

INDIAN ELECTIONS AND AFTER

S. N. RAY

THE FOURTH GENERAL ELECTIONS IN INDIA IN FEBRUARY this year registered significant changes in the balance of political power. That such changes could be brought about peacefully through the ballot box indicates that India's choice of parliamentary democracy has been neither superficial nor unrealistic. At the same time the new situation is fraught with problems and hazards which have become increasingly evident in the last few months.

India's first experience of elections on the basis of adult franchise took place in 1951-52 when the electorate comprised 173 million people.¹ The number increased to 193 and 216 million respectively in the general elections of 1957 and 1962. This time there were about 251 million registered voters; 60 per cent cast their votes. The elections were for a total of 521 seats in the Lok Sabha (House of the People, or the Lower House of the Federal Parliament), and over three thousand seats in the State and Territorial Assemblies. There were over 18 thousand candidates and 260 thousand polling stations.

In the previous three elections the Indian National Congress had been repeatedly returned to power both in the Union (*i.e.*, Federal) and the State governments (except once in the State of Kerala where a Communist government was in office from 1957-59).² Founded in 1885, the Congress is India's oldest political party, but during the first three decades of its history its membership was almost entirely limited to a relatively small though highly articulate urban middle class. In the 'twenties, it was transformed into a powerful mass-organisation with a sizeable rural base, thanks primarily to the techniques of political struggle developed and used by Gandhi. It accommodated a wide range of views and interests, and became in effect a national front of nearly all political groups which were engaged in the movement for independence. Its dominant position in the country's politics over the last twenty years has been due in no small measure to its historic role in the pre-independence period.

¹ Franchise was introduced under the British but on a limited scale — 33 thousand voters under the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909; 5.1 million in 1919; 30 million under the Government of India Act, 1935.

² See the three Reports of the Election Commission of India — 1951-52; 1957; and 1962 (New Delhi). Also S.V. Kogekar and R.L. Park (eds.), *Reports on the Indian General Elections 1951-52* (Bombay, 1956); S.L. Poplai (ed.), *National Politics and 1957 Elections in India* (Delhi), and 1962 *General Elections in India* (Bombay).

However, since independence, the Congress has been undergoing political erosion. Many groups which formerly belonged to it began to break away and form rival organizations of their own. But since these parties were neither very strong nor united, their challenge was hardly effective either at the national or the State level. Although the Congress received only 45%, 48% and 45% of the total votes cast in the elections of 1952, 1957 and 1962 respectively, it nevertheless managed each time to gain control of the Union and State legislatures, due to the fragmentation of the non-Congress vote among a multiplicity of opposition parties and independent candidates. This situation has been substantially altered by the elections this year.

The Congress this time secured only about 40% of the votes cast, showing a 5% decline since the last elections. It returned 282 candidates to the Lok Sabha (361 in 1952, 371 in 1957, and 358 in 1962), thus retaining its absolute majority (54.50% of seats) but substantially reduced from the last parliament (when it had 72.50% of seats). Much more dramatic was its set-back in the States where it won a majority in only 8 states out of 16. In one of these eight states, Haryana, thirteen members defected from the party shortly after the elections leading to the fall of the Congress government there. The Congress made up for this loss by winning over some independent legislators in another State, Rajasthan, where originally it had not returned a majority. But in Uttar Pradesh (India's most populous State which has also furnished all the Prime Ministers of India to date) where the Congress, although without a majority of its own, had formed the government with the support of some independents, it was forced to resign when some of its own members broke away and formed a new party.

Currently anti-Congress parties are in office in eight States. Except in Madras (recently renamed Tamizhagham), these are all multi-party coalition governments. In Madras, the Congress was virtually wiped out by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (D.M.K.), which won 138 seats out of 234 (Congress: 49). In Kerala and West Bengal, the coalition is dominated by the Communists, in Orissa by the Swatantra Party, in Bihar by the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP), and in Punjab by the Akali Dal. In Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the largest anti-Congress Party is the Jana Sangh which also controls Delhi, India's capital, where it won 33 out of 56 seats on the Metropolitan Council.

There are many reasons for this political debacle of the Congress. Nehru's death in 1964 marked the end of the generation of leaders of national stature who had given to the Congress its great prestige and popularity. In fact, Nehru's own stature declined sharply during the last two years of his Prime Ministership — after the Chinese invasion of India in 1962. Two decades of power-monopoly had made the organisation corrupt, slothful and complacent; its leadership was faction-ridden at every level; it had

become grossly indifferent to public opinion. While the first two Five Year Plans (1951-61) had considerable economic achievements to their credit, the third Plan (1961-66) was in most respects a failure.³ Rapid population growth, increased defence expenditure, neglect of agricultural priorities, administrative mismanagement and wastage, and repeated failure of the monsoon rains greatly worsened the food situation. The result was growing public discontent which, instead of unifying the Congress and revitalizing its leadership, tempted unsuccessful factions within the party to break away from the parent organisation and form alliances with opposition parties. What, however, in the end proved decisive was that the opposition parties, despite strong ideological and programmatic differences among themselves, managed in a number of States to form United Fronts or tactical alliances before the elections, thus substantially reducing fragmentation of the anti-Congress vote. Had these Fronts been more extensive and not restricted to the State level, the Congress reverses would in all probability have been more severe, even to the extent of forcing it to seek a coalition government at the Centre.

