

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WDF-9
The Elections: Victory and Defeat

Houseboat Jacqueline
The Bund
Srinagar, Kashmir
India
March 31, 1957

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522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers,

Those election posters, proclaiming the advantages of voting for all those honest, intelligent, diligent candidates, have been ripped down and peeled from walls, or covered over with new posters advertising dance recitals and field-hockey matches. The Indian elections are over (except in some snow-bound parts of the Himalayas---and Kashmir is a special case), and the counting is nearly completed.

The 19 days of polling ended on March 14. The next day was Holi and the elections were driven aside with a rush of merry-making. Several tens of millions of people in India, from Mr. Nehru down to me, were squirted with colored water and sprinkled with colored powder in the name of the Coming of Spring. Mr. Nehru reportedly loved it, and I really didn't mind, even if my clothes were ruined and my teeth were stained purple for a day or two.

Holi or no Holi, the election returns kept coming. Monotonously, the morning papers brought reports of new Congress victories. The election results, as the election campaign, revolved around the Congress, and the ruling party has again, as in the first general elections five years ago, won three-fourths of the seats in the national Lok Sabha (House of the People) and two-thirds of the seats in the State Assemblies. The monotony was sufficiently relieved as the counting progressed, however, for the results produced some surprises, including a shocking victory of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the State of Kerala.

From Calcutta and Orissa, where I spent some time during the campaign (WDF-7), came news I particularly watched for. In Calcutta's Vidyasagar constituency, the Communist candidate, Dr. Narendra Chandra Roy, defeated the Congress minister, Sankar Prasad Mitra, by 3,000 votes in their contest for a State Assembly seat. And the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr. B.C. Roy, of the Congress, beat his Communist opponent, Mohammed Ismail, by only 550 votes. Of the 26 Assembly seats at stake in Calcutta, the Communist-led United Leftist Election Committee (ULEC) won 18 to the Congress' eight, while the other leftists and independents won none. But the Congress, with its State-wide rural strength, won 152 seats in the Assembly as a whole, leaving the ULEC far behind with 80. That 80, however, includes 46 seats that went to the Communists---a two-thirds gain for them.

In Orissa, the ex-Raja of Dhenkanal overwhelmed Surendra Mohan Patnaik, the young Congressman-lawyer, by 19,000 votes, and the Congress in general ran into trouble. The party of ex-Rajas and land-

owners, the Ganatantra Parishad, won 51 of the 140 MLA seats, to 56 for the Congress. With 71 seats needed to command a majority and form a Government, the Congress will have a hard time closing the gap, and keeping it closed during the next five years. Right now, newly elected MLAs, independents and members of other parties, are being "heavily canvassed," the phrase of Dr. Harekrushna Mahatab, the Congress Chief Minister in the State, in an effort to line them up.

Mr. Nehru contested the election from his home constituency in Allahabad (although he gives his "permanent address" as "the Prime Minister's Residence, New Delhi"), and he re-gained his seat in the Lok Sabha with a huge majority: 227,448 to a total of 82,493 for his three opponents. In Bombay city, Mr. Krishna Menon, who had returned to India on the eve of the elections to be hailed as "The Hero of Kashmir," won over a Praja Socialist Party (PSP) candidate, 171,708 to 123,967, in a contest which Mr. Nehru had described as a test for "our foreign policy."

With you there, and me here, and so many miles in between, I am tempted to dazzle you with an interpretation of the election results replete with "trends," "over-all patterns," and, best of all, "hidden significance." On the other hand, I'd better just say how many voted for whom.

In the first place, a lot of people voted. Of India's 370 million people, 193 million were eligible to vote, and about 100 million did, so that the percentage of participation will be a little higher than the 51% of the first general elections. This is a matter of considerable public pride.

In the second place, as expected, a lot of people voted for the Congress. In the Lok Sabha elections the Congress won 46.5% of the votes, as compared to 45% last time, and won 366 of 488 seats, or 75% of the total, as compared to 74% before. Once again, the Congress will be without an official Opposition in the lower house, since no other party has won as many as 50 seats, the minimum requirement.

