

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Election surprise

The announcement of elections to be held in November took the nation of India and especially the opposition by surprise.

The announcement of the Nov. 22 date for the general elections was a surprise all around—most of all, perhaps, for the opposition, whose capacity to present a united electoral front may turn out to be the decisive issue in the contest.

After charging Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi with conspiring to postpone the elections and demanding for more than three months that he step down immediately, the opposition would clearly have preferred to have its own propaganda come true. Now, with the Nov. 22 date fixed, the ethereal quest for a combined opposition against the ruling Congress (I) party has suddenly become time-bound. Now, opposition leaders find themselves working against deadline to find a formula by which they can overcome a decade of squabbling.

All the deals will have to be in place by Oct. 31, the last day for registering candidates. Only then can one begin to evaluate what Nov. 22 polling holds in store. In the absence of opposition unity, the campaign against the government on the Bofors scandal, or the more serious issue of basic price inflation, is expected to fall flat.

The challenge is not to be underestimated. The last time the opposition united to fight elections was 1977. Then, Indira Gandhi's administration, coming out of a highly unpopular period of national emergency, faced a hostile electorate and was routed. Even so, the dissension within the opposition was only papered over by virtue of the electorate's pressure.

The so-called unity was given a heave-ho in favor of conflicting personal ambitions of the opposition leaders, and the erstwhile Janata government of Morarji Desai was driven out of office in disgrace just three years later.

The crux of the problem lies in the disparate character of the various opposition formations. The Janata Dal, a conglomerate of former Congress Party members and powerful farmers, has the largest base. It has followers throughout the country, but it is in the so-called Hindi belt of the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, and Karnataka in the south, where the Dal has its muscle.

Though it contains such diverse and even contradictory ideologues as self-professed socialists, wealthy peasant mafia dedicated to free enterprise and proponents of appropriate technology, Janata Dal is generally considered a centrist party. Its leadership, however, is far from united, with the daily fallings-out among supremos such as Devi Lal, V.P. Singh, and Ajit Singh a matter of public record.

Three other distinct groups enjoy electoral strength in restricted areas. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with strength in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and many urban centers in the Hindi belt such as Delhi, calls for establishing Hindu Rashtra (a Hindu religious state) and considers the Communists and socialists slightly superior to vermin.

The Communists—one brand of which runs the states of Kerala and West Bengal—are constantly in a quandary. Recent crackdowns in Moscow and Beijing have made huge dents in their ideological armor. Closer to home, the fact that they have always backed the foreign policy of the Nehrus and Gandhis, even while disapproving of their domestic policies, has made them slightly suspect. Now, with their credibility as opposition forces at stake, they have no choice but to join hands with the most disagreeable of the domestic lot—the religious fundamentalists.

The third force consists of a number of regional parties who have ousted the Congress (I) from state administrations on a "sons of the soil" local chauvinist plank. These parties dominate the states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Assam, and Punjab. Several have joined with Janata Dal in a National Front against the Congress (I).

While the regional groups and the Communists are contained geographically, the same cannot be said of the Hindu fundamentalists. With the BJP as the political arm, Hindu fundamentalist groups have begun to surge ahead, arguably gaining ground in recent years. Their latest campaign to establish a temple at Lord Ram's birthplace in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, on the spot where a Muslim mosque has existed for centuries, has already ignited communal rioting on a significant scale in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh.

Flush with recognition of its growing power, the BJP will certainly claim an extra pound of flesh to join the combined opposition. The Communists, who have friends and sympathizers within the Janata Dal, the Congress (I), and perhaps even in the BJP, will also try to extract the maximum in exchange for delivering the Kerala and West Bengal vote.