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The elections clearly demonstrated that in a parliamentary democracy, governments may be changed peacefully when they no longer enjoy majority support even though they may have been in office for a considerable period of time. This, of course, would be taken for granted in a few Western societies (including Australia), but in most parts of the world changes of political power continue to be associated with *coup d'etat*, organized violence, civil war and dictatorship. One has only to look at China, Indonesia, the Middle East, Africa and the countries of Latin America to appreciate the political achievements of Indian democracy.

However, major changes in the balance of power, even if peaceful, are rarely without problems and hazards. In India, the first post-election problem is the relation between the Union and the States. Being a land of many races, languages and cultures, India after gaining independence advisedly adopted a Federal Constitution which would base its polity on the principle of unity in diversity. But as long as both the Union and the State governments were run by the same party, the main trend was expectedly towards increasing domination of the federated units by the Central authority. Now that eight states are governed by non-Congress parties, conflict between the Union and the States would be difficult to avoid or resolve.

³Between 1951-61 the index of industrial production rose at an average rate of about 9.5 per cent; between 1961-66 it fluctuated between 6.6 and 8 per cent. Food production which had steadily increased during the 'fifties (from 50 million tons in 1950-51 to 82 million in 1960-61) suffered a sharp decline in the 'sixties (77 million tons in 1965-66).

The danger in this context often emphasized by political pundits is that since in India centrifugal forces are quite strong, a weakened Federal authority may eventually provoke secessionist adventures. However, developments of the last few months do not particularly support this apprehension (except possibly in the case of West Bengal where the pro-Chinese Communist party which constitutes the largest group in the coalition is trying to exploit the traditional Bengali distrust of Delhi and precipitate a crisis.) The D.M.K. in Madras, which in the past spoke threateningly of secession, has proved to be responsible and cooperative; so surprisingly enough has Kerala where the Communist Chief Minister, Mr. Namboodiripad has in fact been criticised by his own party for his readiness to abide by the Constitution and cooperate with Delhi.

A more immediately relevant aspect of this problem would seem to be that of national policy making. Until now economic planning, for example, has been conceived on a national plane although its execution had to rely heavily on the States. The opposition is strongly critical of the Congress approach to economic planning — the Left because it is not socialistic enough, the Right because its excessive restrictions on private enterprise and foreign investment prevent quicker economic growth. Now that both the Right and the Left are in power in a number of states, their criticism would have to be seriously taken into account. This is likely to make national planning more ambiguous and ineffective, but on the other hand it may very well lead to welcome decentralization of developmental authority and efforts. It is at least conceivable, though as yet far from certain, that there will be healthy competition among the States to increase their respective rates of economic growth by following alternative principles and methods.

At least in respect of one policy issue the new balance of power would seem to be favourable to greater realism and statesmanship. The Congress with its power base in North India was committed to replace English by Hindi as the official language of the Union, even though the latter was neither developed enough nor acceptable to most non-Hindi speaking people. This was in particular opposed passionately by the Dravidian South, and the spectacular defeat of the Congress in Madras was almost entirely due to this issue. The new policy which seems to be emerging under pressure from some of the non-Congress Governments is that of continuing English indefinitely as the official language of the Union, and of placing the regional languages on an equal footing with Hindi.

Another apprehension raised by the new set-up is that of growing political instability, especially in some of the States. The Congress has a solid majority in seven, but in Rajasthan it depends on the support of a group of independents who may again cross the floor. Except in Madras where the D.M.K. commands absolute majority, all the other non-Congress gov-

ernments are based on coalition. Among them the seven party coalition in Kerala dominated by the Communists and the two party coalition in Orissa led by the Swatantra party would seem on the whole to be stable. In Bihar the six-party United Front includes parties as diametrically opposed as the Jana Sangh and the Swatantra on one side, and the pro-Peking Communists on the other. In West Bengal, the Front is composed of as many as fourteen parties and several independents. In Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, non-Congress Governments were made possible by post-election defections from the Congress; and in Punjab, the majority of the seven-party coalition government is precariously slender. Thus possibly in six states, certainly in four, the danger of political instability would seem to be quite genuine.