In the State Assemblies the Congress did not fare quite so well. It now counts as its own 2105 MLAs of the total of 3200, or 65.8% compared to 68.5% as before. The party was able to improve its position in only two States, namely Andhra Pradesh, where the Communist-supported People's Democratic Front failed badly, and in Rajasthan, where a reactionary Hindu group provided the only real opposition.

The Congress managed to stay about even in the Assemblies of two other States, Madhya Pradesh and Madras, but it declined in strength in the other nine. Aside from Kerala and Orissa, the Congress suffered unexpected set-backs in the heretofore friendly areas of Bombay and Uttar Pradesh.

In Bombay State, the old Congress majority in the Assembly was cut from 83% to 58%, largely at the hands of two groups which denounced last year's States' Reorganization, which denied the Gujerati-speaking people on the north side and the Marathi-speaking people in the southern part the separate linguistic states they longed for. Congress spokesmen have attributed their reverse to "linguistic emotionalism" and deny the opposition claim that the results are a mandate to re-open

"the whole question" of States' Reorganization.

In Uttar Pradesh, in the 430-member Assembly the former Congress strength of 383 has been reduced to 286, mostly by gains of the socialists, who raised their numbers from 23 to 69, and of independents, who unseated Congressmen in the eastern part of the State, where apparently many contests were settled along caste lines. In the most celebrated individual defeat in all India, Chandra Bhanu Gupta of Lucknow, who ran the Congress in "U.P." and held four important portfolios in the State Government, was soundly trounced, 26,652 to 15,522, by the Praja Socialist opponent he was supposed to overcome easily.

This raises another point about the election returns: the defeat of large numbers of supposedly strong Congress candidates, including ministers of the Union as well as State Governments. Whereas five years ago the party leaders were willing to get these men into Parliament through the back door---i.e., into the upper house, the Council of States, upon election by State Assemblies or nomination by the President---or at least into the upper houses of a State legislature by a similar method, this time the Congress High Command is understood to have suggested that these defeated candidates retire from politics or go into party organizational work. The moral that the Congress is drawing is, "Keep in touch with your constituents."

Without question, the biggest defeat for the Congress---and the most portentous fact about the 1957 elections in India---came with the victory of the Communists in the southwesternmost State of Kerala. There, the CPI won 60 seats of the total of 126 and with the support of four or five independents will form the Government. The Congress, with only 43 seats, will find itself in the strange position of sitting in Opposition. The fact that the Congress outpolled the CPI by some 150,000 votes in the State provides little consolation; the Communist vote, concentrated in the right places, produced more winners.

The official weekly of the CPI, New Age, saw Kerala as marking "the triumph of the struggle of the toiling man...All that is best and noblest, the finest traditions of our national movement which one day it was the proud privilege of the Congress to bear are today slowly and truly being entrusted to the hands that hold high the Red Flag."

A less oratorical explanation from Congress sympathizers attributed the CPI victory to the Congress' failure to alleviate unemployment, especially among the educated unemployed; internal dissension and complacency within the Congress, and lack of imaginative Congress leadership. They see the Communist success as a protest against the Congress rather than an endorsement of the Communists. None-the-less, while before the elections few were predicting a sweeping Congress victory, non-Congress voters were expected to scatter their votes among other leftist parties rather than drop them in the Communist boxes in such heavy numbers as they did.

With its victory in Kerala and other gains elsewhere in India, the Communist Party has replaced the Praja Socialist Party as the No. 2 party in the country. The CPI now outnumbers the PSP in the Lok Sabha, 29 to 18, and in the State Assemblies, 218 to 196. Moreover, the CPI more than doubled its 1951-52 vote and won nearly 10% of the ballots.

For the first time the CPI is represented in every State Assembly, whereas it has been missing in three States up to now.

