

Where are
other elements
on this
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THE STATESMAN

Incorporating and directly descended from
THE FRIEND OF INDIA—Founded 1818

Published Simultaneously from DELHI and CALCUTTA

DELHI, JANUARY 5, 1971

Vol. No. CVVXI 2284

THE DEMOCRATIC FRONT

The three-party electoral front formed by the Congress (O), Jana Sangh and Samyukta Socialist Party on Sunday night represented a welcome advance towards the consolidation of national democratic forces. But the step forward was accompanied by at least half a step back. The Swatantra Party's last-minute withdrawal from the front frittered away some of its impact. This could have been welcome only to those in power whose policies and actions have made the unification of all democratic parties so necessary. Mr M. R. Masani would seem to have some justification for his precipitate decision; what was intended to be a full-fledged electoral alliance, based on a common minimum programme, was suddenly diluted to a mere adjustment of seats, reportedly at the SSP's insistence. A bold alliance, offering itself as a credible alternative to the present Government and clearly spelling out its policies, would of course have been preferable. But if, in spite of a common minimum programme, the Congress (O), Swatantra and Jana Sangh were going to retain separate election symbols and manifestos, the difference between what was originally proposed and what has been eventually agreed to may be one of form rather than substance.

While regretting Swatantra's unexpected withdrawal from the democratic front and hoping that it would change its mind, Mr Nijalingappa and Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee seem to have given the impression that between Swatantra and the SSP they would prefer the latter. This is unfortunate, because the fight against a ruling party not averse to using the

official machinery or other dubious tactics to maintain itself in power requires the mobilization of every party and group willing to undertake this fight. Disunity in the democratic camp cannot but be disastrous. It is therefore to be hoped that before January 13, when the Swatantra National Executive meets, both sides will have found a mutually acceptable basis for Swatantra's participation in the democratic front. Mr Rajagopalachari put his finger on the heart of the matter when he described the mid-term poll as a "referendum to decide once for all whether the country approves of Mrs Gandhi's plans to tear up the Constitution", and advised all those opposed to this dismal prospect to "unite, unite".

Against this background, the attitude of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal cannot but be regretted. Although Mr Prakash Vir Shastri and some others see the wisdom of joining hands with other democratic parties, Mr Charan Singh apparently thinks otherwise. Initially he talked of the advantage to the BKD of going it alone, especially in U.P. but latterly he has been saying that he must keep all his options open, which is little short of a polite euphemism for opportunism. According to reports he still expects some overtures from the Congress (R), which means that he has apparently learnt nothing from his experience in U.P. only three months ago; at the same time, despite denials for the record, he seems to have asked the democratic front to name him shadow Prime Minister before he can lead his party into the front. This would be a case of not only putting the cart before the horse but also of chasing a shadow while ignoring the substance.