

India waits for next act in political drama.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Nov 29 (Reuters) - India woke up on Saturday to a lame-duck government and a political crisis that only deepened after Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral's resignation.

Newspapers were cynical about what lay ahead and ran banner headlines like "Experiment Coalition: Abort, Fail, Retry" and "India back to abnormal".

"But the denouement is certain to bring widespread relief because what had to happen has finally happened," The Pioneer said in an editorial.

The nation's main opposition group, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) met its allies to gauge if it had a chance at staking a claim to form a new administration, but it quickly made clear it was not in a hurry.

"We should await the president's call rather than take any decision now," BJP president Lal Krishna Advani told reporters.

Two weeks of paralysis ended late on Friday when Gujral told President K.R. Narayanan: "Assigning high priority to the national interest I have come to the conclusion that I should submit my resignation to you."

The Congress party, which withdrew its pivotal support for Gujral's United Front coalition because it had failed to expel one of its 15 partners, was quick to tell Narayanan: "We are sure, given a chance, we would be able to prove our majority" in parliament. But the odds were stacked against that happening.

Neither Congress, with 138 deputies, nor the BJP, with 162, can win a vote of confidence without support from other groups in the 545-seat Lok Sabha, or lower house of parliament.

Advani said President Narayanan would meet all political parties before deciding what to do next. Under India's constitution Narayanan can either invite the BJP or Congress to prove a majority in parliament, or call fresh elections.

Economists say India can ill afford a second national poll in 18 months, but some experts believe the present hung parliament cannot produce any stable government.

"When the electorate puts sectional interests like caste, community and region above nation, a fractured verdict is inevitable," The Pioneer wrote. "And if the verdict is as fractured as it was in 1996, politics is hopelessly debilitated."

Congress pulled out of its alliance with the United Front over the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which rules the southern state of Tamil Nadu and has been named in a preliminary report on former premier Rajiv Gandhi's 1991 assassination.

The inquiry accused DMK of "tacit support" for Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas, who are blamed by Indian authorities for the assassination.

Analysts said Congress was clearly trying to cash in on the emotional appeal of the Gandhi assassination to try to return to power after it suffered a humiliating defeat in 1996 elections.

"A party that has roundly lost the mandate just last year now wants to hijack power through sheer blackmail," wrote Indian Express editor Shekhar Gupta.

Rajiv Gandhi's widow Sonia, wooed by Congress's leaders, has given no indication she will don her husband's mantle if fresh elections are called, but her next move is being closely watched.

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