investigate the violence is not likely to convince minorities of his commitment to their welfare. Rajiv probably has already written off Sikh votes in the coming election, but the loss of many Muslim votes could deprive the party of victories in closely contested constituencies.

disparate parties have the potential to displace Congress with a coalition government. Even without unity, the opposition could deny the Congress Party a majority and force it to rely on support from other parties to form a national government.

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We believe Rajiv's electoral prospects will be hurt if voters—breaking with tradition—judge his party by its performance in the states rather than on the basis of his reputation and continuation of the Nehru dynasty. US scholars have noted that since 1971, when Indira Gandhi separated national from state assembly elections, voters have supported Congress Party candidates for Parliament on the strength of the party's proven national leadership. Until 1980, the Congress Party image was powerful enough to help even unknown candidates in state elections. Since then, Indian voters have become more critical, voting the party out of power in states where it has failed to provide good government. Some Indian and US observers believe the increasingly sophisticated electorate may for the first time support or reject parliamentary candidates on the basis of their parties' performance in the states—a possibility we cannot exclude, especially in the south.

Rajiv's abrupt announcement of elections has caught opposition leaders unprepared, as he probably hoped it would. A major realignment of opposition parties is still under way. Opposition leaders suddenly faced an immediate deadline either to work out durable electoral alliances that had eluded them for months or else permit the Congress Party once again to win by default.

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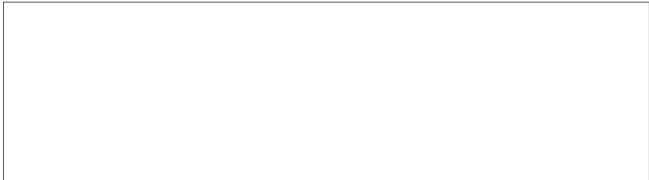
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We believe the realignment of opposition parties since politician Charan Singh's formation in late October of a new party—the Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party (DMKP)—has dimmed prospects for successful alliances. By drawing on elements of both non-Communist opposition alliances and excluding the best organized opposition party—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—the DMKP has ruptured opposition efforts to reach electoral agreements. Charan Singh has declared his willingness to negotiate with all opposition parties—including the Communists—but Rajiv's call for an election in December left him little time.

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The Opposition: Scrambling To Unite

The opposition threat to Rajiv rests on the dwindling possibility that local and state opposition leaders will maintain agreements to pool their support until the election. No opposition party has emerged as a credible alternative to the Congress Party at the national level, but, in alliance, the fragmented and regionally



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The Indian Opposition

**Parties Merged in Charan Singh's
Dalit Mazdoor Kisan Party**
Lok Dal/Charan Singh

Greatest strength in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana among small landowners and farmers. Some strong areas in Bihar, Orissa.

Janata Party/Subramaniam Swamy faction

Principally among educated urban voters in Hindi-speaking belt, with pockets of support in Karnataka (whose government the Janata Party controls), Maharashtra, Bihar, and Gujarat.

Democratic Socialist Party/H. N. Bahuguna

Support chiefly confined to pockets of Uttar Pradesh, where Bahuguna was chief minister.

Congress(S)/Sharad Pawar

Support only in Maharashtra.

**Other National Non-Communist
Opposition Parties**

Bharatiya Janata Party/A. B. Vajpayee

Support concentrated among landowners, traders, and civil servants in Hindi-belt states—especially Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

Janata Party/Chandra Shekhar faction

Support base same as that of S. Swamy faction.

Rashtriya Sanjay Manch/Maneka Gandhi

Limited support in Uttar Pradesh.

Major Regional Parties

Telegu Desam/N. T. Rama Rao

Andhra Pradesh, where it controls state government.

ADMK/M. G. Ramachandran

Tamil Nadu, where it controls state government. Supported by a broad cross section of populace, excluding Brahmins.

DMK/M. Karunanidhi

Tamil Nadu.

National Conference/G. M. Shah (rival faction leader: Farooq Abdullah)

Chiefly among Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir, where it holds power.

Akali Dal/H. Longowal

Punjab, among Sikhs.

Communist Parties

Communist Party of India/C. Rajeshwar Rao

Scattered support nationally.

Communist Party of India/Marxist/E. M. S. Namboodiripad

Support concentrated in West Bengal, where it rules, and in Kerala. Scattered support nationally.

