

EMERGING ALIGNMENTS

With the dissolution of the Tamil Nadu Assembly the country is now confronted with general elections for the Lok Sabha and one or more State legislatures. Pressures are building to announce elections to the West Bengal Assembly as well which it would be both difficult and unwise to ignore. Mr Karunanidhi's move is certainly a shrewd and calculated election manoeuvre in which all parties are now fully engaged up and down the country.

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.

Conceding the force of Mr Masani's argument, it is still necessary to understand the difficulties in the way of the Congress (O) in accepting this somewhat idealistic prescription. The Congress (O) is in the throes of an identity crisis and many in the party have not wholly reconciled themselves to the compulsions of the new situation. And it is not a peripheral fringe in the party that has reservations about a closer identification with the kind of ideological position that Mr Masani espouses. The Chief Ministers of Gujarat and Mysore, the two strongholds of the Congress (O), have serious doubts about the tactical wisdom of a more explicit alliance with parties of the right. And lastly, the wishes of the SSP cannot be lightly brushed aside, considering the real accretion of strength that its presence in the Front could bring in the crucial States of U.P. and Bihar.

For the moment the members of the National Democratic Front will issue their own separate manifestoes, though it is not inconceivable that they might later put forward a joint statement covering certain specific issues. How this arrangement and the electoral adjustments that must follow will in fact work out remains to be seen since the souring of some aspirations could well result in discords within each party. But this hazard will not be unique to the NDF. The Congress (N) and its associates will be confronted with a similar problem.

The BKD National Executive has meanwhile decided to keep aloof from any alliance but has empowered its State units to forge such local adjustments as seem desirable, except in U.P. where Mr Charan Singh believes his best hope lies in going it alone. Following the strong attack delivered against Mrs Gandhi's government by Mr Charan Singh at Rohtak on Sunday, it seems likely that the BKD may become an associate member of the Front outside U.P. and even in that State wherever it is itself not contesting a seat. This could, however, strain the SVD in U.P. though it need not break it. Should that happen other consequences might ensue.