

THE ECONOMIST NOVEMBER 19 1988

India

## Sooner the better

FROM OUR INDIA CORRESPONDENT

**I**T IS a politician's privilege to change his mind. Only four weeks ago Mr Rajiv Gandhi was insisting that he would not cut a single day off the life of India's present parliament. That meant an election in Decem-



Hands up for an early election

ber 1989. Now everything his Congress party is doing suggests that the election will take place next March.

The government always had a good case for an early poll. The opposition, slowly coming together under the leadership of Mr Gandhi's former finance minister, Mr V.P. Singh, would then have less time to put together a programme. The country has had an excellent monsoon; the production of grain is expected to rise by 30m tonnes this harvest-year. Inflation is falling and the reviving confidence of businessmen has sent share prices soaring. Why wait, Mr Gandhi's advisers have been asking, and risk the vagaries of weather and market?

At first, Mr Gandhi seemed unmoved. He wanted to press ahead with his projects for lifting bureaucratic controls on industry, rationalising taxes and reforming the election system. All the same, the opposition's attacks on the Congress party for being autocratic and riddled with corruption were beginning to hit home. Contingency plans were already being made for an early fight.

That may explain the arrest in August of Mr Sanjay Singh, one of Mr V.P. Singh's closest supporters in the key northern state of Uttar Pradesh, on what seems a spurious murder charge. The arrested Mr Singh was Mr Gandhi's campaign manager in his home constituency in the 1984 election. His defection meant that Mr Gandhi's seat might be in danger. And Mr Bhaskar Ghose, who in his two years as head of India's state-owned television network had brought a measure of objectivity to programmes, was suddenly moved on—a sign that the government might be preparing to manipulate television once more.

What seems to have nudged Mr Gandhi

towards an early election was India's textbook military intervention against the attempted coup in the Maldives on November 3rd. The Indian soldiers who landed in Male, the Maldives' capital, did not suffer a single casualty in chasing off the would-be coup-makers. Their success helped to restore Mr Gandhi's reputation after the failure of the Indian peacekeeping force in Sri Lanka to disarm the Tamil Tigers. Meanwhile, the opposition is bogged down in organisation problems, and has not produced a clear statement of what it stands for.

Mr Gandhi is unlikely to make up his mind before the state election in Tamil Nadu in January. Until last January that state was ruled by a coalition led by an elderly but still wildly popular film star, Mr M. G. Ramachandran. Since the chief minister's death his own party has divided into four factions. Congress hopes to gain thereby in January. If it emerges as the largest single party in the state legislature, an all-India election in March will be a near-certainty.

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