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C. Rajeshwar Rao heads the Communist Party of India, which has formal ties to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. [redacted]



N. T. Rama Rao, recently reinstated as chief minister of Andhra Pradesh state, heads the Telegu Desam Party but aspires to national leadership. [redacted]

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The abiding animosity between the Communist parties and the BJP is a further obstacle to broad cooperation among opposition parties. [redacted] the Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI/M)—whose stronghold is the state of West Bengal—and the Communist Party of India (CPI) have agreed to avoid direct electoral agreements with the BJP. Although the Communists are optimistic that the opposition parties will successfully pool their votes in many constituencies, they expect Rajiv Gandhi to win on the strength of the sympathy vote. [redacted]

Rajiv's Electoral Balance
Sheet: Consolidating Support

We believe that Rajiv is likely to fare well in the northern Hindi belt states, retain some seats in the west, and gain support from a major regional party to secure a parliamentary majority. According to press reports, Rajiv's campaign itinerary gives priority to the populous states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the north, Maharashtra in the west, and Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka in the south—acknowledged swing states in any election. The first three—all Congress ruled—account for 188 of the 542 seats in Parliament. Most Indian observers have calculated that the Congress Party will need at a minimum to retain most of its seats in these three states and also secure help from at least one opposition party—most likely, the ADMK Party that governs Tamil Nadu. [redacted]

We judge that the Congress Party will benefit from current trends in the south if they persist. According to the Indian press, Andhra Pradesh remains firmly in

the hands of the regional Telegu Desam Party, but Karnataka—now governed by the Janata Party in coalition with other opposition parties—could return to the Congress Party fold. A decision by Karnataka's principal farmers' union to field its own candidates would, if implemented, cut into support for the Janata Party and improve the odds for the Congress Party. [redacted]

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In our judgment, Rajiv also can be confident of finding coalition partners in case his party falls short of a majority. In Tamil Nadu, deputies of the ailing ADMK Party leader—a longtime ally of Indira Gandhi—have decided to continue his policy of supporting Congress Party candidates. [redacted]

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A Congress Party Win:
Implications for Political Stability

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In our view, opposition disunity is likely to permit the Congress Party to return to power, probably with a reduced majority. The magnitude of Rajiv Gandhi's win will determine his ability to secure his own position in the Congress Party against possible challenges. In turn, the confidence and parliamentary strength of the government will decide whether it can take the political risks to address problems that threaten India's near-term political stability. With only a bare majority, Rajiv would appear to yield

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M. G. Ramachandran, a former movie star, nominally still heads the ADMK Party and is Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, although his deputies have wielded the authority since "MGR" became ill several months ago. [redacted]

power out of weakness if he made concessions to political opponents. A fragile base also might spark increased separatist or communal strife as these groups tested what they would view as a weakened national government. [redacted]

We believe Sikh unrest in Punjab and Hindu-Sikh tensions in the military—the most urgent problems facing Rajiv after the election—will severely tax his political resources. If, as we judge possible, militant Sikhs launch a campaign of violence during the election, Rajiv's difficulties will multiply. Concessions to the Sikhs are likely to offend his party's conservative Hindu constituents and could even lose him some support in Parliament—risks he could ill afford without a firm footing in his party. Yet if New Delhi fails to conciliate moderate Sikhs with an acceptable political settlement, the threat of renewed Hindu-Sikh conflict and more violence by Sikh dissidents probably will force the reluctant Army to remain in indefinite control of Punjab. Associated sectarian tensions and morale problems in the military could ultimately affect combat readiness. [redacted]

In our view, initiation of long overdue reforms in the Congress Party and reexamination of the national government's relationship to state governments also will entail major political risks. Last year, Rajiv advocated party elections to replace appointed party officials as soon as possible, but giving up his mother's practice of appointing state party and government officials will deprive him of a major source of political leverage. Rajiv also will be called on to meet or defuse demands from regional groups for greater devolution of authority to the states. We believe that without

such changes the Congress Party and the institutions of state government will continue to disintegrate. [redacted]

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In our judgment, if the Congress Party secures only a bare majority or a plurality, Rajiv will be vulnerable to challenges from within the party, and the party to fragmentation. [redacted]

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[redacted]

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[redacted] In our view, a poor Congress Party showing in the election could set off a chain of defections from the party and perhaps spark bids to replace Rajiv as its leader. Even before the election, a number of Congress members of Parliament have threatened to run as independents against the candidates Rajiv selected in their stead. [redacted]

