

## Electoral Alignments in Kerala 1957 General Elections\*

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"Ten lame men joining together cannot make a strong man", was the comment with which Prime Minister Nehru at one time tried to pour ridicule on the Communist Party and other parties of the democratic opposition who were trying to form a united front

Little did he realise at the time that, at least in one State, his own party would have to share the fate of being a lame man trying to become strong by joining together with other lame men. Little did he realise that his organisation's all-India "electioneering expert", Sri S. K. Patil, would have to rush to Kerala and advise his friends and colleagues of the Congress to try to form a united front with all the non-Communist parties. This is the only way. Sri Patil advised the Congressmen of Kerala, "in which you can avert the disastrous defeat that awaits you

### **Patil Faces Difficulties**

Unfortunately for Sri Patil, the effort at such a united front in Kerala was full of difficulties. The parties with which he had to build united front in Kerala were mainly three—the Muslim League, the Kerala People's Party and the PSP. It was his ambition to bring at least the first two of these, if not all the three, into his united front.

So far as the third, *i.e.* the PSP, was concerned, it was an all-India party, whose Andhra unit had not joined his united front even in the 1955 elections. Furthermore, it had recently made clear at its Bangalore conference that its main political aim today was to help the formation of a strong opposition to the

authoritarian rule of the Congress. Finding it difficult, therefore, to bring such a party of opposition into a united front with the Congress—that too against another all-India party of opposition, the Communist Party—Sri Patil confined his initial efforts to the Muslim League and the Kerala People's Party.

He, however, found that even this was full of difficulties. The very first suggestion that he made to the effect that the Congress should come to a united front with the Muslim League roused intense opposition in the ranks of the Congress. Muslim Congressmen, as a whole, came out very strongly against the proposal. Large sections of non-Muslim Congressmen too voiced their opposition. Even certain Congress leaders who were in favour of the proposal (because of the obvious advantage that they could obtain from such an alliance), were opposed to the shameless manner in which Sri Patil went about his job of making approaches to the League leaders.

Opposition to the Congress-League alliance was voiced not only in the ranks of the Congress, but in the ranks of the League too. The leaders of the League had for long been telling their followers that it was because of the anti-Muslim policies of the Congress leaders that their legitimate rights as a religious minority had not been safeguarded. They had told their ranks that they had to remain in opposition to the Congress so long as they did not get reliable guarantees that their interests as a religious minority would be properly safeguarded.

But, the alliance that was proposed by Sri Patil and favourably considered by the League leaders did not contain any such guarantee. The alliance was to be confined to the allocation of seats between the Congress and the League and, it is rumoured, certain key jobs to some Muslims. Would it not be better, some sections within the Muslim League asked, for the Muslim League to have a closer alliance with the parties and elements of the democratic opposition, with a view to strengthening the democratic movement as a whole and, with its help, the Muslims' own struggle for protection required by them as a religious minority?

### **Congress High Command Decides**

It was not, however, the opposition inside Kerala that sealed the fate of Sri Patil's efforts. Whether it came from within the Congress or the League ranks, opposition in Kerala could well have been steamrollered if only the proposal secured the blessing of the Congress High Command. The leaders of the League and Sri Patil had agreed among themselves that the Congress would not insist that the League as a political party should be dissolved and its members individually join the Congress and contest elections as Congressmen (this, it may be recalled, was the condition imposed by the Congress High Command on the Akalis of Punjab). The Congress would be prepared to accommodate a certain number of candidates standing on League ticket with the symbol of the League, in the list of candidates which the Congress would recommend to the electorate.

The League, for its part, would not insist, as it had so far done, that all the Muslim candidates who would be contesting the elections should be League nominees; they would be prepared to accommodate some Congress Muslims standing as Congress candidates, or non-League Muslim candidates standing as independents.

This, however, was not acceptable to the Congress High Command. The Indore session of the Congress was the occasion when the protagonists and opponents of an alliance with the League put their respective cases before the Congress High Command. These discussions were reported to have led the High Command to the conclusion that it could not bless the Patil plan. Probably because of the fear that an open alliance with the Muslim communal organisation in Kerala would have serious repercussions in those parts of the country where the Hindu communal organisations are pretty strong the Punjab, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc.- -the High Command turned down the proposal.

