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Bombay

Client:-

Swatantra Party

Subject: Swatantra Party

Hindu Weekly Review, Madras,

15 APR 1968

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Gujarat Swatantra Ranks in Disarray

By V. Venkateswaran

A MAJOR crisis is brewing in the Swatantra Party in Gujarat. The rift in the party came into the open when a section of its members in the State Assembly defied the whip and voted for the 'rebel' candidate, Mr. Udesinh Mahida in the elections to the Rajya Sabha, thereby being responsible for the defeat of the official Swatantra candidate, Mr. Babubhai Vaidya.

For the other two seats in the Rajya Sabha, the sitting members, Mr. Jaisukhlal Hathi, Union Minister for Law and Rehabilitation, and Mr. Tribhuvandas Patel (both Congress) were returned. These two were declared elected on first preference votes, while Mr. Mahida was declared winner after second preference votes were taken into account. (Mr. Hathi polled 46 votes, Mr. Patel 41, Mr. Mahida 48 and Mr. Vaidya 27). Though 51 Swatantra members took part in the election, the official candidate could secure only 27 votes, while the 'rebel' candidate got several second preference votes from the Congress.

Leaders Resign Posts

Following the success of Mr. Mahida, who was supported by the Congress Party, the Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Mr. Bhailalbhai Patel, and the Deputy Opposition Leader, Mr. Jaideepsinhji, resigned their party posts.

Mr. M. R. Masani, Deputy Leader of the Swatantra Party in Parliament, followed the example of the State unit's leaders by offering his resignation from the party's National Executive and Central Parliamentary Board.

Mr. Bhailalbhai Patel reacted sharply to the open defiance of the party

whip by members. "No one will now have any faith in the party and its promises," he said. Mr. H. M. Patel, M.L.A., and President of the Gujarat Swatantra Party, described the election of the unofficial candidate as "unfortunate" and said that the party was facing a crisis. According to Mr. Babubhai Vaidya, he did not take the defeat as his own, but that of the Swatantra Party. He was, however, happy that a number of non-Swatantra M.L.As. had voted for him.

Promise to Vaidya

It may be recalled that in 1966, the Swatantra Party got the support of the Independent Progressive Group in the Gujarat Assembly, of which Mr. Babubhai Vaidya was the leader, to secure the election of Dr. Beharilal Anantani to the Rajya Sabha. In return for this support, Mr. Vaidya was promised that he would be the party's candidate for the 1968 Rajya Sabha elections. This assurance had the support of the top leaders in the party, including Mr. Masani.

Later, when the issue came up at the Central Parliamentary Board level, it was decided that the promise given by the Gujarat party leaders should be honoured. The Board, at its meeting held in Bombay, decided that Mr. Babubhai Vaidya would be the party's candidate for the Rajya Sabha elections from Gujarat in 1968.

It is now clear that one of the major reasons for the differences in the Swatantra Party is that the other princes, who gave their wholehearted support to the party's candidates at the time of the general elections and to the party's policies, are now adopting a different attitude over some of

the crucial issues facing it. It was reported that the main opposition to the official candidate came from Chandrasinh Jadeja, the Thakore of Dhrol.

Some of the members of the Swatantra Party expressed surprise when Mr. Pravinsinh Solanki, M.P., and General Secretary of the Gujarat unit, in a statement, extended indirect support to Mr. Mahida. He said that a good number of Swatantra Party members opposed the choice of Mr. Vaidya as the official candidate at the last meeting of the State Council, held on March 10. These members did not like the ticket to be given to a candidate who was not a member of the party. He, however, added that the State leadership was quite justified in its statement that Mr. Mahida's victory could be taken as lack of confidence in the leadership of the party.

'Rigidity in Working'

The Swatantra Party in the State is now in disarray. The causes are not far to seek. Immediately after the elections, an influential section of the party members openly expressed dissatisfaction with the working of the State leadership of the party. They felt the party was becoming more and more rigid in its working and that flexible attitudes had not been taken on many problems.

It has to be seen whether the top leaders will set the house in order, or take disciplinary action against those who openly go against the 'rebel' candidate. The outcome will be watched with interest by all the parties in the State.

If there is an open break, the rebel Swatantra members may swell

the ranks of the Congress. The Chief Whip of the Congress in the Assembly, Mr. Indubhai Patel, said after the Rajya Sabha elections that his party had adopted a "political strategy" in securing the success of the 'rebel' Swatantra candidate.

Besides the Swatantra Party dissensions, adding to the happiness of the ruling party is the outcome of the panchayat elections. By its resounding victories the Congress has regained the unassailable position it held after the 1962 elections.

Congress Regains Ground

The Congress routed the Opposition parties in the 17 district panchayats, winning about 90 per cent of the seats. It also captured 150 of the 180 taluka panchayats. The remaining seats went to the Swatantra Party, dissident Congressmen and independents.

In Sabarkantha, Surendranagar and Panchmahal districts, where the ruling party fared very badly in the last general elections, it has regained its position of supremacy. In Kaira district, considered to be the "bastion" of the Swatantra Party, Congress won 17 of the 18 seats, only one seat going to the Swatantra Party.

The Chief Minister, Mr. Hitendra Desai, commenting on the results, said people had now realised how the Opposition parties functioned in other States and that was the reason they had given their verdict in favour of the Congress. A ruling party spokesman said the results reflected people's faith in the Congress administration in Gujarat.