

From New Delhi by Susan B. Maitra

India prepares for mid-term polls

After more than a year of unstable governments, Indians are wearily awaiting the next election.

After several years of unresolved debate over whether or not to dump the existing Westminster parliamentary system and opt for a presidential system, like the French and American varieties, the political turmoil of recent weeks has made President R. Venkataraman the de facto chief executive of India. In the turbulent second week of March, the responsibilities for keeping the country functioning fell on him.

Using his vast political experience and the maneuvering room provided by the Indian Constitution, it was President Venkataraman who got crucial finance and other bills passed within a week of the resignation of the government of Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar. It was the President who dissolved the Parliament and set the stage for the mid-term polls, which will most likely be held in the last week of May.

The crisis erupted on March 6 when the minority government, a breakaway faction of the Janata Dal under former Prime Minister V.P. Singh and led by Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, found itself locked in Parliament with a hostile opposition without its backer, the Congress (I), and ready to be voted out of power.

The hitch between the Chandra Shekhar government and the Congress (I) Party was formed when it was found that Congress (I) president Rajiv Gandhi was kept under surveillance in his own residence by intelligence operatives of the Haryana state government. The Congress (I) boycotted Parliament and demanded that a few heads roll. But the prime minister,

pleading ignorance of the surveillance operation, refused to oblige.

As a result, Chandra Shekhar, with little maneuvering room left, threw in the towel and asked President Venkataraman to dissolve the Parliament and set the date for fresh elections. Having accepted the resignation of the Chandra Shekhar government, President Venkataraman was left with a plethora of crucial bills to be passed by the people's representatives. Although not constitutionally bound to listen to the resigned prime minister's advice on the matter, the President took his time and got the absolutely necessary bills passed before dissolving the Parliament.

The irresponsible manner in which the entire episode unfolded is symptomatic of the rot that has set into India's body politic. The 11 months of the V.P. Singh government's rule, beginning in December 1990, under the banner of a cobbled-together National Front, reminded people of a basketful of live frogs, each vying with the other to leap out of the basket for no apparent purpose. Prime Minister V.P. Singh, who has subsequently shown little skill in keeping even his own "frogs" in one place, was more keen to project himself as a social reformer with an eye to grabbing a fraction of the vote than to administer the country.

His successor, Chandra Shekhar, a veteran politician with a hands-on attitude, did well under trying circumstances. His ultra-minority government was established with Congress (I) support when it was deemed inadvisable to go to the polls following the

V.P. Singh government's collapse. He, at least partially, succeeded in defusing the social chaos thrown up by his predecessor's social reform exercises.

The coming elections will throw up once again the issues which were present, but hardly discussed, during the 1989 elections. The economic situation has worsened considerably since then, partly due to the Gulf war and mostly due to the lack of governance and policy implementation. The Eighth Five Year Plan, which went into the implementation stage two years ago, remains in limbo while the crisis of inadequate infrastructure and lack of confidence among investors are on the rise. India's top business leaders have laid the blame flatly on the paralysis of the national government in New Delhi and claim that the crisis of the economy today is a result of mismanagement.

Meanwhile, India's foreign debt has soared to close to \$70 billion officially, while trade deficits and erosion of foreign exchange reserves have seriously undermined the country's image abroad. The situation has pushed India to go to the International Monetary Fund for loans. The IMF, true to its established tradition, has demanded the bridging of fiscal deficits, cuts in farm subsidies, and partial privatization of public sector units as conditions for getting \$1.8 billion immediately and a possible \$2 billion after this year.

In addition, secessionist forces in Punjab, Assam, and Kashmir continue to show their muscle while Tamil Nadu remains embroiled in the spillover of terrorism which still haunts the nearby island nation of Sri Lanka after almost a decade.

All in all, a number of crucial issues, besides the obvious need for a stable government in Delhi, must be discussed in the election campaign.