But the most serious risk of the new situation comes from the nature of some of the non-Congress parties which the elections have brought to the fore of Indian politics. Despite all its ambiguities and shortcomings, the Congress has always been committed to democratic principles and practices. Among its principal rivals the Swatantra party alone would seem definitely to share this commitment. Founded in 1959, it is heterogeneous in its leadership and support (Parsee businessmen, ex-rulers of princely states and their erstwhile subjects, peasants, anti-communist intellectuals, etc.); it opposes expansion of the government's powers and role in the economy and advocates decentralisation and greater scope for private enterprise. Rejecting the Congress policy of non-alignment, it advocates closer ties with the Western democracies and a regional alliance in South and South-East Asia against Chinese expansion and subversion. It is now the second largest party in the Parliament (44 seats) and the leading partner in the Orissa Coalition Government, and it has substantial strength in the State legislatures of Gujarat (64 seats), Rajasthan (49) and Andhra (29).

Of the other powerful non-Congress parties, the D.M.K.'s support and activities are limited to Madras. In the past it has not been altogether averse to violence and political extremism especially in its opposition to Hindi, but the new responsibilities of government seem to have already had a sobering effect. In some respects the SSP may be called its counterpart in the North with its passionate pro-Hindi and anti-English stand; but its cultural populism is of a more extreme variety and it has a much stronger penchant for violent demonstrations and unconstitutional activities. It is strong in Bihar (where it is the largest party in the anti-Congress coalition) and Uttar Pradesh, but it also enjoys some support in Kerala and Madhya Pradesh. Again the responsibilities of office in Bihar are having their effect on its political stance and behaviour, although it is rather doubtful if the effect will prove to be lasting.

The real political threat to democracy in India, however, comes from the Jana Sangh (JS) on the one hand, and the two Communist parties on the other. Founded in 1951, the Jana Sangh is essentially a Hindu national-

ist party, opposed to secularism and distrustful of democracy. It is believed to be the public political facade of an extremist authoritarian organization called the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.⁴ Since its inception it has grown steadily in strength and popularity; its main support comes from six states in North and Central India (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh). Currently it is the third largest party in the Union parliament (35 seats), and has the second largest number (264) of the total of seats in the State legislatures. It controls the Delhi Metropolitan Council and consequently is in a position to exert much pressure on the Union Government. It is bitterly opposed to Pakistan, and is militantly anti-liberal in its outlook and methods.

Indian Communists⁵ are now divided into two parties — the pro-Moscow CPI and the pro-Peking CPIM. The latter dominates the coalition governments in Kerala and West Bengal but the former has a somewhat larger representation in some other states (Bihar, Assam, Maharashtra, Orissa and Uttar Pradesh). They have a combined strength of 42 seats in the Lok Sabha and polled together over 12 million votes. While the pro-Moscow party would wish to take, for the time being, a relatively moderate political tone, the CPIM is bent on subversion and chaos. The struggle between the two parties cost them their commanding position in Andhra; they lost 32 of their previous 51 seats in the state legislature. In Kerala, although the CPIM (52 seats) dominates the coalition, Chief Minister Namboodiripad (who belongs to the CPIM) has been trying to put a brake on the extremism of his party. For this, he is under strong attack from the national leadership of the CPIM. In West Bengal, on the other hand, the CPIM dominated United Front government is fast heading towards a crisis. The extremists in the CPIM have already set up a “liberated area” at a place called Naxalbari situated in the sensitive north border of the state and close to Sikkim, Nepal and East Pakistan. According to reports, this is to be a base of guerrilla training and operation on the Chinese model. At the same time, widespread subversive activities are being organised in the state, much to the dismay of the other more moderate partners in the coalition. The plan would seem to be to establish a full CPIM controlled State in West Bengal which, with support from China and possibly East Pakistan, will eventually plunge the Union into a Civil War.

Whether the threats from the Jana Sangh and the Communists become more serious or not would seem to depend on several factors. Its debacle

⁴ For a description of the RSS, see J.A. Curran, *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics* (Institute of Pacific Relations, New York). For Jana Sangh, see Myron Weiner, *Party Politics in India; the development of a multi-party system* (Princeton, 1957).

⁵ See G. D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India* (University of California, 1959). Also J.H. Kautsky, *Moscow and the Communist Party of India; a study in the post war evolution of International Communist Strategy* (Wiley, New York, 1956).

in the elections may revitalise the Congress and make it more active, realistic and united.⁶ The moderately inclined opposition parties and groups may try to work in a cooperative and responsible manner, thus providing the country with a peaceful alternative to the Congress. The efforts of both when they are in office may raise the tempo of economic growth which slackened ominously during the last five years. It is hard to foretell if any or all of these will take place, but the next few years are sure to be decisive for the future of India.

⁶ Unfortunately the signs are not at all encouraging. At this writing 35 Congress MLAs are reported to have crossed the floor in Madhya Pradesh reducing the Congress strength in a House of 296 to 141. It looks as if the Congress will lose another state to its rivals. The largest non-Congress party in Madhya Pradesh legislature is the Jana Sangh (78 seats).