And yet the CPI cannot be called a party of national strength. The Communists concentrated their winnings in two States, Kerala and West Bengal, which provided them with 15 of their 29 MPs and 106 of their 218 MLAs. Moreover, the CPI will not be represented in the Lok Sabha from five States, namely Assam, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Mysore and Rajasthan, and it will have only one representative from three other States, Orissa, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In U.P. the Congress outpolled the CPI by 7.9 million to 370,000, and in Madhya Pradesh, 3.1 million to 31,000, according to the nearly complete figures.

There are other reasons why the present power of the CPI should not be overestimated. Although the CPI may be the No. 2 party in India, the second-greatest political bloc is that of the "other parties," i.e., parties other than the four main ones, the Congress, CPI, PSP and the Jana Sangh.

Twenty-three other parties, combined, have won 9% of the Lok Sabha seats and 11% of the State Assembly seats. Most of these parties are confined to State borders and range in polling power from the Muslim League in Kerala and the Mizo Union in Assam, which won one MP seat each, to the Ganatantra Parishad, which now has 51 MLAs and seven MPs. Others, like the Scheduled Castes Federation and the Hindu Mahasabha, a rightist group, have followers in several States. Most of them advocate greater regional autonomy, religious orthodoxy or revolutionary socialism. This time, the more militant Hindu groups among them have lost ground.

Another strong factor in the elections have been the independent candidates. Independent MLAs in six States will outnumber all other party blocs except the Congress.

And then, too, the PSP is not necessarily all through. Actually PSP candidates drew slightly more votes than the Communist candidates, although slightly fewer of them (18 MPs and 196 MLAs) were winners. Where the PSP lost out was in the percentage of votes it won: only 10% this time, as compared to 16.4% in 1951-52. The party, which suffers from a variety of ailments including weak organization, dearth of personalities and lack of money, is weakened most by the split that makes them rivals of socialists who rally around Dr. Rammonohar Lohia, under whose leadership they themselves won five Lok Sabha and 59 State Assembly seats. The split, however, based on personal and organizational differences and not ideology or program, shows no signs of mending at present.

It is being pointed out that in Kerala, Communists have for the first time in history come to power democratically. What will happen when a party which has stood opposed to parliamentary democracy gains control of a State within a nation that subscribes to parliamentary democracy? What will be the attitude of the Congress-dominated Center toward the black sheep in its flock of State Governments? If the Communists provide a successful government in Kerala for five years, what will be the impact on politics in India and elsewhere? Will the Congress, standing opposed to communism and standing to lose by

a successful Communist administration, help the Communists to fail?

For the time being, nothing drastic is expected to happen. In the Lok Sabha, a Congress Minister of Home Affairs, B.N. Datar, said the Union Government would help the Communist Government in Kerala to "the fullest extent consistent with its obligations to the other States and with the manner in which that Government carries on the administration."

The leaders of the CPI, ever since it became apparent that their party would win in Kerala, have been speaking in moderate terms: the Communist Government "would function within the framework of the Constitution," and there would be "no trouble" with the Center.

If there is going to be no trouble between the Communists and the Center it will be a matter of mutual accommodation, but a matter in which the Center will have the stronger hand. As the liberal Delhi weekly Thought thought, "...all the safeguards in the Constitution for the preservation of national unity and democratic forms will have to be oiled and brushed up."

The point is that the constitutional safeguards are there. Although State Governments have exclusive powers over such matters as police, administration of justice, local government and agriculture ---matters which communists have been known to be concerned with--- the Union Government, with its all-inclusive territorial jurisdiction, residuary powers, administrative controls and emergency provisions, is fully empowered to pull the reins on a State Government if it wants to.

"Of course," a Congressman told me, "we would like to see the Communists fall flat on their face, but we cannot be so undemocratic as to harass them publicly." I liked the "publicly."

Mr. Nehru, meanwhile, has been quoted as saying that the Congress reverses, and especially the loss in Kerala, are "a blessing in disguise. These should goad Congressmen to work harder."

For a party that enjoys such great power and prestige, a slight kick in the pants may, as Mr. Nehru hopes, do it some good. For the time being, however, there is a cloud on the horizon---but no bigger than a man's hand.