

**Indian elections hold promise of more uncertainty.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Dec 7 (Reuters) - The word "pundit" is Sanskrit for "learned man," and in India they were busy at the weekend trying to divine what lay ahead for the world's most populous democracy.

This much was clear -- no single party was likely to win a clear majority of the 545 seats in parliament's lower house in the general election next Spring.

Battle lines were already being drawn by the United Front coalition embracing communists, free-marketeers and centrists which resigned on November 28, and its major rivals, the centrist Congress and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The United Front will meet on Monday to thrash out a common strategy, and the BJP's national executive will meet in the southeastern city of Bhubaneshwar on December 19.

Political scientist Rajni Kothari told Reuters that coalition governments were here to stay.

"A new constellation of forces has emerged. The myth of one single party insuring 'national stability' has been exploded. So one clear alternative shouldn't be expected," said Kothari, who heads the independent Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

"It may still not be a total alternative," Kothari said, adding that a variety of regional parties were steadily gaining ground in electoral support.

"Regions will matter, class will matter, caste will matter, communities will matter," he said.

An Indian election is a huge exercise.

Eight national parties, 30 regional parties, and 171 smaller parties vied in the 1996 elections for 592 million registered voters -- of whom only 57.9 percent cast their votes.

As many as 12,688 of the 13,952 candidates received less than one-sixth of the vote and lost their deposits.

At least 10,600 of the candidates stood as independents not affiliated to any party, a practice which election authorities are trying to discourage this time around as they figure how to deploy an army of 4.5 million election officials.

Kothari noted that Congress, which ruled India for all but five years since independence in 1947 and is riven by internal dissent, has seen a steady erosion of support.

Election data show that Congress won only 28.8 percent of votes polled in 1996, a drastic fall from 36.5 percent in 1991, 39.5 percent in 1989, and 48.1 percent in 1984.

At the same time, the BJP's support grew only slightly to 20.3 percent of votes polled in 1996 from 20.1 percent in 1991.

"Congress is internally completely broken," Kothari said, adding that the BJP had been unable to shake off the fundamentalist Hindu push of its ideological parent group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Congress politicians were not sanguine.

"Politics has become a propulsion for power," Rajesh Pilot, one of the Congress leaders, morosely told a meeting on Sunday.

"We are all trying to criticise each other for our benefit, not for the country's benefit. I hope the coming election will put that right."





Kothari said the United Front, which was created by 13 groups after the 1996 elections threw up a hung parliament, stood a better chance if it could present a common, radical platform.

"But there is no clear ideology yet, nor a single leader," he said.

Kothari said economic liberalisation, which was launched in 1991, had not truly benefited the middle class.

The number of officially recognised unemployed stood at 36.7 million in 1995 -- more than 10 percent of the organised workforce in a country where two-thirds of the population still works in the unorganised, agricultural sector.

"The lower middle class is gripped by a tremendous sense of insecurity," Kothari said.

"Today if any class has a stake in the electoral process it is the poor."

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