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Swatantra Party

Resigning from the National Executive and the Central Parliamentary Board of the Swatantra Party a fortnight ago, Mr. M. R. Masani expressed the hope that his action might stimulate the 'conscience' of the party. On Sunday in New Delhi the national executive agreed, among other things, that on 'matters of conscience' members could have considerable freedom, provided their action was not against the basic principles of the party. Conscience is the moral sense of right and wrong, but politicians, being generally blessed with an 'elastic' conscience, decide themselves what is right and what is wrong according to their own light and even self-interest. Qualms of conscience are in most cases a momentary feeling. Incidentally, the national executive has appealed to Mr. Masani to withdraw his resignation, but whether his conscience will permit him to do so remains to be seen. Mr. Masani's dilemma is understandable. The Swatantra Party, despite its reactionary posture and partiality to the affluent class, has been a disciplined organization, but it seems to be losing even this advantage. Discipline among leaders as well as the rank and file is essential for the survival of a political party. The events which forced Mr. Masani to tender his resignation explain to what extent the forces of indiscipline have raised their heads. Differences within the Swatantra Party in Gujarat led to the defeat of certain nominees of the party in the recent elections to the Rajya Sabha. Obviously a large number of Swatantra legislators did not vote for the party candidates. The defeat of Mr. Babubhai Vaidya who was supported by the parliamentary board was a shock to central leadership. It has been alleged that a senior leader of the party, Mr. H. M. Patel, had worked for Mr. Vaidya's defeat. About 33 of the 57 Swatantra votes reportedly went against the party decision. In protest Mr. Masani resigned, but the question is whether his

resignation will bring the erring members to the straight and narrow path. Mr. C. Rajagopalachari has been, strangely enough, silent on the issue.

The Swatantra Party is passing through a critical phase. Some of its legislators have deserted it. In the last general elections its performance was impressive, but it is now finding it difficult to retain its strongholds. The pro-Swatantra trend that was noticeable in certain states just before the elections was a corollary of the anti-Congress trend. But it still lacks a mass appeal. So long as it upholds the cause of big industrialists and landlords, how can it claim that it is a party of the common man? Its economic programmes will favour only the private sector. It is against nationalization. It has made a virtue of the profit-motive. Adam Smith and Marshall and the Tatas and Birlas are the party's prophets and high priests. On the credit side, however, it must be said that the Swatantra's role as an opposition party has been highly responsible. In Parliament its representatives have established themselves as good debaters. Unlike certain other opposition parties, which revel in creating disorderly scenes in the legislature, the Swatantra is keen on maintaining the dignity of the house.

The Swatantra Party finds itself in an embarrassing situation when it makes friends with other opposition parties. In U.P. the party will quit the united front because it has hardly benefited from the alliance. There is something in common between the Jan Sangh and the Swatantra Party but their philosophies are different. The Swatantra, on its own, cannot form a government and temperamentally it is incapable of forging successful coalitions. But it is not necessary that all political parties should assume office. Some of them, by remaining in the opposition, can play an effective and useful role, and the Swatantra belongs to that category.