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We judge that if Rajiv returns to power at the head of a coalition government—a possibility we believe less likely—his ability to make the tough decisions required to solve domestic problems will be drastically reduced. The need to secure agreement from coalition partners would reduce his policy flexibility and undercut his authority. Even the friendly ADMK probably would expect special favors for its constituents in Tamil Nadu, but we believe the Communist parties would exact a higher price. The Communists might, for example, demand rapid social reforms that would antagonize the Congress Party's conservative supporters, bringing government and party into conflict. [redacted]

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**Opposition Coalition:
Implications for Political Stability**

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An electoral alliance of opposition parties broad enough to win a majority in the election in our view could scarcely govern. The allied parties—which could range from Communists to conservatives associated with the BJP—probably would have serious difficulties agreeing on a Cabinet and Prime Minister and setting priorities. Personal rivalries among the disparate opposition leaders also would make a coalition vulnerable to defections that could leave it short of the majority it needs to govern and ensure the collapse of the government—as occurred in 1979. [redacted]

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The government's expected difficulties in making controversial decisions probably would encourage civil disorder. At the same time, a coalition that included parties representing single states or regions probably would favor devolution of authority to the states, particularly for setting national planning goals and priorities. [redacted]

Implications of the Election for India's Regional Ties

We judge that, regardless of the outcome of the election, New Delhi will make few changes in its policy toward its neighbors in the near term. Indira Gandhi's stances toward Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, although heavyhanded, reflected enduring Indian concerns and interests in South Asia. Any Indian government will view as threats to India's security and regional dominance such developments as Pakistan's growing ability to inflict damage on India and ethnic violence in Sri Lanka. New Delhi probably will also continue to assert India's right to counter such threats. [redacted]

We believe that New Delhi's suspicion of Pakistani involvement with Sikh dissidents, together with Indian concerns over Islamabad's acquisition of sophisticated US weapons, will continue to sour relations between the two countries. Public opinion polls suggest that the popular Indian image of Pakistan has worsened significantly since 1983—a factor that partly reflects New Delhi's pronouncements on Islamabad but could in turn discourage efforts by any government to ease bilateral tensions. [redacted]

Rajiv's hard line toward Islamabad before the election—including renewed charges of Pakistani involvement with Sikh dissidents—probably signals that a Congress Party government would not be inclined to improve relations with Islamabad in the near term. [redacted]

[redacted] Rajiv will consider better ties only if President Zia promises to end assistance to Sikh dissidents and releases Sikh hijackers to Indian custody or tries them in Pakistan—developments we consider unlikely. Several opposition leaders have indicated their willingness to ease tensions with Pakistan, but we believe that domestic and strategic concerns would limit their actions. [redacted]

[redacted]

We believe any government in New Delhi probably will hesitate to reverse policies that have helped ensure quiescence among volatile groups at home. To deflect pressure from Indian Tamils to aid Tamils in Sri Lanka, New Delhi is likely to continue pressing the Sinhalese-dominated government of Sri Lanka for a political settlement, while turning a blind eye to covert aid by Indian Tamils to their Sri Lankan brethren. [redacted]

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Likewise, any Indian government is likely to continue to build a wall along the border with Bangladesh to keep out illegal immigrants, despite Dacca's protests. The move in our view is intended to placate predominantly Hindu native Assamese, who believe they are disadvantaged politically and economically by competition from the largely Muslim immigrants. Reversal of Indira Gandhi's decision to seal the border would risk setting off renewed violence in Assam [redacted]

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Implications of the Election for Relations With Washington and Moscow

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We judge that New Delhi's ties with the United States and the Soviet Union will not change dramatically under any likely government, although important shifts in tone may occur. Indian concerns over US arms sales to Pakistan, rumored attempts by Washington to secure military bases in neighboring countries, and ties between China and the United States probably will continue to limit Indo-US relations. These factors, added to the importance of Soviet arms and technology to India's arms modernization program and the widespread Indian view that Moscow is a uniquely reliable friend, are likely to sustain New Delhi's special relationship with Moscow. [redacted]

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If the Congress Party returns to power, we believe Rajiv Gandhi's favorable disposition to the United States will warm the chilly relations he inherited from his mother, but within limits. [redacted]

