

Politics of compulsion

New Delhi Diary By C. S. Pandit

IMMEDIATE poll adjustments as against long-term political alliances have been the main outcome of the Prime Minister's decision to hold a snap election to the Lok Sabha a year ahead of schedule.

It is not as if the decision to go the polls within sixty days was flung on the nation as a surprise. The talk of a mid-term poll was very much in the air for three months. And yet the Opposition parties hoped against hope that it would not come. Their reactions when the decision was announced on December 27 betrayed a certain lack of preparedness on their part.

National conferences of the various parties were hurriedly cancelled. The leaders of the parties which had been working towards a "grand alliance" of Opposition parties rushed to Delhi to put their final seal of approval on what some of them presumably thought would provide a credible alternative to the ruling party.

Isolated

The author of the grand alliance idea, Mr M. R. Masani of the Swatantra Party, was probably the most frustrated man on Sunday last when he found his dream crashing because of the immediate compulsions of the Old Congress and the Jan Sangh in the Hindi-speaking states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. His party had nothing to offer in these states during the elections. The Samyukta Socialist Party, on the other hand, could make a major difference to the electoral front that came into being.

Isolated and ignored, Mr Masani was forced to withdraw from the meeting. If he was bitter in his subsequent statement, it was understandable. He probably realises that his walking out will not stop his party joining the front, only it will not be able to give either the ideological direction to the combination or bargain for seats from a position of equality and strength.

The new electoral front of the Old Congress, the Jan Sangh and the S.S.P. that has thus emerged has a purely negative aim to defeat Mrs Indira Gandhi and her personal following particularly in the Hindi-speaking heartland of India.

If in the process the front manages to get a clear majority, its constituents feel, there will be time enough to evolve a minimum programme to form a government. The leaders of the electoral front presumably had in their mind the pattern of the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal that have come into being in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

They would have liked the Bharatiya Kranti Dal leader, Mr Charan Singh, also to throw his lot with them. The combination would then have been a formidable

one. The latter preferred, however, to keep out probably because he hopes to play the same role at the national level which he has been playing in Uttar Pradesh ever since the mid-term poll in that state in February, 1969.

Another possible reason is that in the mid-term poll in U.P. the B.K.D. had won most of its seats in the State Assembly at the expense of the Jan Sangh and the S.S.P. A formal poll adjustment with them now may disturb the very base of his party. Besides, he has no love lost for the Old Congress leader, Mr C. B. Gupta, although political compulsions have forced them to come together in their state for the time being.

Judging from some of his recent speeches, it is also certain that Mr Charan Singh has no hope of any accommodation from the Prime Minister. It will, therefore, be wrong to assume that his decision to stay out of the electoral front is to keep his options open on either side.

It would be more appropriate to assume that, while keeping a public posture of going all alone, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the B.K.D. leader may find it expedient to enter into electoral adjustments with the three-party front at the district level in constituencies where his party may not be strong enough. This is borne out by his assurance to the S.S.P. leaders that he would work towards the defeat of the New Congress.

For the Old Congress, too, the emergence of the three-party electoral front seems to be a marriage of convenience, although for some of its senior leaders Mr Masani's withdrawal and the collapse of the grand alliance idea on a minimum programme must have come as a disappointment. But some in the Old Congress, like Dr Ram Subhag Singh, are obviously happy.

Limited purpose

The association of the S.S.P., which claims to be more radical than even the Marxists, in the three-party front gives it, according to these leaders, a respectability which would have been missing, had the alliance confined itself to the Old Congress, the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party. They can now turn round and say that theirs is not a rightist, conservative alliance—the main accusation against them from the ruling party.

They also feel their party's association with the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party was becoming a liability in their strongholds in Gujarat and Mysore. They hope that the new electoral front will probably be less unacceptable in these States since the Jan Sangh does not have much of a base in

either and the Swatantra Party cannot now bargain for seats, particularly in Gujarat, from a position of equality and strength.

