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Following unbridgable differences and long drawn out tussle between the ICS and the political wings in the Swatantra Party's leadership, M. R. Masani has resigned from the national executive and the parliamentary board of the party. Bhaikal Patel, commonly called Bhaikaka, and Jaideepsinghji Baria, leader and deputy leader respectively of the Swatantra Party in the Gujarat Assembly have also stepped down from their posts. Some more resignations are likely to follow.

THIS has created an unprecedented crisis within the Swatantra Party. Its General Secretary N. Dandekar has even hinted a possible split in the party due to this development.

Ostensibly, the cause of these resignations is the defeat of Swatantra's official candidate, Babubhai Vaidya (though he is not the member of the party) for the Rajya Sabha seat from Gujarat and the victory of a rebel candidate, Udesingh Mahida, a member of the party.

But the fact that Masani's evaluation of this defeat, as not an isolated case but "one more example of general demoralisation in the political life of the country finding its way into our own ranks", tells a lot.

Masani's bitterness about the state of affairs in his own party is not a new thing. Only recently he had confessed that the Swatantra Party was suffering from a 'credibility gap', that it was losing the 'elan and dynamism of its early years'.

And he has taken his preoccupation for 'job rotation' ("too many people have been occupying the same position in its hierarchy too long") or his dig at the state units (many of which are claiming that "there should be no interference by the national headquarters in their affairs"), Masani had pointed out the danger of 'Balkanisation' within the party as a result of indiscipline and parochialism growing day by day.

It is also known that N. G. Ranga, the present Chairman of the party did not oblige Masani by stepping down from the leadership of the parliamentary group which he has been holding since 'too long'.

Masani's Role In Gujarat

Second, the post-election developments within the Gujarat unit of the Swatantra vis-a-vis Masani's role in it have much more to do with his resignation than is usually understood.

On some important occasions, Masani had found himself in real trouble with the Gujarat unit of the party. Once when he took an outright pro-American stand on Kashmir immediately before the general elections, he was strongly reprimanded by his allies like Jana Sangh in Rajkot constituency and even by his own cadres. He was hooted at a public meeting in Rajkot.

And he had to employ a lot of manoeuvres to win back those sections. His sunset started from that event, though he succeeded in winning the election.

Another time, it was again his blatantly pro-American stand during the Indo-Pak war that had infuriated the Gujarat leadership of his party. His image as the sole spokesman of the party was further tarnished.

Third time, it was more open. Bhaikaka is said to have clearly

party that he will not get a seat from Gujarat next time.

At that time Masani wanted Vadilal Mehta, a former Congressman and a millowner of Ahmedabad, to take over the leadership of the Swatantra group in the Gujarat Assembly in place of Bhaikaka.

But Bhaikaka did not take it lightly. He sensed mischief in Masani's move, and did not give his place to Vadilal. He was elected the leader of the party group.

Vadilal was supported mainly by Kshatriya members (former feudal chiefs) of the party against the Patels of Bhaikaka's caste. The Swatantra had placed very high hopes on Vadilal when he joined the party as a life member with great fanfare.

He later resigned from the party with two other MLAs, Pra-

Swatantra Party in Doldrums

—Split in the Offing?

by

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bhudas Patel and Laldas Kundivala. While resigning, he accused the Swatantra of serving exclusively the interests of some privileged classes and castes.

He also declared that the crisis of confidence and internal degeneration within the party accentuated by the casteist divisions made it impossible for them to remain in it. That was a big blow to the Gujarat unit, particularly to Bhaikaka's prestige.

Thus, bad blood was created between the Gujarat leadership and Masani on more than one occasions. Once Masani, as the then general secretary of the party, had given a directive to the state unit in favour of Dhanraji Patel in a dispute within latter's Junagadh district branch of the party. The state unit felt humiliated as the directive went against its own stand.

Masani was believed to superimpose himself on the state unit. And Bhaikaka had always a grudge against him. Former ICS bureaucrats, former feudal chiefs

and Bhaikaka thus found a common target at least for once and that was Masani.

And now comes Babubhai Vaidya's defeat. If the defeat is seen in this light, it is clear that Masani had very few colleagues in Gujarat to support his stand.

It is widely believed that Bhaikaka was more pleased by Babubhai's defeat than annoyed, because that signified Masani's defeat also. His resignation as the leader of the Swatantra group in the assembly was to come any way, defeat or no defeat. He had planned it long ago.

Actually the decision to allot a party ticket to Babubhai was a

sort of private understanding between Masani plus some two or three leaders and Babubhai's so-called Progressive Group (consisting of seven members) in 1966.

At that time Babubhai's group voted for the Swatantra candidate for Rajya Sabha, Antani. In lieu of that, Masani promised to give a Rajya Sabha ticket to Babubhai in 1968. It is alleged by Masani's opponents that he never bothered to take the party into confidence for such an understanding.

Not only the majority of the

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Swatantra MLAs revolted against this and voted for the rebel candidate Mahida, but almost all the Swatantra MPs, former feudal chiefs and ICS wallahs supported Mahida against the wishes of Masani. Among them were Pravinlal Solanki, Dahyabhai Parmar, Manubhai Amarsingh, R. K. Amin, Ramchandra Amin, C. C. Desai and, above all, H. M. Patel—the present leader of the party in Gujarat. Their main contention was that, unlike Babubhai, Mahida was an official member of the party.

Some Kshatriya members who stood for Babubhai were mainly led to do so to save the party from total disaster. Though, they could not save it.

It is revealing that the first persons to congratulate Mahida on his success were Vadilal Mehta and Dhrol Thakor, a Congress MLA and one of the most prominent former Raja of Saurashtra.

After all this, the Swatantra Party in Gujarat now is considerably shorn of its former splendour. Its strength in the Assembly has gone down to less than 58 from its original 72 members.

Defections have been more from the Swatantra to the Congress and many frustrated Congressmen who once saw in the rise of Swatantra party their only hope to achieve fame, money and power and joined it have been terribly disillusioned.

What the leadership has till now failed to realise is that the party which stands for the monopolists and former rajas can never attract dedicated workers, it can only acquire mercenaries. And the increasing hold of the ICS wing over the Swatantra party can only lead to its further de-