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[redacted] Rajiv's Westernized outlook and approval of private enterprise are likely to improve the tone of New Delhi's relationship with Washington. [redacted]

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Even so, we expect Rajiv to look to the United States for initial concessions as a precondition for substantially improving relations. [redacted]

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[redacted] he favors better ties with the United States, but only if Washington avoids increased military aid to Islamabad. [redacted]

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[redacted] New Delhi's unhappiness over alleged support from Sikhs resident in the United States for Sikh extremists in India also is likely to remain an irritant in Indo-US relations. [redacted]

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In our view, Moscow has secured no special benefit from its public endorsement during the past year, first of Indira Gandhi's leadership, and then of Rajiv's. [redacted]

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[redacted] In our judgment, New Delhi would significantly increase its tilt toward Moscow in the near term only if Rajiv were compelled to form a coalition government with the help of the CPI. [redacted]

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Appendix

Indian Parliamentary Elections

Purpose

To elect representatives to the lower house (Lok Sabha, or "people's assembly") of India's Parliament in New Delhi. For the purpose of Lok Sabha representation, the 22 states are divided into single-member constituencies. Seats are allocated to the states in proportion to their population. Constituency boundaries are adjusted as needed after each national census.

Lok Sabha Seats

The Constitution allows for the election of up to 525 members from the states, with up to 20 more to be elected or appointed to represent union territories. The Lok Sabha currently has 542 members. Certain constituencies can be represented only by a member of designated disadvantaged castes and tribes. The state of Uttar Pradesh has the largest number of "reserved" constituencies, numbering 18. The President also may appoint members to represent the Anglo-Indian minority. Lok Sabha members must be at least 25 years old.

Timing

Although the usual term for the Lok Sabha is five years, the President may dissolve it before the end of its term and hold new elections. He may do so if he judges the composition of the Lok Sabha is not conducive to stable government—for example, in case of a stalemate in a governing coalition. In practice, the Prime Minister has decided the timing of elections. If a state of emergency has been declared, the term of the Lok Sabha may be extended up to one year at a time and up to six months after the state of emergency ends. Byelections to fill empty Lok Sabha seats may be held at any time within the five-year term.

By contrast, the upper house of Parliament (or Rajya Sabha) is a continuous body not subject to dissolution. One-third of the 244 members end their term every two years.

General Election Procedure

The Constitution defines procedures for both national and state elections, with details provided in various legislative acts. It also provides for the Election Commission to supervise and conduct elections.

The Election Commission

The Constitution created a permanent and autonomous Election Commission to conduct elections to Parliament, the state legislatures, and the offices of President and Vice President. The Commission maintains electoral rolls and revises them regularly. It appoints tribunals to resolve disputes arising in connection with any election and rules on the qualifications of legislators, the composition and duration of legislatures, and the reservation of seats for specified disadvantaged caste and tribal groups.

Voter Qualifications

Any Indian citizen at least 21 years old and not disqualified by unsoundness of mind or criminal acts is eligible to vote. There are no literacy or property requirements.

Size of Electorate

An estimated 380 million persons will be eligible to vote in the 1984 election.

Turnout

Voter turnout varies greatly by state. Nationally, the turnout in 1971 was 55.3 percent of the electorate; in 1977, 60.5 percent; and in 1980, 57 percent. Turnout has gradually increased with the establishment of more polling booths and the reduction of travel time. A large turnout generally has not favored the Congress Party.

Ballots

The ballots used in India's 542 single-member parliamentary constituencies differ in the number of candidates listed and the languages used, but everywhere

they show the candidates' names and party symbols. Election symbols are allocated by the Election Commission in New Delhi.

How Citizens Vote

Voting takes place in polling booths placed so that voters will have to walk no more than 5 kilometers. To prevent undue influence on voters, candidates are forbidden to provide voters with transportation to the polls and are permitted at most one representative at each polling place.

The voter signs or places his thumb impression in indelible ink on the stub of the ballot. The ballot is separated from the stub and given to the voter, who goes behind a curtain to mark it with an inked rubber stamp supplied by the polling officer. The voter then folds the ballot and places it in the ballot box in the presence of polling officers.

Who Wins

In each constituency the party whose candidate garners the largest number of votes wins the seat.

Nationally, the party holding the majority of parliamentary seats forms the national government. If no party wins a majority, the party with the largest number of seats may form a coalition government with the support—and seats—of one or more other parties.



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