### **Kerala People's Party**

A similar fate befell Sri Patil's effort at united front with the Kerala People's Party. The difficulty here was the very origin of

this political party. It was only a few weeks before Sri Patil came to Kerala that this new party had been born. Its founders and leaders are all former Congressmen who, for factional reasons, only recently left the Congress and formed their own party. It was their revolt against the State leadership of the Congress that had led to the fall of the last Congress Ministry in the former Travancore-Cochin State (six Congress MLAs abstained from voting on the crucial motion which decided the fate of the ministry).

Between this initial revolt on their part and the final act of the formation of the new party, a series of efforts had been made by the all India leaders of the Congress to patch up the differences between these "rebel Congressmen" and the State Congress leadership. All these efforts had failed in the background of the "rebel Congressmen's" demand for a change in the leadership of the State Congress, coupled naturally with stiff opposition on the other side. The efforts to take them back to the Congress now proved as fruitless as the earlier efforts.

It was the failure of the Patil plan that led the Congress leaders to make the pompous declaration that the Congress was not going to have any alliance in Kerala. People know well enough that this is a case of "sour grapes".

### **Stand of PSP**

One factor which helped the failure of Sri Patil's efforts was the position taken by the PSP. Sri S. K. Patil had come to Kerala and initiated his talks on a united front of non-Communist parties at a time when talks between the Muslim League and the PSP had reached an advanced stage. The leaders of the PSP had the ambition of acting as the "go-between" in evolving a non-aggression pact between the Communist Party and the Muslim League. They planned to divide all the seats for the Malabar part of Kerala in between the Muslim League, the PSP and the Communist Party. They had similar plans of an electoral alliance with the Kerala People's Party with regard to the division of seats in the Travancore-Cochin part of Kerala.

These efforts had to be temporarily stopped when the Patil plan of Congress-League alliance received the support of the League leaders. But, as soon as news came that the efforts at a Congress-League alliance had failed, talks were resumed between the League and the PSP. In a couple of days an agreement was signed by the League and the PSP leaders according to which 39 out of 49 seats in the Malabar part of Kerala were divided between the two parties (22 for the PSP and 16 for the League). A similar agreement is expected to be arrived at between the PSP and the KPP on the question of division of seats in the Travancore-Cochin part of Kerala.

It was the possibility of such a combination of the League, the KPP and the PSP that strengthened the hands of the KPP on the question of their going back to the Congress. They calculated that, if the Congress leadership does not take them back into the Congress on their (KPP's) own terms, they can fall back upon the support which they can very well expect from the PSP.

It was this very consideration that helped the PSP, too, to make a hard bargain, and ultimately break off the talks, with the Communist Party on adjustment of seats. The Communist Party offered very generous terms for an electoral understanding between itself and the PSP. For example, in the Malabar part of Kerala, where the PSP had secured less than 10 per cent of the votes and just 1 seat in the last district board elections while the Communist Party had secured nearly 40 per cent of the votes and 24 seats, the PSP was offered more than 25 per cent of the seats. Even this was turned down by the PSP as inadequate.

Furthermore, the PSP made it clear that they could not support the Communist candidates even in those constituencies, which would be allotted to it under the terms of the Communist-PSP agreement, which would be contested by another non-Congress party (obviously meaning the Muslim League). It was this fantastic stand taken by the PSP that led to the breakdown of the talks between the two parties. The factor that encouraged the PSP to make such fantastic claims was the expectation of falling back upon the alliance with the Muslim League in the Malabar part of Kerala and with the KPP in the Travancore-Cochin part.

Three main forces have, thus, emerged on the electoral scene in Kerala—the Congress, the PSP League-KPP alliance and the Communist Party with its allies.

### **RSP Breaks Off**

It would, however, be incorrect to look upon these three main electoral forces as having made their final and ultimate alignment for the period of the elections. Still further changes and realignments are possible between now and the time of voting.

The position of the third electoral force mentioned above—the Communist Party with its allies—is yet to be finally decided. The alliance of the Communist Party with the RSP and other democratic forces has not taken the form which had been originally visualised.

Taking advantage of the anxiety of the Communist Party for an electoral alliance (for which it was and is prepared to make considerable sacrifices), the RSP began making claims which were as fantastic as those of the PSP. They demanded seats in areas where there was not a single member of their party. The Communist Party, for its part, made the utmost possible concessions to the claims of the RSP.

