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Swatantra keeps out

NEW DELHI, January 3 (U.N.D.).

An electoral front minus the Swatantra was formally launched tonight by the Opposition Congress, the Jana Sangh and the Samyukta Socialist Party to fight the Rolling Congress in the mid-term poll to the Lok Sabha.

The electoral pact was proclaimed in a statement signed by Mr. Nijalingappa, President of the Opposition Congress, Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee, President of the Jana Sangh, Mr. Ram Sewak Yadav, Chairman of the Central Parliamentary Board of SSP, and Mr. George Fernandes, General Secretary of SSP.

The leaders said the front would "contest the elections to the Lok Sabha with a view to defeating the present Government which is taking the country in an authoritarian and anti-democratic direction."

The leaders decided to put up one agreed candidates in each constituency and to set up a coordinating committee of representatives of their own parties and others willing to join in this task to finalise the allocation of constituencies and nomination of candidates.

A surprising development was the withdrawal of the Swatantra chairman, Mr. M. R. Masani, from the talks a little before the joint declaration was made by the opposition leaders.

As Mr. Masani told newsmen later, his objection was that the Opposition Congress, which had earlier agreed to have a full-fledged alliance based on minimum programme with his own party, the Jana Sangh and others, now proposed only "electoral adjustments."

He alleged that Mr. Nijalingappa had modified his stand under the pressure of Samyukta Socialist leaders who joined the talks today. Taking to newsmen after releasing the statement, Mr. Nijalingappa, Mr. Vajpayee and Mr. Rajnarain expressed the hope that "the Bharatiya Kranti Dal and the Swatantra would join us in the endeavour to replace the present Government."

Mr. Raj Narain remarked that the leaders of the front would have talks with Mr. Charan Singh tomorrow. "I am confident that BKD would rise to the occasion and not lag behind in joining the India Congress from Power."

Mr. Masani, who appeared to have left the meeting in a huff, told newsmen he had no authority to agree to anything but a programme of alliance based on the June 28 resolution of the All India Congress (O) Committee. He would put the new proposal for electoral adjustments before the National Executive

of his party in Madras on January 13.

Mr. Nijalingappa, later diverted Mr. Masani's contention that there was any firm decision to have a full-fledged alliance based on an agreed minimum programme.

He said talks on such a programme would follow an electoral understanding. "These can talk pile even now," he added.

The move for electoral adjustments was almost collapsing when Mr. M. R. Masani withdrew from the talks at about 8.45 p.m.

After Mr. Masani's departure, Mr. Nijalingappa told newsmen that the projected joint statement would not come tonight. He said the leaders of BKD and the Jana Sangh, who were expected to join the talks, had not arrived. And Mr. Masani also declined to consult his National Executive about some suggestion made today by the SSP leaders.

Mr. Nijalingappa had barely made this statement, when Mr. Vajpayee, who had just then reached the capital from Amal, arrived at the Congress President's residence, the venue of the talks.

The discussion then took a dramatic turn. Dr. Rajmohan Singh, whose opposition to any programme of alliance is known, made a determined effort to persuade the party leaders not to postpone a final decision but announce the formation of the front tonight itself. He said the doors could be left open for BKD, Swatantra and other groups.

According to Congress (O) circles, the inclusion of SSP in the electoral front is a definite political gain in that the front, going as far as divided only in a combination of rightist parties. They also pointed out that the Lucknow session of the party had only authorised Mr. Nijalingappa to enter into electoral adjustments with other "democratic" parties.