

THE FOURTH GENERAL ELECTION has changed the country's political map. One era of the growth of India's parliamentary democracy has come to an end. A new stage, complicated and yet full of great possibilities for the democratic movement, has begun. The nation is now clearly at a turning point. The election, however, has not settled the direction in which India is going to move in the years ahead. That will be decided in the course of the growing confrontation between the forces of progress and those of reaction. The election results are a pointer.

In the previous three nationwide general elections, too, the Congress had suffered increasing reverses. Taking the country as a whole, its electoral record has been one of continued decline. But this time it is not mere quantitative additions to defeat and losses. Something qualitatively different has happened. The fourth general election has shaken the monopoly of power of the Congress to its very foundations, weakened it greatly on a national scale and, above all, broken it in several states. Out of the sixteen states of the union which went to polls the ruling party was defeated in eight. These eight states embrace about 300 million out of 500 million people (three-fifths) that inhabit this country today. The political impact of the Congress defeats in UP and Bihar—the two traditional centres of congress power and prestige, West Bengal and Madras is bound to be very great. Moreover, at least two state governments—Kerala and West Bengal are now under strong left united front leaderships and orientated firmly towards the working people.

At the centre the Congress has come down to 281 in Lok Sabha and the slim majority of barely 41 which the Congress now has is not good enough to even enable the ruling

party on its own to get Constitutional Amendments passed. Besides, how this majority will work in the changed political context and with crisis deepening in the ruling party remains to be seen. In the state assemblies where the aggregate congress strength used to be around two-thirds of the total, it is now the non-congress forces that lead. The Congress has won only 1650 seats out of the total 3352 seats (assemblies of the union territories excluded). The Congress has further been reduced by the defections in UP and Haryana. The election has created a situation that in the assemblies' sector of the electoral college for the presidential elections (assemblies and the two Houses of Parliament constitute the electoral college) the non-congress side has a lead in the value of votes.

In the course of the introductory remarks it should be stressed that the election was by and large held in peaceful conditions, despite provocations in some places. This again is a sign of maturity of our people. Observers in the USA, Britain and other western countries had prophesied that the Indian election this time would end in chaos and violence and some even went to the length of saying that the 'Balkanisation' of the country would begin amidst such disorder. The election has belied these prophets of doom. And the American interference in the election, through its CIA and other cloak-and-dagger agencies has failed to draw the expected dividends and this again goes to the credit of our public life. The pro-Americans no doubt fought with lavish American funds but even they did not always dare openly speak for the Americans. The mood of the people was intensely patriotic. Indeed it is the people's patriotic and democratic urges that dominated the election scene. In short, the election was a massive patriotic and democratic upheaval.

#### BACKGROUND

Let us now briefly refer to the background of the momentous general election. After all, the election results would seem unthinkable without failures, crimes and

treachery of the congress government on the one hand and the deepest discontent and new awakenings of the people on the other. The election took place, as our party's election manifesto boldly said, in maturing objective conditions for the overthrow of the hated congress rule.

It is not necessary to recount in detail the pre-election situation in the country. All this is well known. Even so, some salient features are to be noted. The capitalist path of development, accompanied by increasing concessions to Indian and foreign monopolists and by ever-mounting burdens on the masses and injustice against them, had already set the stage of allround crisis. The failure of the Third Five Year Plan was the cumulative effect of the path the congress regime had chosen. Sufferings of the masses had reached the limit of endurance, thanks to rising prices, food crisis, unemployment, tax burdens and so on. Over seventy million people in Bihar and the eastern regions of UP were and are still passing through famine conditions. The incompetence as well as the anti-people face of the congress rule stood exposed before the masses as never before.

To all this suffering was added the greatest national humiliation of the devaluation of the Indian rupee on American orders. Apart from causing incalculable damage to our economy, devaluation came as a cruel blow to our national self-respect. By this treacherous step the nation was angered. But devaluation was not the only act of surrender. In the recent period, especially in the last two and a half years or so before the election, the congress government made many ignominious surrenders to the Americans and it planfully fastened upon the country the PL-480. That this great nation of ours had been made so helplessly dependent on America for food could not but hurt national feelings and cause grave anxiety and resentment among the masses. The Congress thought that US wheat would silence the patriotic feelings of the hungry people. As far as the Americans are concerned, they openly said in their press and in the US senate that the PL-480 food deliveries to India were necessary to keep the congress regime in power and to prevent left and democratic forces

from making headway. It was with this aim that the Americans built up S. K. Patil, patronised C. Subramaniam and constantly briefed and ordered Asoka Mehta. In the pre-election year, the US food supplies reached the all-time peak of over 10 million tonnes. On the eve of the election, certain promises of food and cash were announced by Washington, although in respect of the latter, any firm commitment was deferred till after the election.

The fourth general election was preceded by nearly four years of the emergency regime, the rampage of the DIR against the country's left and democratic movement, especially the working people. Political workers, trade unionists and others were imprisoned and persecuted by their tens of thousands under the DIR all over the country and civil liberties and democratic rights were trampled underfoot. In 1965 the DIR terror was let loose in Tamilnad against the people to suppress the language movement. During the Indo-Pak war in the same year, nearly 2,000 persons belonging to the minority community were detained and these included prominent personalities including editors and legislators. The problems of the Assam Hills peoples were first mishandled and then sought to be met with repression. Government employees were persecuted and even jailed, as in UP, and the countrywide student agitation was met with police bullets and lathis. Practically, all sections of the suffering people were subjected to naked repressive measures, mostly under the DIR. Public opinion therefore grew very strongly against these and other repressive, anti-democratic actions of the congress regime.