In the Hindi-speaking region comprising U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, on the other hand, an alliance with the Jan Sangh can be of considerable advantage to the Old Congress.

The same argument holds good in the case of the S.S.P. so far as U.P. and Bihar are concerned, notwithstanding the fact that on policy issues like a new Constituent Assembly, compensation to princes and property rights it is in total disagreement with the approach of its two partners, the Old Congress and the Jan Sangh.

The S.S.P. leaders explain that theirs is a limited purpose and tactically they see nothing wrong in having electoral adjustments with parties opposed to their basic policies so long as they have the freedom to enter into a similar adjustment with the Communist Marxists in states like West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Contradictions

Probably another reason for joining the front, which is not admitted publicly by the S.S.P. leaders, is that even in states like U.P. and Bihar, where they claim a sizable following, they might have been wiped out, had they gone to the elections on their own. By having an electoral adjustment with some of their partners in the S.V.D. governments in the two states they hope not only to retain the seats they had in the dissolved Lok Sabha but also to secure some more from those held by the Ruling Congress.

There are, however, some basic contradictions in the electoral front that has come into being. The idea of a joint election campaign by parties, which have been fighting against each other in the past and which have avoided evolving a common programme for the coming elections may confuse the voter.

The S.S.P. leaders openly describe it as an alliance of convenience for a limited purpose. They believe their party stands to gain considerably in the elections as a consequence. They have no compunction in pointing out that their committed voters in constituencies, where they agree to support the Jan Sangh and the Old Congress, may prefer to vote for the B.K.D., which has the same backward class base as their own party rather than for candidates of their partners in the electoral front.

In other words, the S.S.P., hopes to get all the advantage from its electoral understanding with the Jan Sangh and the Old Congress without returning it in equal mea-

sure in their pockets of influence. This will be particularly true of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

In Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan the S.S.P. does not count for much. The Jan Sangh is a far more important party having forged a direct alliance with the former princes who are out to oppose the Prime Minister's party. The Old Congress, which lost its moorings in these states after the split, may get a foothold with the help of the Jan Sangh and the princes. But the real gainer will be the Jan Sangh, unless the Swatantra Party also comes into the electoral front. It will then share part of the gain with the Jan Sangh.

It is not as if the alliance and electoral adjustments have taken place only among the opponents of the Ruling Congress. The Prime Minister's party, too, is seeking electoral adjustments with parties like the Praja-Socialists, the D.M.K. and the Communist Party of India. Its tactics, however, are different. There is no alliance or commitment at the national level. It would like to have an adjustment of seats only at the state level. This would make the bargaining easier since there will be no prior commitment to entertain exaggerated claims of the smaller parties.

In Uttar Pradesh, too, some such adjustment is visualised with parties like the P.S.P., C.P.I. and the Republican Party. Despite that the Ruling Congress believes the toughest fight will be in that state. The B.K.D.'s decision to stay out of the electoral front of the Opposition, no doubt, will help a little by making the fight three-cornered in many constituencies. Even so the tactical astuteness of the Old Congress leader, Mr C. B. Gupta, and the committed cadres and the militancy of the Jan Sangh and the S.S.P. are not underrated by the New Congress.

Caste basis

The New Congress assessment of the situation in Bihar is different. Its leaders believe that politics has frozen in that state on caste basis. Whichever side is able to field the right combination of the various caste candidates will have an edge, whatever be the complexion of the alliance.

That is why frantic efforts have been made in the last few days to compose the differences among Bihar leaders of the New Congress which had flared up following the fall of Mr. Daroga Rai's Government.

Thus the emerging alliances or electoral adjustments have hardly helped to clear the political confusion, and the voter is still without clear-cut alternatives. In this confusion the New Congress poll strategists are banking heavily on the personal popularity of the Prime Minister and her policies. This is something intangible which may or may not pay off.