It is well-known that there is not a single seat in the whole State which, the RSP can claim, it can win on its own; yet the Communist Party offered it more than a dozen seats, several of which are seats which, if the Communist Party were to contest on its own, can be won for it. Even these concessions did not satisfy the RSP and it ultimately led to a deadlock in the Communist-RSP talks.

The RSP had declared that it does not propose to pursue the talks with the Communist Party but will contest a few seats which it considers it can fight on its own. The Communist Party, on the other hand, has stated that it does not consider the present break in the talks as final and irrevocable, but that they can be resumed. The final picture in this respect is yet to emerge. In the meanwhile, the names of the Communist candidates, together with a large number of democratic-minded individuals whom the Communist Party supports, have been announced for nearly 80 seats (out of 126).

### **Possible Adjustments**

It is yet to be seen what the League-PSP-KPP alliance proposes to do in those constituencies in which they have no candidates of their own, but for which there is a straight fight between the Congress and the Communist Party or Communist-supported candidates. There are 11 such seats in the Malabar part of Kerala and the number of such seats in the Travancore-Cochin part is not yet known.

Efforts are still being made to see that at least in such constituencies, the present three-party alliance is further expanded into a four-party alliance embracing the Congress as well. Proposals are being made that such seats should be contested not by any party candidate but by independents acceptable to all the non-Communist parties.

Similar efforts are also being made to see that, at least in such constituencies, the Communist Party and the PSP act together in order to secure a decisive victory over the Congress. Furthermore, efforts are still being made to bring about local adjustments between the Communist Party and the PSP, so that the possible victory of the Congress on account of triangular contests may be minimised.

How these efforts, being made from two ends, will develop in the coming days cannot now be forecast.

Efforts are being made on the part of non-League Muslims to set up independent candidates, who can unite all the non-communal forces in the Muslim majority areas of Malabar. These efforts, too, have yet to take final shape.

Above all, the impact of the alliances so far made, and still being sought, on the followers of the various parties is yet to be seen. This is a very important factor, because the alliances that were sought to be made by the Congress, the PSP and the Muslim League have not been taken well by their followers. Even inside the Communist Party, considerable dissatisfaction began to emerge when it was seen that big sacrifices were being made as the price to be paid for the alliances with PSP and the RSP. This dissatisfaction within all the political parties may affect the election campaign at least in the sense that their followers become

frustrated and inactive, *i.e.*, they do not carry on that active campaign for their party's candidates which alone can assure victory for them

It is against this background that the Communist Party in Kerala has to carry on its struggle for the electoral defeat of the Congress, which will pave the way for the formation of an alternative government in the State

This struggle has, of course, become far more difficult than originally visualised. The absence of a Communist-RSP PSP alliance, the emergence of a PSP-League KPP alliance and the consequent triangular contests in a large number of constituencies may make it possible for the Congress candidates to win many seats which they would otherwise have lost. Further, the failure of the parties and elements of the democratic opposition to unite has led to the absence of that hope and confidence among the mass of the people which alone could inflict a decisive defeat on the Congress

### **Alternative Government Prospects**

It would nevertheless be wrong to consider that the objective of defeating the Congress, paving the way for the formation of an alternative government has receded into the background. It cannot be assumed that triangular contests would automatically lead to the victory of the Congress in all or a majority of constituencies, which they would otherwise have lost. Previous elections show that while triangular contests lead to the victory of Congress candidates in some constituencies, in others they lead to the victory of Communist or PSP or League candidates

It will be difficult to forecast the ultimate outcome of the large number of triangular contests that are now taking place. Much will depend on the tempo created by each party during the election campaign, the extent of each party's mobilisation of its own forces, the extent of shifts taking place among the uncommitted sections of the electorate etc. So far as the Communist Party is concerned much depends on how it is able not only to mobilise all its own forces for its election campaign but also to skilfully utilise all the shifts that are likely to take place among the mass of uncommitted voters

It can, in any case, be forecast with a certain amount of confidence that the main forces of the democratic opposition—the Communist Party, the PSP, the RSP and the democratic-minded individuals allied to them—will have considerable representation in the State legislature, that will come into existence in Kerala. These three parties of the democratic opposition together obtaining a majority in the State legislature is not yet outside the realm of possibility. It is this possibility that is being sought to be realised by the Communist Party when it carries on its campaign for the return of as many Communist and Communist-supported candidates as possible throughout the State. If this possibility becomes a reality, it is obvious that the struggle for an alternative government will once again become a question of practical politics.