



The 65 million question

Now Mrs Gandhi has to show that she knows how to use her overwhelming victory to get India's economy moving

It is an awesome thing when 65 million people are heard speaking with one voice. And it is all the more remarkable when this happens in a country where the voices normally speak in 14 different languages in settings as diverse as the glass and steel towers of Bombay and the manure-caked huts of half a million villages. In fact, Mrs Gandhi got her two-thirds majority in India's lower house with only 44 per cent of the total vote. But that is more votes than anyone has ever polled in a free election before, even in India. And since, parliamentary technicalities apart, the vote was for Mrs Gandhi herself, it must be seen as a sweeping personal mandate.

No politician could ask for more. But Mrs Gandhi got it in the form of the collapse of her opponents nearly everywhere. This is the big advantage she has over her neighbour, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Pakistan, who also rolled up a huge majority in his eastern part of the country but who faces an intractable minority leader in the west, Mr Bhutto. The troubles of Pakistan (see page 37), and those of Mrs Bandaranaike's coalition government in Ceylon, should give pause to those democrats whose reflex response is to lament Mrs Gandhi's sweep and the eclipse of India's opposition. There are always reasons to fear that great power will be abused. Certainly Mrs Gandhi's recent political record gives no grounds for complacency. But for the moment, anyway, the scale of her victory should be no cause to mourn.

The opposition which has fallen under the new Congress juggernaut is hardly a loss to Indian democracy. There was never any prospect that the four parties which joined in a pre-election alliance would be able to perform the valuable services of a loyal opposition, much less an alternative government. They were too divided ideologically to provide a coherent challenge on policy; in greater number, they would only have been better equipped to obstruct and delay. The four parties which dominate the opposition now—the Marxists, the pro-Moscow communists, the Tamil nationalists of the DMK and the Hindu nationalists of the Jana Sangh—are even less likely to agree on anything at all. Some articulate individuals like the Swatantra leader, Mr Minoo Masani, will be missed in the new parliament. But maybe other persuasive and principled debaters will emerge from the 165 opposition members who remain in the 521-man house, as well as from among the heterogeneous ranks of Mrs Gandhi's own party. And there are already rumours of mergers and reshuffles which might yet produce a more viable rival grouping than the current fractionalised ragbag.

With more than two-thirds of the lower house under her direct command, Mrs Gandhi will have free rein over ordinary legislation. The only parliamentary opposi-

tion that can still cause her difficulty is in the upper house, where her new Congress party holds just over a third of the seats. The upper house can stop the ruling party from having its way on constitutional amendments, for which a two-thirds majority of voting members of both houses is required. So, although Indian observers expect it to tack with the Gandhi wind, it may provide one check on the prime minister's power.

The other potential source of opposition to Mrs Gandhi is in the six states which are still ruled by non-Gandhi coalitions. But here too the bandwagon is already having its effect. There have been ministerial resignations in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar which could well lead to the collapse of their shaky governments and their replacement by more stable coalitions led by the new Congress party. The real problem-state is still West Bengal. West Bengal, predictably enough, will be Mrs Gandhi's first major headache and a test of her decisiveness. She faces a Hobson's choice between unpalatable alternatives: allowing the Marxists, as the largest state party, to have another opportunity to misgovern the state; and attempting to govern it herself by reimposing president's rule. There is one other outside possibility: that if the Marxists cannot pull together enough support for a working majority, Mrs Gandhi's Congress party will manage to rope all Bengal's splinters and strays into a coalition. At the moment it looks as if all attempts at cabinet-making are bound to fail. As soon as this becomes inevitable, then Mrs Gandhi must move swiftly to impose president's rule and to back her decision with armed force if necessary.

The nearly unimpeded power which Mrs Gandhi secured this month should help to ensure that the West Bengal syndrome will not be repeated elsewhere. Once some kind of authority is installed in Calcutta, the prime minister will be able to turn to that endless catalogue of woes that is India's. The election won her time: for several years, at least, she will be able to devote herself to the job of running the country without too much distraction from her tasks as politician-in-chief. But time is not on her side in another sense. Prices, unemployment and the losses of state industry are rising every day, and so are the expectations of the millions of Indians who voted for Mrs Gandhi as a national saviour. Mrs Gandhi's victory may look like those won by her father in the 1950s. But the mood of India is much changed. People are too impatient now to tolerate the lumbering, indecisive, compromising style of politics characteristic of Mr Nehru's Congress. They want results, and they have given Mrs Gandhi the power to produce them. Above all, she has to produce an effective programme of land reform and give Indian industry a chance to grow faster. The opportunity may never come again.

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