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Attached are comments in the National Press on the stand we took in Delhi on January 3, when the President, Mr. Masani declined to sign the statement announcing the formation of a Front without a programme by the Congress (O), Jan Sangh and SSP.

Extracts from an editorial in

The Statesman, January 5, 1971.

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".

Extracts from an editorial in

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

5-1-1971

Emerging Alignments

The most notable development in this direction so far has been the emergence of a National Democratic Front comprising the Congress(O), the Jan Sangh and the SSP whose terms for entry seem to have been the signal for what may not be more than a temporary withdrawal by the Swatantra Party, one of the original sponsors of the move. The NDF offers the country "an alternative government." The endeavour is to put up for each of the 520 Lok Sabha seats an agreed candidate supported by the constituent units of the Front. In other words, what has come into being is a Front based on electoral adjustments, as desired by the SSP, rather than an Alliance based on a common programme as sought by the Swatantra Party Chairman, Mr. Masani.

At a meeting of the Swatantra Party in Madras some time ago Mr. C. Rajagopalachari had pleaded with all like-minded parties not to get lost in the details of a "minimum programme" but to make up their minds to work together in the hope that the compulsions of the new association would exercise its own political logic. Indeed, Rajaji has been acting on this premise in the arrangements he is working out with Mr. Kamaraj in Tamil Nadu. It therefore appears that Mr. Masani's caveat is not insuperable and that the Swatantra Party may yet join the Front after the national executive considers the question later this week.

It is possible to discern the nature of the dilemma facing the several parties seeking to come together. Mr. Masani obviously believes that an alliance based on a common programme would have greater credibility and obviate future tensions among the constituent parties should they be called upon to shoulder the responsibility of forming a government. This reasoning is not without substance in the light of the experience of earlier united fronts whose common bond of sterile anti-Congressism did not avail them or the country when it came to the sticking point.

5-1-1971

Not united enough

SUNDAY'S dramatic developments in New Delhi show that the democratic parties ranged against Mrs Gandhi's New Congress are simply not united enough. The talks which were meant to seal the agreement between the Old Congress, the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra Party resulted instead in an electoral agreement between the Old Congress, the Jana Sangh and the SSP. Mr. Masani insisted on a full-fledged alliance with a common programme, and he claimed that Mr. Nijalingappa and Mr. Atal Bihari Vajpayee had agreed to this last Saturday. The situation changed swiftly on the following day when Mr. Nijalingappa tried to bring the SSP into the united front. The leaders of the SSP refused to join the front except on a basis confined to adjustment of parliamentary seats. They would not agree to the formulation of a common minimum programme. In these circumstances, the Old Congress and the Jana Sangh had to choose between the SSP and the Swatantra Party. It is perhaps not surprising that they preferred the former as an electoral ally.

The considerations which proved decisive are fairly clear. The SSP is altogether more influential than the Swatantra Party in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and it is in these two States that the electoral calculations of the New Congress can be upset badly by a united front of democratic parties. Moreover, Mr. Nijalingappa seems to have calculated that while the SSP would not modify its stand, the Swatantra Party would finally agree to join the front without a common programme. Mr. C. Rajagopalachari has already said that he looks upon the coming parliamentary election as "a referendum on the single question whether the country approves of Mrs. Indira Gandhi's plan to tear up the Constitution and annul the liberties of the people and replace democracy by totalitarianism." He has also expressed the hope that the democratic parties will forget "all matters irrelevant to the greater menace posed by Mrs. Gandhi's assault on the Constitution." There is fine irony in this in view of the stand adopted by Mr. Masani.

Though Mr. Rajagopalachari's advice might induce the National Executive of the Swatantra Party to reverse the stand adopted by Mr. Masani, this will not reduce the validity of Mr. Masani's reasoning. The joint announcement made by the Old Congress, the Jana Sangh, and the Samyukta Socialist Party on the formation of an electoral front says that these parties have agreed to come together to fight the elections "in order to offer the country an alternative which it urgently needs." The crucial question is whether the electorate will repose its confidence in a united front which does not have a clearly spelt out alternative programme.

The absence of an agreed programme gives the front a negativist look. Most voters want something positive to vote for; and they will expect concrete pledges on a variety of economic and other issues, even though the ruling party itself might not have kept most of the pledges made in the past. If Mrs. Gandhi cannot afford to underestimate the intelligence of the electorate, the parties ranged against her can afford even less to do so. Instead of waiting for Mr. Masani to have second thoughts on the common programme issue, the leaders of the Old Congress, the Jana Sangh and the Samyukta Socialist Party would do well to have second thoughts themselves.

On Sunday night, the Opposition offered the Prime Ministership on a platter to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, perhaps inadvertently. They agreed to disagree on a common programme.

Still they went ahead with an announcement on the formation of something—whether it is an alliance or front, they themselves do not know. This was totally unexpected turn of events.

