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Swatantra M.Ps. to Function as Independent Opposition

FROM OUR SPECIAL
CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI, March 20.

The members belonging to the Swatantra Party in the Lok Sabha will not form any bloc or front with its alliance partners, but will function "on their own, and articulate the distinctive Swatantra approach and policies", according to a decision taken at a meeting to-day of the Central Parliamentary Board of the party presided over by Mr. M. R. Masani.

It was decided that the Swatantra Party should play the role of "a determined Opposition". The Board directed its members in Parliament to resist staunchly any tendency that might develop towards authoritarianism through efforts to truncate the freedom of the press, weaken the position of

the supreme judiciary, or undermine the fundamental rights embodied in the Constitution.

At the same time, it was urged that the members should not hesitate to continue to give support to such measures of the Government as would build the nation into a prosperous and free society and ameliorate the lot of the masses.

FREEDOM FOR STATE UNITS

Mr. Masani, who briefed pressmen after the Board meeting, explained that the decision not to form a bloc in Parliament did not mean that that State units of the party were not free to enter into local adjustments with other parties. Nor did it mean that the party was averse to a merger with other parties for forming a new party if that became necessary in the larger interest of democracy. He, however, said the Swatantra party was not now taking any initiative for such merger. A meeting of the National Executive would be held in April to make an "agonising reappraisal" of the party's election reverses and do

some fundamental thinking on future policy.

He said the present Government at the Centre was only a minority Government in spite of the majority of seats won by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the elections. The Ruling Congress had obtained only 43.64 per cent of the votes polled, while actually only 54 per cent of the electorate had exercised their franchise. This meant that the Congress (R) was really supported by only 24 per cent of the total electorate.

Mr. Masani stated that the system of elections, as practised now in the country, was defective, and that proportional representation alone would rectify the present state of affairs.

DEMOCRATIC ALTERNATIVE

On the functioning of the Democratic Alliance, Mr. Masani said it had always been the party's view that a democratic alternative was what the country needed, and that nothing less than a full-fledged alliance with an agreed programme and only one agreed candidate in each constituency sup-

ported by all the constituent parties of the front would provide such an alternative. The abandonment of the effort at a common programme had proved to be a "gift" to the Prime Minister and her party, who had used it with devastating effect throughout the poll campaign, he added.

He said the Parliamentary Board felt that the party had, unfortunately, to share in the debacle resulting from the loss of credibility on the part of the front because of lack of any agreement on a common programme, and the attribution to it of the slogan "Indira Hatao" which the Swatantra Party for one had never accepted.

The Board felt that while any analysis of the causes or reasons for the pattern of voting must await deeper study and fuller information, one principal reason for the defeat of candidates of the Democratic Front was the absence of a common programme which they could project, apart from a revival of the cult of personality and the use of money power.