

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 1984

SOUTH CHINA MORNING

# Congress is fighting for survival

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New Delhi, Dec 11.

India's ruling Congress (I) Party, which celebrates its centenary next year, is fighting for political survival as much as a parliamentary majority in national elections in two weeks' time.

After years of unchallenged supremacy as India's dominant political force, the party is being rocked by an internal debate about its future.

Its roots go back to December 28, 1885, when 72 Indian nationalists met in Bombay and set up an organisation called the Indian National Congress to "discuss matters of importance to the brightest jewel in the crown of the British Empire."

The party took India to independence in 1947 and has ruled for all but three years since then.

When Mrs Indira Gandhi

became prime minister in 1966, she inherited a party still headed by several leaders who, like her father Mr Jawaharlal Nehru, had spearheaded the fight for freedom from British colonial rule.

Her personalised brand of leadership caused splits in 1969 and 1978, which pushed out the independence old guard and in came an army of followers who owed her unquestioned loyalty.

The party became known as Congress (I) — for Indira — and now political analysts are wondering about new names.

Although the party tried to present a united front behind her son and successor Rajiv, revolts broke out in several key states after he dumped nearly a quarter of the 339 sitting Congress members in parliament's lower house last month.

The purge reflected growing worry among Congress

campaign managers that the party would not regain the majority it won in the last elections in 1980 despite a wave of popular sympathy over Mrs Gandhi's assassination.

"Mrs Gandhi converted Congress into a mindless power machine, designed to win elections," says Mr Lal Krishna Advani, secretary-general of the rightwing Bharatiya Janata Party.

"The proximity of another election is a powerful glue, but can Rajiv continue to hold a quarrelsome party together?"

Without Mrs Gandhi as its standard bearer, questions have been asked about what the party now stands for.

"Never before, perhaps, has the Congress gone into battle in such ignorance of policy and with so little confidence in its unity and even identity," columnist Sunanda Datta-Ray wrote in the con-

servative newspaper Statesman last week.

"Several veteran congressmen feel Rajiv is imposing an alien stamp on a party that is technically only seven years old but boasts of a tradition that goes back to the 19th century," one senior Congress leader said.

But Mr G.K. Moopnar, a senior secretary-general of the party, said the rumblings were a sign of growth and Congress was ripe for change.

"There is a growing feeling among the people that politics and corruption are synonymous," he said. "Rajiv is trying to provide a clean government."

Rajiv has appointed his cousin, Mr Arun Nehru, to the post he vacated as the party's most powerful secretary-general.

A burly and blunt man who successfully headed a paint company before he entered politics in 1981, Mr

Nehru was clear about his vision of a reinvigorated Congress.

"Congress is a mass-based party, and we want to get new people into a breathing organisation," he said.

He said the new party philosophy was "make it quick, effective and clean."

Asked about criticism that Congress had no clear ideology and veers between socialism and a right-of-centre liberalism, Mr Nehru said: "We are neither left nor right, we are upright."

However some people doubt if an old dog can be taught new tricks.

Respected columnist G.K. Reddy wrote in The Hindu newspaper: "The point that is conveniently overlooked by the smart alegs in Mr Rajiv Gandhi's camp is that... it is not possible to apply the latest management techniques to the feudal environment of Indian politics." —Reuter.