Things on the thrashing out a common programme had gone too far. In fact, cyclostyled copies of the common programme were ready for the distribution to the press. Newsmen were asked to come to Mr. Hjalilingappa's residence to collect the copies of the common programme. Mr. M.R. Masani and Mr. A.B. Vajpayee had signed the original copy of the common programme on Saturday. Mr. Hjalilingappa approved the programme in principle, but wanted time to study it further. He promised to put his signature on Sunday.

What happened on the Sunday night was, in a sense, a political coup. Who staged it? How did it succeed? In pursuance Sonapur and Poona resolutions, SSP cannot compromise on programme for the sake of an electoral alliance. If it does, it will break. Thus, the first thing which the SSP signed, led by the formidable Mr. Raj Narain, did was to demolish the common programme. In this they received valuable help from Dr. Ram Subhag Singh. He had never reconciled himself with the idea of an ideologically-based alliance. Within the party, he had been fighting a losing battle. But he was quick to exploit to his advantage the emergence of the SSP on the scene.

However, the theoreticians of the Big Three, namely, Congress (O), Swatantra and Jana Sangh are unhappy with their leaders. In the case of Mr. Masani, his partymen are unhappy because, in the situation, the Swatantra Party cannot afford to go it alone unless it is prepared to face extinction for the sake of principle. After the heroic walk-out by Mr. Masani, the party will have to come back, perhaps on its bended knees, to the alliance, whatever its form is, Mr. Masani will not get support either from Rajaji or from Prof. N. G. Ranga, the two pillars of the Swatantra Party.

Nevertheless, the theoreticians could not be happy. Their efforts to evolve a clearcut common ideological base has received a set-back. In fact, it is not a set-back, but a slide-back. By dropping even the word "democratic" from the joint statement issued on Sunday night, the SSP has successfully kept a loophole to make way for the CPI(M) to join the alliance. In fact, according to interpretation of the SSP leaders, the CPI(M) cannot be kept out of the alliance in terms of the statement. The CPI(M) will also certainly plump for their opportunity as it is terribly isolated and facing the possibility of a most serious setback in the mid-term poll.

The prospects of an alliance with CPI(M) are something very difficult for the hard core theoreticians to swallow. Leaders like Mr. Morarji Desai and Mr. Asoka Mehta in the Congress (O), Mr. Balraj Madhok and Naraji Deshmukh in Jana Sangh are not happy even with the statement signed by their leaders. However, faced with a fait accompli they have not come out openly against what happened on Sunday night.

What pained them most is that all the time and labour for the last six months to chart out a common ideological base has lost.

Voters, in all probability, will not vote this time on negative considerations alone. Without a positive programme, they will not feel enthused. The question is: how long this soulless "alliance" will remain intact?

Without agreeing on a common programme, it has become doubly difficult to sort out the problems of adjustments. Moreover, the adjustments are more difficult among equals, since every party would be trying hard to become supreme in the "alliance."

The question is that without any agreement on policies, the give-and-take spirit is totally missing. The adjustments become purely a matter of horse-trading. When parties have unlimited ambitious and exaggerated notions, there is every chance of their falling out at the crucial hour of adjustments. An idea of these exaggerated notions could be had from one fact. The Jana Sangh leaders openly say that through the mechanism of "alliance" they will carry the corpse of their partners on their shoulders. When the partners are harbouring such notions and do not bother to reach agreement on principles and programme, there is every possibility that the alliance may prove to be a non-starter.

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Extracts from an editorial in the Economic Times of January 7

The parleys that attended the formation of the Congress (O), Jana Sangh and SSP partnership, and the Swatantra walkout are of considerable significance. One must concede that Mr. Masani had both logic and political principle on his side when he asked that there should be a full-fledged alliance based on a minimum programme. In any case, the Swatantra has little prospect of making its presence felt except in collaboration with allies like Congress (O) and Jana Sangh. Quite obviously, Mr. Masani was asking for a much deeper commitment to hold together than the SSP, for instance, was willing to concede. The SSP contention was that even if an alternative Government was to be formed, a common minimum programme could be worked out later. There is, for instance, the precedent of the various SVDs, most of which found it possible to draw up a common programme after the elections had taken place. There was possibly one more objection here on the part of the SSP. And that is, that if the Congress (O), Jana Sangh, Swatantra and the SSP are to agree on a common platform, then according to the SSP, many more points indeed would have to be added to what had at the time been agreed upon. And this was not found to be feasible.

Whatever the position, Mr. Masani was perhaps basically right in arguing that the voter must know clearly what the alliance stands for and what it offers on behalf of a possible alternative Government. The general opinion in the alliance appears to be that though there will be one candidate, who will be backed by a joint campaign, there will be separate manifestos. The ostensible reason for this arrangement is that there is no merger of parties; hence separate manifestos are unavoidable. The real reason may be that among the rank and file of a party, a certain hostility to any close collaboration with other parties still persists. And secondly, every party probably thinks that for the constituency in which it is asked to contest, its own distinct manifesto should form the best possible electoral platform from which to fight the rival parties. One final point would have to be made here. Alliances will vary from place to place; allies in one constituency will be rivals in another. Alliances could also include a very wide range of the political spectrum. But then, what does all this mean in terms of beliefs, ideologies, policies and programmes? Or, do they have no place?