

Sent to Liberal
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A Note on the Indian General Elections, February 1967

What has happened

The recently concluded Fourth General Elections have left the Congress Party in shambles. The twenty-year monopoly of power enjoyed by the Indian National Congress has ended. The political map of India has been radically altered.

Before the elections, all but one of the 16 States comprising the Indian Union had Congress Party governments. The exception, Kerala, was under President's Rule (namely, direct by Delhi). In the Lok Sabha (India's House of Commons) the Congress Party enjoyed a majority of 225 members over the combined Opposition.

The picture emerging from the recent General Elections is quite different. Of the 16 States, the Congress Party has been returned to power in only eight States. In seven others non-Congress governments are in office. Of these Madras has an Opposition Party called the D.M.K. (the Dravidian Progressive Federation) commanding an absolute majority. The Swatantra Party is the senior partner in a two-Party Coalition government in Orissa. In Kerala the Left Communists (Peking Communists) lead a multi-Party coalition government. In Bihar, Marissa, Punjab and West Bengal, multi-party coalition governments which include almost all shades of non-Congress political opinion ranging from the Jana Sangh to the Communists (both Peking and Moscow varieties) are in power. In Rajasthan the elections have resulted in a stalemate with President's Rule having been imposed.

In the Lok Sabha, the Congress Party's majority has been reduced to fifty members with five results yet to come. The Swatantra Party retains its position as the largest single Opposition Party by doubling its strength from 22 in the old House to 45 in the present one. The Jana Sangh has displaced the Left Communists for second place, with the D.M.K. occupying the third place. The Right Communists share the fourth place with the U.S.P. (the United Socialist Party - comparable to the Menshi Socialists).

- The two wings of the Communist Parties have together done better. As against a combined strength of 25 in the last House they now have together 42 members (Left Communists 19 and Right Communists 23).

The verdict of the electorate has thus been a vote of no-confidence in the Congress Party in half the States and a hesitant vote in their favour at the Centre. It is obvious the days of one-Party government are coming to a close and an era of coalition governments is in prospect.

Why it has happened

The Indian economy is bankrupt. Food shortages, inflation, unemployment and famine conditions in several parts of the country are prevalent to an alarming degree. The much vaunted Plans have failed miserably. Corruption in the administration is the rule rather than the exception.

The ruling Congress Party is riven by factionalism. The pre-election period witnessed a rash of rebel Congress groups sprouting up all over the country. Though these defections had more to do with the plums of office rather than

ideological differences, they nevertheless succeeded in eroding the Congress vote.

The Congress in earlier elections had been able to ride back to power in overwhelming numbers on a split vote. Multi-cornered contests enabled Congressmen to get elected on a minority vote. Thus with 44.3 per cent of the votes, the Congress had 75 per cent of the seats in the old Lok Sabha. This time the lopsided proportion of seats to votes polled has been repeated but to a lesser degree (approximately 54.5 per cent of the seats to 38.3 per cent of the votes polled). This was mainly due to electoral adjustments arrived at between Opposition parties. These adjustments merely involved agreements among Opposition parties to divide the areas of contest. Unfortunately even this limited arrangement was only partially successful. Efforts to forge such arrangements at the National level were unsuccessful but succeeded to a certain extent at States' level. For instance, the Swatantra Party was able to arrive at electoral adjustments with the Jana Sangh in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Orissa, Rajasthan and Madras. Similarly the Leftist parties and the communists arrived at arrangements in Kerala and West Bengal.

Future Prospects

In the long term, the Fourth General Elections might result in the emergence of a more balanced party system with a polarisation of political forces. The immediate future, however, portends a period of uncertainty and even confusion. Parliamentary Democracy has never had a chance to function in real terms since a strong Opposition Party which offered an alternative government was absent to make such a system meaningful. With the Congress Party's monopoly of power broken, Parliamentary Democracy has a chance to come into its own. The future, therefore, augurs well for democracy.

For the Swatantra Party, the future is full of promise. Apart from doubling its strength in the Lok Sabha, it is in office in the State of Orissa. Elsewhere it has improved its position. In the States of Rajasthan, Andhra and Gujarat, it has emerged as the largest single Opposition party. It has entered the Assam and Bengal legislatures and has considerably improved in the southern States of Mysore and Madras.

More than any other Opposition party, the Swatantra Party can justifiably claim a national character. Even where it has been unsuccessful, the Swatantra Party has polled a significant number of votes. This disproves a London Times editorial comment that the Swatantra Party cannot claim a national character.

Arrangements with the Jana Sangh

The Swatantra Party's efforts to work out arrangements with other democratic parties have been, like the proverbial Curate's egg, good in parts. The difficulties of working in cooperation with the Jana Sangh are many in view of the fundamental

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character of the two parties. The Swatantra Party with a liberal philosophy chooses to tread the middle path in most matters. While as patriotic as any other national democratic party, the party avoids taking extreme positions and in particular eschews national jingoism.

The Jana Sangh on the other hand swears by a kind of supra-nationalism. On the question of the Nuclear Bomb, the Jana Sangh wants an indigenous Bomb while the Swatantra Party advocates acceptance of a Western Nuclear umbrella. While on economic and foreign policy issues the two parties have much in common, the gulf dividing them on emotional issues is indeed wide as, for instance, on such questions as the attitude to minorities, relations with Pakistan, Kashmir and the language problem, where the Jana Sangh has taken rigid positions, while the Swatantra Party has taken attitudes which are pragmatic, sober and fair. On matters of conscience like language, the Swatantra Party has allowed its members individual freedom to take whatever position they like.

Conclusion

Though the youngest (only seven year old) among India's political parties, the Swatantra Party can be justifiably proud of its achievements. It has emerged as the largest Opposition party in the country.

The Party is wedded to a liberal-democratic philosophy. It advocates a mixed economy of the State and free sectors and not a laissez faire economy; a foreign policy calling for adherence to regional collective security and alignment with the Western Powers. In matters of religion, the Swatantra Party believes that the State should be non-denominational. On social matters like caste, its stance is radical — it would like to do away with caste barriers and ensure equality of opportunity for all. It is strictly Constitutional and frowns upon all acts of an unconstitutional nature.

Its weakness is in regard to cadres. The national leadership, well aware of this weakness, is now giving much thought to the development of a cadre trained and equipped to carry the message of the Party to the people.

It is, therefore, a misnomer to call the Swatantra Party a right-wing or conservative party in terms understood in the West. It is radical in matters of social policy and liberal on economic issues.

A substantial part of the Indian electorate has reposed confidence on this liberal-democratic party as evidenced by the results of the General Elections. This augurs well for the future of democracy in India.