

**FOCUS-India parliament leader bullish on democracy.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Dec 7 (Reuters) - The speaker of India's parliament said on Sunday democracy had taken deep root in his country a half-century after independence, and all parties would speak the language of economic reform will go ahead," Purno Sangma, speaker of the Lok Sabha or lower house of parliament, told the World Economic Forum's India Economic Summit.

Sangma presided over a hung parliament elected in mid-1996 and saw three prime ministers come There are 64 countries around the world with coalition governments," he said.

"For some time we may have to live with coalition governments. But as a nation what is important is the stability of the system, and we have that," Sangma said.

He spoke as India's main political parties began casting about for partners and broader-based groups to fight the mid-term poll which analysts said would probably again produce a fractured result.

"I do not foresee any party or group of parties getting a clear majority," Mahesh Rangarajan, an analyst with the Centre for Contemporary studies told Reuters. "We are into an era of coalition and alliances."

"How many countries that won independence before and after India did have remained democratic?" Sangma asked his audience of businessmen as he listed that made India unique.

He said members of India's parliament could speak in 21 official languages in a country where 530 parties jostled for support from 600 million voters. About five million election officials would man voting stations in the biggest such operation in the world. "All smoothly done," Sangma said.

"Can you believe that 1,600 languages are taught in India's schools? We have 50,000 registered trade unions. We have conducted 11 national elections and 300 provincial elections. The transfer of power has been very smooth," Sangma said.

Both the Congress Party and its arch-foe the ratiya Janata Party (BJP) held out the lure of a stable government as they began looking for allies during the weekend to cobble together a winning majority at the polls.

Congress cut off vital support to Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's 15-party United Front and left Pweek with little choice but to order a snap poll.

None of the three major formations -- the Congress, United Front and the BJP -- was able to muster a majority in India's badly-fractured lower house of parliament, which has 545 seats.

Congress leaders said the party would not have any truck with the United Front but said talks were continuing to forge a broad secular front to the elections.

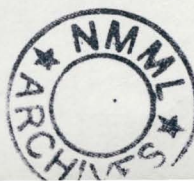
Congress has been criticised for pulling down the Gujral government after it refused to drop the DMK, a regional constituent named by an investigation into former premier Rajiv Gandhi's assassination six years ago.

In a damage-control exercise, the Congress party in a document released at the weekend said it did its best to avoid general elections in quick succession but complained that the United Front's "short-sighted policies" had created an untenable situation forcing it to withdraw its support.

The United Front is meeting on Monday to thrash out a common strategy to fight the polls, and the BJP's national executive is scheduled to meet in the southeastern city of Bhubaneshwar for three days from December 18.

"The United Front is a functioning group for the first time," said Rangarajan.

Leaders of the front have said it would stick together for the elections, and Sangma said any pre-election alliance stood a better chance of lasting a full five-year term.





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...promise of more uncertainty.  
...and trying to divine what lay ahead for the world's most populous democracy.

...no single party was likely to win a clear majority of the 542 seats in parliament's lower  
...election next Spring.

...a uneasy being drawn by the United Front coalition embracing communists, free-marketters  
...on November 26, and its major rivals, the central Congress and the Hindu  
...Party (BJP).

...on Monday to thrash out a coalition strategy, and the BJP's national executive will  
...of Shubhashwar on December 12.

...told Reuters that coalition governments were hard to come by.

...of forces has emerged. The myth of one single party ensuring 'national stability' has been  
...alternative shouldn't be expected," said Kathari, who heads the independent Centre for  
...Developing Societies.

...a local alternative," Kathari said, adding that a variety of regional parties were steadily  
...of support.

...all matter, caste will matter, communities will matter," he said.

...a huge success.

...30 regional parties, and 171 smaller parties vied in the 1996 elections for 542 million  
...of whom only 17.8 percent cast their votes.

...1,912 candidates received less than one-sixth of the vote and lost their deposits.

...of the candidates stood as independents not affiliated to any party, a practice which started  
...to discourage this time around as they figure how to deploy an army of 4.5 million  
...army.

...which ruled India for all but five years since independence in 1947 and is given  
...has been a steady erosion of support.

...Congress won only 20.8 percent of votes polled in 1996, a drastic fall from 36.5  
...1992, 36.5 percent in 1994, and 48.1 percent in 1996.

...the BJP's support grew only slightly to 20.3 percent of votes polled in 1996 from 20.1  
...1992.

...broken," Kathari said, adding that the BJP had been unable to shake off the  
...of the ideological parent group, the Rashtriya Swamishwa Sangh (RSS).

...not forgiving.

...a reputation for power," Rajan Pillai, one of the Congress leaders, mockingly told a  
...of society.

...to decide such other for our people, not for his country's self. I hope the coming  
...that right."

