

Gandhi

This coming week, India, the world's largest democracy, will go to the polls for one of the most dramatic and important elections of its history. At stake will be the continued rule of the mighty Congress Party and its youthful leader, Rajiv Gandhi as well as the near-term political future of troubled West Asia. The Gandhi dynasty has ruled the Congress party, and India, almost uninterrupted since independence.

Jawaharlal Nehru was India's first prime minister. His daughter, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi) came very close to becoming India's first dictator. Her eldest son, Sanjay, was groomed to succeed her — but was killed in an air crash. In a wave of national mourning, younger son Rajiv, an airline pilot, was swept into power.

Rajiv was supposed to have been India's Mr. Clean, the savior who would purge the eternally ruling Congress of its deep corruption and malefactors. Rajiv was the new India: Hi-tech, dynamic, urbane. Computers, it was hoped, would replace ox carts and naked fakirs as the symbol of modern India. Alas, old Mother India seems to have overcome the latest Gandhi.

India is really a collection of separate nations. Her 807 million people speak 16 major languages and 300 dialects, follow a myriad of different faiths and range from fair-skinned Kashmiris to dark-skinned Tamils.

Running India from New Delhi is simply impossible without the backing of regional and local Congress politicians, who too often are crooks, bagmen, goondas (thugs), bureaucrats and hacks.

After trying for a while to change the system, Rajiv struggled and gave in to the bad old ways.

One of the worst of these was a practice widely used

dynasty at risk in India



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by his mother. This was to finance Congress by levying secret commissions on all foreign contracts made by the government. When the Indian Army bought US\$1.4 billion in artillery from Sweden's Bofors, at least \$200 million was skimmed off in bribes and commissions that flowed back to Congress bigwigs — and, say many critics, even as far as Rajiv Gandhi's doorstep.

The Bofors scandal was so bad it outraged even the most cynical Indians who are used to bribery and kickbacks as a part of daily life. Efforts by Congress to cover up the scandal by intimidating the press have only made things worse. The shaky opposition coalition, called the National Front, is hoping the Bofors bombshell will convince Indian voters it's finally time to ditch the wormy, arrogant Congress party.

But the Front has so far offered no real program other than criticism and promises of clean government.

Made up of such diverse elements as parties from southern Tamil Nadu and northern Assam, the Front has no real national mandate or coherence. Only a massive protest vote against Congress will give it a hope of victory.

This is unfortunate. Forty years of being a one-party state ruled by a single dynasty is bad for India and its democratic system. All politicians become corrupt and

arrogant if they stay too long in power. India should throw the Congress rascals out. Polls, however, suggest that Congress will either win a narrow victory or be forced into a coalition with the right-wing Indian Peoples Party, an ardent promoter of chauvinistic Hindu fundamentalism.

If this happens, there will be lots of trouble with India's 100-million strong Moslem minority which remains at dagger's drawn with increasingly militant Hindu fundamentalists. There is also a lesser chance that India's resurgent communists may become a coalition partner.

India's neighbors are quietly hoping that Congress will lose its grip on power. Almost all, from Pakistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka, have been bullied of late by Indian big-brotherism and fear New Delhi's fast-growing military power. Sabre rattling by New Delhi plays well in the Hindu north, where dreams of creating a Hindu Greater India are vivid. Raising a clamor about the threat from Pakistan or China has always produced dividends for Congress. A National Front government, it is hoped, will abandon plans to create a new Indian Raj and patch up relations with neighboring states.

Congress was a vital, positive political movement 40 years ago. Today, it has become a heavy drag on India's economic and social development by combining the worst of socialism and backroom politics. Modern India, the 120 million urban dwellers, need a political movement that looks to the future, not to India's antique past. Perhaps a sound drubbing next week will either get Congress off India's back or at least bring about an overdue housecleaning.

Surely out of 807 million people someone besides the Gandhi can be found to run the country.