

5585

Hindustan Times \$

Crus

2/5/68

SWATANTRA LOSSES

The Swatantra Party has been steadily losing ground. This is unfortunate because at least in two States—Rajasthan and Gujarat—it seemed, after the last general election, to have emerged as a powerful and credible democratic alternative that could challenge the long-standing monopoly of power enjoyed by the Congress. Today, however, the party is rent by dissension. Its leadership is in disarray; its rank and file demoralized. What is more serious, the party is beginning to pay a heavy price for disunity in terms of loss of electoral support.

The results of two recent by-elections in Rajasthan are grievous blows to the party's electoral fortunes. The contest for the Dausa parliamentary seat was a straight fight between the Congress and Swatantra. In the Chomu Assembly contest, there were two independent candidates. But for all practical purposes, as the small number of votes received by the independents showed, it was a direct Swatantra-Congress confrontation. In both, the Congress wrested seats that the Swatantra Party had held for nearly six years. Some of the pro-Congress votes could be attributed to the slight swing that is in evidence in its favour all over the country today. But the results in

Rajasthan represent not so much a Congress success as a Swatantra defeat. And the Swatantra defeat cannot be explained except in terms of the party's internal squabbles.

Both in Gujarat and Rajasthan, the party has lost ground to the Congress through defections by MLAs originally elected on the Swatantra ticket. In Gujarat, the party had the further mortification of seeing several of its MLAs help a rebel candidate win the recent elections to the Rajya Sabha in defiance of the party whip. This led to the resignation of the party's energetic general secretary, Mr M. R. Masani, as "atonement" for the defeated candidate who had long been promised the Swatantra nomination. The national executive of the party rightly decided to take disciplinary action against the errant MLAs from Gujarat. After this decision, Mr Masani's resignation would seem to have become redundant. But, apparently, the party has not been able to persuade him to withdraw it. Clearly, there is more to the rift in the leadership than meets the eye. The party must understand that if it does not repair the cracks that have appeared in its public image, it stands in danger of being reduced to a wistful memory of the past.