

A DECISIVE VERDICT

BY GIVING THE BJP-led omnibus alliance a comfortable working majority in the 13th Lok Sabha, the electorate has returned a verdict that is more decisive than in 1998. The combine, which has as many as 24 partners, has succeeded in winning enough numbers to form a government, thanks to the strategic alliances it had struck with regional parties having a dominant presence in the various States, the Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh and the DMK in Tamil Nadu, for instance. What is significant, however, is that the BJP's own tally has remained just about the same as in the previous Lok Sabha and the fresh accretions this time have come from its allies, old and new. The fact that the leading partner's dependence on others stands considerably enhanced has heightened the challenge for the National Democratic Alliance in the task of governance. Strategically, the Congress(I)'s inability to take a clear stand on the 'coalition' question, caught as it was in a Hamletian fashion between the rhetoric of 'single-party government' and the political imperative of a 'multi-party arrangement', would seem to have cost it dearly in electoral terms.

As far as the issues go, a mix of national and local factors would appear to have worked, not uniformly across the nation but in different degrees in different States. The 'Kargil' card and Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee's 'war hero' image have apparently had an impact on the electorate in the first two rounds of voting which covered close to 50 per cent of the 543 constituencies, as reflected in the NDA's comprehensive victory in States like Delhi and Haryana and creditable showing in others such as Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu. Given the NDA's campaign that virtually reduced the elections to a 'Vajpayee versus Sonia Gandhi' contest, with a 'swadeshi versus videshi' underpinning linked to the Congress(I) president's "foreign origin", the general voter would appear to have been less than impressed with Mrs. Gandhi's leadership credentials especially when juxtaposed with Mr. Vajpayee's. It is undeniable that her image as a leader got a heavy beating because of the way she handled the political situation after the collapse of the Vajpayee regime contributing to the failure of the effort to form an alternative government.

In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, the advent of Mrs. Gandhi as the chief campaigner was believed to have set the Congress(I) on a resurgence trajectory and its tally of 141 was attributed substantially to her charisma and this perception was reinforced by the party's exemplary performance in the Assembly elections in four States last November when it wrested power from the BJP in Rajasthan and Delhi, besides retaining power in Madhya Pradesh. But this time round the party is left with a much lower tally. The expectation that the party would be able to repeat its impressive showing in the current parliamentary polls in these States has been belied, with the BJP sweeping Delhi, winning handsomely in Rajasthan and retaining its 1998 position in Madhya Pradesh, and this cannot be explained fully by the anti-incumbency factor or the factional feuds in the ruling Congress(I). In many places, however, the people's seething anger against the ruling establishments has found expression, as for example in Orissa against the Congress(I), in Bihar against Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal, in Karnataka against the Janata Dal (United), an NDA constituent, in Punjab against the Akali Dal-BJP coalition and in Uttar Pradesh against the BJP. There have, of course, been other factors which are peculiar to the respective States. Mr. Laloo Yadav's corruption in Bihar, the split in the ruling Shiromani Akali Dal in Punjab and the internal bickerings that the JD(U)-BJP alliance had set off down the line in Karnataka.

Given the lacklustre performance of the Kalyan Singh Government and the intense caste-linked infighting among the State BJP leaders, the party's poor showing in Uttar Pradesh was not unexpected. That the Congress(I) would

gain considerably was also anticipated. The surprise elements lay in the substantial gains made by Mr. Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Mr. Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party which besides the Congress(I), have claimed their own slice of the anti-BJP electoral cake. The split in the anti-BJP vote has apparently not gone to that party's advantage as it has done in Maharashtra for instance, at least in the context of the Lok Sabha. If the BJP-Shiv Sena combine in Maharashtra could secure an impressively higher tally, it was primarily because of the erosion caused in the Congress(I)'s vote base by Mr. Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party. This, however, has not worked in the Assembly poll, where the ruling coalition has ended up capturing fewer seats than the combined strength of the Congress(I) and the NCP.

The one State where the incumbency factor has worked very favourably is Andhra Pradesh, where Mr. N. Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam (TDP), together with the BJP, has won over three-fourths of the 42 Lok Sabha seats and secured for itself a more than comfortable majority in the Assembly. Although in a way Mr. Naidu took a calculated risk by forging a formal tie-up with the BJP, his idea was also to derive some electoral advantage from the perceived positive image of Mr. Vajpayee in the post-Kargil context. In the ultimate analysis, the one to benefit more from the arrangement is the BJP and Mr. Naidu's performance on the development front and the several target-specific welfare programmes for women and other weaker sections, although dubbed 'populist', did pay off. If the Congress(I) could not gain by way of seats from the reported shift of minority votes away from the TDP, it was because the party was crippled organisationally by factional fights and also because it chose to run a totally negative campaign against the TDP and Mr. Naidu personally.

In Karnataka, the BJP and its old ally, Lok Shakti, had to pay dearly for the Samata Party-Lok Shakti-Janata Dal (Sharad Yadav) merger constituting the Janata Dal (United), a move that proved counter-productive because of the revolt within the ranks of the constituents in the State. With the "adoption" of the Chief Minister, Mr. J. H. Patel, the NDA became the victim of the anti-incumbency factor. The fact that many of the Janata Dal stalwarts, including Mr. H. D. Deve Gowda and Mr. Patel, were defeated is a measure of the vehemence of the public disapproval of their penchant for ego-centric squabbling. In the event, the Congress(I) has sailed back to power in the State, apart from improving on its Lok Sabha tally. In the overall national context, it must be said, the non-BJP segments of the political spectrum representing the democratic, secular forces — particularly the Congress(I) — have failed to bring into sharp focus and in a credible manner the looming threat to the nation's secularist fabric from the Sangh Parivar which has continued to pursue its sectarian ideology despite disavowal by the Vajpayee regime.

Now that the NDA under Mr. Vajpayee will be forming the government, one would like to see it repudiating the divisive policies that have always been at the heart of the BJP's agenda but have, for tactical reasons, been kept off the alliance's governing plank. In practical terms, this will mean working the coalition in the way it ought to be and pursuing the path of transparency and consensus building, as distinguished from that of pushing its own hidden agenda. The record of the Vajpayee regime, during the 13 months in office, left much to be desired in this area and the coalition found itself at sixes and sevens and ultimately collapsed. Managing a coalition of 24 parties, big and small, and one that has very little in common by way of ideology and policy is indeed an awesome responsibility for the leadership of the NDA, particularly of the BJP.