

## TURNING POINT IN INDIA

S. G. Sardesai\*

**N**O previous election in India generated the heat and fury experienced in the recent parliamentary poll. The forces of progress and reaction were pitted against each other in bitter conflict, often leading to violence. The results are clearly indicative of a turning point in our post-independence history. The verdict of the people has been decidedly in favour of a speedy introduction of economic and social reforms.

The unexpectedly sweeping victory of the Congress led by Indira Gandhi under the slogan of 'Garibi Hatao' (remove poverty) should not make one lose sight of the gravity of the situation as it stood on the eve of the elections.

On the one hand, the economic situation in the country had deteriorated alarmingly since the mid-sixties. Prices had been shooting up month after month for years. Unemployment was soaring. Pressures exercised by foreign and internal monopolists, as also the landed interests, secured concession after concession from the government. Particularly after the split in the Congress in 1969, the political offensive of the parties of right-wing reaction, called the Grand Alliance, developed into a menace. Their aggressiveness was seen not only in parliament but in the unleashing of massive communal riots in many provinces and of linguistic chauvinism in a few.

On the other hand, mass struggles of workers, peasants and youth also reached a new high in the period. After the split in the Congress, though Mrs Gandhi's party was reduced to a minority in parliament, major banks were nationalised with the support of left-wing parties. An attempt was made to abolish the privy purses of the princes, though it was defeated by the Supreme Court. Under the circumstances, the atmosphere in the elections was one of extreme tension, bitterness and also of uncertainty.

It was the healthy instinct and sense of realism of the masses that led to the rout of the parties of reaction whose strength has been reduced from 140 in the last parliament to 46 in the new one. The Congress led by Indira Gandhi has increased its strength from 220 to 350. The Communist Party of India (CPI) has maintained its strength of 24. The Communist Party—Marxist (CPM)

---

\* S. G. Sardesai is a member of the Central Executive Committee and a Secretary of the National Council of the Communist Party of India.

has increased its strength from 19 to 25, though 20 of these have been elected from one state alone, viz. West Bengal, and two from adjoining Tripura. The CPI's candidates have been elected from eight states in different parts of the country.

The key slogan of the CPI in the election was the defeat of right-wing reaction and the election of left and democratic candidates, including progressive sections in the Congress, to bring into existence a more left and democratically oriented parliament capable of making radical changes in the constitution for rapid socio-economic advance. In the new parliament, progressive forces are distinctly stronger and the reactionary forces much weaker than before. In the main, the strategical-tactical line of the CPI has proved correct.

But there is no ground for complacency. The election results also indicate that bitter struggles and complicated problems lie ahead and it is necessary to assimilate the lessons arising from the electoral verdict to determine the new tasks of the democratic forces.

Firstly, the electoral defeat of the grand alliance does not mean that reaction has been eliminated. In some states, its parties secured a very substantial number of votes. The entire bureaucratic apparatus, corrupted by vested interests, has always sabotaged the implementation of progressive measures in the past. Its power continues as before. Though the number of Congress MPs seriously committed to radical measures is much greater now, reaction is still strongly represented in the Congress Parliamentary Party. Members of the Syndicate Congress (the reactionary wing which split off in 1969) are trooping back in a massive landslide to the Indira Congress. In the new situation, the pressure of monopoly and landed interests inside the Congress is bound to grow.

Much more serious is the division and conflict among the left parties. The Praja Socialist Party and the Samyukta Socialist Party, two of the four major left parties in the country, have been almost eliminated in the election. The parliamentary strength of the Praja Socialist Party has been reduced from 13 to 2, and that of the Samyukta Socialist Party from 23 to 3.

The electoral success of the CPM in West Bengal is striking. But it is based to no small degree on its policy of individual terrorism and murder, supported by a major section of the police and bureaucracy, directed against all other left and democratic parties. This has created an extremely grave political crisis and constitutional stalemate in West Bengal, bringing grist to the mill of reaction. Because of its thoroughly disruptive policies, the CPM has lost

heavily in every state except West Bengal and Tripura. It has been virtually reduced to the position of a regional party.

There is not the remotest doubt that if the left parties had stood together in the elections, their combined representation in parliament would have been far greater. As it is, the Congress has gained at the cost both of the right and of the left. This need not have happened.

The massive vote for the Congress is not a vote for a party, as such, in the traditional sense. The Prime Minister herself has stated that it is an expression of the impatience of the people for the rapid removal of economic and social disparities. In the absence of left unity, this mass sentiment plumped dominantly for the Congress as a sheet anchor for a strong, stable and progressive government.

Hence, if the problems of unemployment, high prices and land are to be firmly and earnestly grappled with, if the situation is not to stagnate leading to disillusionment, apathy and worse, left and democratic unity of the forces both outside and inside the Congress, for pressure in parliament and mass actions outside, is the burning need of the hour.

Significant and welcome indications of such rethinking are already there. The Samyukta Socialist Party is in a crisis, with vast sections demanding a break with the policy of allying with the right in the name of fighting Indira Gandhi, which was pursued by the SSP leadership in the election. The demand for left unity is growing in the Praja Socialist Party. With its electoral achievement in West Bengal, the CPM leadership is, at present, riding a high horse. But it has to think of the severe setback received by it over the rest of the country, including Kerala.

The beginning of new efforts at left unity will, most likely, be in the sphere of united working class and peasant actions. All the left parties are rooted in the trade union and kisan movements. Joint actions on political demands for radical amendments of the constitution, for the abolition of princely privileges and purses without compensation, and other measures are also in the offing.

There is every reason to expect that innumerable young Congress MPs, and the huge numbers of new youth attracted towards the Congress because of the new orientation given to it by Indira Gandhi, will link up with the forces of the left outside the Congress in various ways. A characteristic feature of the youth now drawn towards the Congress is that it does not suffer from anti-Communism.

Most of them have a healthy, co-operative attitude towards Communists.

The general election this time has been such a whirlwind that its implications cannot be fully seen so soon after its results. But there is no doubt that despite dark and difficult patches the prospects of a united left and democratic offensive for a popular advance have clearly improved.