

From New Delhi by Paul Zykofsky

Mrs. Gandhi housecleans

Her Congress Party is being put into shape for 1985, while she moves to heal social divisions.

Day after day, for the last three weeks, New Delhi has been rife with rumors and stories that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi will order mid-term general elections within the next 12 months—well ahead of the 1985 due date.

Political parties opposing the ruling Congress Party are drumming up noise on this issue, and astrologers and political pundits are positioning themselves for the “expected” campaign.

What is Mrs. Gandhi thinking about these matters, one asks, since in the final analysis it is only her opinion that will count.

In her typically low-keyed style, she has shifted her attention after the March Non-Aligned summit in New Delhi to focus on prickly domestic issues, particularly the violent demonstrations and other instances of social unrest in Punjab and Assam states.

When a reporter tried to pin down Mrs. Gandhi on the much-touted mid-term poll, she shot back, “Can you give me some reason for doing so?”

Whatever her opponents may think, there is no driving political need for her to go for elections. The Congress Party she heads holds a two-thirds majority in the lower house of parliament, and waiting until 1985 gives the party sufficient time to prepare its organization to face the voters.

Everyone knows that that is the concern in Mrs. Gandhi’s mind. Without a substantial housecleaning in the Congress Party and an economic perspective to produce tangible results, no elections will make any

difference.

On these two fronts, economics and party affairs, action has now begun.

Immediately after the Non-Aligned summit, numerous reports appeared suggesting that the star of Brandt Commission member L. K. Jha is on the wane. Jha, an economic adviser to the prime minister, found that not only was he not included in the Indian delegation to the Buenos Aires Group of 77 meeting for follow-up on the New Delhi summit’s economic discussions, but he has been losing ground at home.

In early March a panel of economic experts was formed to advise the prime minister on the problems in economic and planning strategy. They were also assigned to come up with solutions to break through key bottlenecks in the economy.

Jha favors a “New Bretton Woods” world monetary arrangement of the sort proposed by Felix Rohatyn, which would reorganize developing nations’ debt without providing new credit for production and technological investment. Jha’s name was conspicuously absent from the list of experts, and several economists known to oppose his World Bank-sponsored schemes were named instead.

At present, in order to tackle the political problems, particularly the upheavals in Punjab and Assam, several actions are being taken on the federal level.

Mrs. Gandhi herself spent three days in Assam on March 28-31, in-

volving herself in the welfare of the population and in the details of the law and order situation, as well as reviving the political parties in the state.

She has also appointed a one-man commission to look into the problems of relations between the central government and the states so that solutions may be found within the framework of the Indian constitution to the current serious strains on the federal structure.

Simultaneously, Mrs. Gandhi met with all chief ministers—equivalent to state governors in the United States—and told them that there cannot exist a strong center alongside weak states.

She re-emphasized this point in an address she delivered to party workers on April 8.

“Divisive forces and communal elements pose a serious threat to the nation,” she stated. “These will have to be checked and artificial barriers created by vested interests in the name of language, religion, and regionalism demolished.”

“Certain elements, apparently under the influence of some outside powers” have been active in Punjab and Assam, the prime minister said. “Some foreign powers are jealous of India’s progress and are trying to create hurdles in the chosen path of amity and progress.”

Mrs. Gandhi has given orders that party positions at state and local levels be filled through elections which are to be completed by the summer.

As this process has started, many party men with images tarnished by corruption are being taken to task.

Two chief ministers have been called to New Delhi to explain their conduct in shady deals, and the word is out that some heads will definitely roll soon.

This column was written by Uma Zykofsky.