India's foreign policy of peace, non-alignment and anti-colonialism played a part in sustaining the prestige of the Congress. Nehru used to draw heavily upon this policy in his election campaigns. The nation felt justifiably proud that it was playing at least some significant, positive role in world affairs. But in the recent period the policy had been greatly compromised so much so that none in the world today looks to India as a potent force in the international arena. The growing effort on the part of the congress government particularly under Indira Gandhi to

adjust to American pressures in foreign policy matters has caused deep resentment among the enlightened sections of our people and brought down the prestige of the Congress. Incidentally, it is not fortuitous that in the fourth general election, unlike in the previous ones, the congress leaders hardly referred to foreign policy issues in their election speeches. This was, they evidently realised, not their strong point any more.

Many corruption cases in high places have also come to light in the period between the third and the fourth general elections. In these five years five congress chief ministers (including the one-time congress protege Bakshi Ghulam Mohammed) were exposed. The emergency powers had only fed corruption. Another great exposure was the growth of monopolies and the bewildering concentration of economic power in their hands as a result of the policies of the congress government. The findings of the official Monopolies Commission were before the nation and these were to play a big part in laying bare the pro-monopolist character of the Congress. The hypocrisy of Congress about 'socialism' stood nakedly exposed and the people's indignation against the monopolists and against the ruling party for building up the big money was an important aspect of the election background.

In the months immediately preceding the election the dissensions and fissures within the Congress party were accentuated. A new spate of disintegration of the organisation had started. Many influential congressmen and congress workers left the Congress. The most outstanding event in this connection was the emergence of the Bangla Congress in West Bengal under the leadership of Ajoy Mukerjee. The Bangla Congress was to play a historic role in changing the balance of forces in that state and in bringing about the downfall of congress rule there. In several other states this growing dissidence took the shape of Jana Congress, Janata Congress, Jana Kranti Dal etc. Partly at least this development reflected the growing differentiation among the national bourgeoisie and within the Congress party. The crisis of bourgeois policies had quickened

the process. After Nehru's death the Congress High Command was fast losing its prestige and authority among congressmen, as well as its grip over the organisation. It was no longer in a position to stem the tide of open dissidence, revolts and defections which affected the mass base of the Congress.

But overshadowing everything else in the pre-election situation was the unprecedented mass upsurge and mass struggles all over the country. One remarkable aspect of the mass struggles was that they were not only highly militant in many places but they began to draw ever broader sections of the people including government employees. In the forefront of these struggles were the working class and the left parties, specially our party. The rising tempo of the mass struggles and their great sweep galvanised the entire political scene and elevated the popular discontent and consciousness to a high level. It was often from these mass struggles that came spontaneously the slogan: *Congress Hatao!* (e.g. UP and Bihar). The bandhs, strikes and other forms of mass actions in the face of wanton repression prepared, as it were, the nation for the coming election battles. The Great People's March to Parliament in protest against devaluation organised by our party on 1 September 1966 was an important contribution to the great patriotic national awakening. Ours was the party to first raise the national slogan: *Indira government must resign!*

It may now be stated emphatically that but for the mass movements of the day in which the left parties and the organised working class played the leading role, the avalanche that swept the Congress in the election would not have been unleashed. The mass struggles were the biggest single factor to influence the election and the people's resounding verdict against the congress rule.

To sum up, the crisis of the policies of the ruling class, the differentiation among the national bourgeoisie, the dissensions within the Congress and its disintegration, the gathering mass discontent and mass struggles—all these constituted the political background in which the country

went to polls. All opposition parties were to gain in the election from the seething mass discontent and mass struggles, depending of course on the organisation, strength, capacity of the parties concerned in different states.

#### THE CONGRESS DEBACLE

In the days of the freedom fight the Congress enjoyed unrivalled prestige and it used to sweep the polls in general constituencies. After independence masses, however, began to judge the Congress as the country's ruling party, by the deeds of the congress governments both in the states and at the centre. It did not take long for the masses to begin to shift away from the Congress. This was clearly noticed in the very first general election of free India in 1951-52. The Congress polled only 43 per cent of the votes in the country as a whole and only in the small states of Coorg, Delhi, Saurashtra and Bhopal did it secure a majority of the polled votes. In the composite Madras and Travancore-Cochin states the Congress won only 152 seats out of 375 and 44 out of 108 seats respectively. It suffered heavy reverses in Hyderabad state, West Bengal and Tripura (in Tripura it won only 13 seats out of 30 and lost both the Lok Sabha seats). The election review of the CC of our party observed that 'the real loss of the congress influence is far greater than indicated by the voting figures' and added that the Congress 'had suffered the biggest political and moral defeat in its entire history.'

Here was the beginning of the downfall of the Congress and this downward course, though with certain temporary local recoveries, continued. In the second general election (1957), the Congress, however, polled 47.78 per cent of the 92 million polled votes for the Lok Sabha and 45.41 per cent of the assembly votes. But this increase in the percentage did not imply that the Congress had improved its position on a national scale. In several states, viz., Bihar, Orissa, Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Mysore the Congress lost respectively 23, 11, 5, 42, 54, 28 seats in assemblies. It lost its majority in Kerala making way for the communist-