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BJP front and Congress(I), U.F. evenly poised?

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, March 2.

The Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies were expected to cross the psychological barrier of 250-seat but are likely to fall agonisingly short of the magical number of 270 seats in the Twelfth Lok Sabha. With the two Yadavs, Mr. Mulayam Singh in Uttar Pradesh and Mr. Laloo Prasad in Bihar, considerably slowing down the saffron party, the non-BJP forces began exploring the possibility of forming a "secular government" at the Centre. Of the 525 seats for which results were declared, the Congress(I) and allies have won 166 and the United Front 95. Against their combined total of 261, the BJP and allies have so far won 245 seats. Of the 10 seats for which results are awaited, the BJP front is leading in six and the U.F. in three. Independents and others have won 19 seats and are ahead in one.

The Congress(I) president, Mr. Sitaram Kesri, declared in New Delhi that there was a "greater possibility" of a coalition led by his party, while Mr. Sharad Pawar let it be known in Mumbai that talks has begun between the Congress(I) and the U. F. to form a "secular government".

The non-BJP parties began getting their act together once there appeared to be convergence of perceptions that the Congress(I) and the U. F. would have to join hands in a coalition if the BJP had to be kept out. The reasoning appears to be that because the Congress(I) and the U. F. together may add up more numbers than the BJP and its allies, there was nothing "automatic" about the latter being invited to form the Government.

But the BJP and its allies appeared to be confident that the numbers, national mood, and the constitutional precedents would ensure that their combine is given the first chance to form the Government.

The U. F. conceded the principle that this time it had to be a Congress(I)-led coalition, and that it was an internal matter of that party as to who should be the leader of its parliamentary wing. The indications are that, despite pressures, Mrs. Sonia Gandhi would not be inclined to lead the Government, should such a situation arise. At the same time there was no definite agreement as to who would be the leader of the Congress(I) Parliamentary Party.

A key role has, once again, come Mr. Chandrababu Naidu's way. The Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, with his 12- members in the new Lok Sabha, could sway the balance of numbers in favour of the BJP, and away from the Congress (I). Having just engaged the Congress(I) is in a bitter electoral battle, the Telugu Desam leader may find it difficult to sell the idea of his party's participation in a Congress(I)-led coalition. The numbers game could take an interesting turn should he decide to break ranks with the U. F.and declare himself to be "neutral".

As per the declared results the following is the tally of the BJP's allies: AIADMK (18), Akali Dal (8), Biju Janata Dal (8), Samata Party (7), Shiv Sena (6), Trinamool Congress (5), PMK (4), Lok Shakti (3) and Janata Party (1). The AIADMK has emerged as the second largest party in the BJP combine.

The Congress(I)'s allies have bagged seven seats — four by the Republican Party of India, two by the IUML, and one by the Kerala Congress (Mani).

The Rashtriya Janata Dal led by Mr. Laloo Prasad Yadav which has bagged 14 seats has not been included in the list of allies of the Congress(I) as both the parties could not arrive at an electoral understanding for all the seats in Bihar.

The 14-party United Front which had a strength of over 170 seats in the dissolved Lok Sabha is expected to end up with a tally of less than 100 seats in the new Lok Sabha. The CPI (M) with 23 seats will the single largest party in the combine followed by the Samajwadi Party with 20 seats.

The tally of the other U. F. constituents is: Janata Dal 6, Tamil Maanila Congress 3, DMK 6, CPI 7, RSP 5, Telugu Desam 12, and Forward Bloc 2.

Besides the three known formations, a fourth group has emerged in the new Lok Sabha. These are BSP (5), Haryana Lok Dal (4), PDWP (1), United Muslim Front (1), ASDC (1), Apang Congress (2), Rashtriya Janata Party (1), independents (2) and UPF (1).

The Haryana Lok Dal led by the former Chief Minister of Haryana, Mr. Om Prakash Chautbala, has declared 'unconditional support' to the BJP in its bid for formation of government. Apang Congress was part of the United Front before the announcement of the Lok Sabha election.

Like the situation which emerged after the general elections to the Eleventh Lok Sabha, this time too it will be a coalition government. However at this juncture it is not clear as to the nature of the coalition government. In the last Lok Sabha election it was a government supported from outside by the second single largest party in the House, the Congress (I), with a strength of 141 members.

The Janata Dal which led the United Front Government for 18 months with a strength of 45 members to begin with was the largest party in the combination of parties which were part of the government. Subsequently the strength of the Dal came down to 29 when Mr. Laloo Yadav floated his own group.

Naidu's options open

Meanwhile in Hyderabad, Mr. Chandrababu Naidu said the Telugu Desam would keep its options open on supporting a Congress(I) or a BJP led new Government at the Centre, taking a decision based on the party's perceptions about the development of the State and the country.

"Now, a new scenario has emerged in the country, in the wake of the mid-term elections, and it is necessary for the Telugu Desam to take all issues into consideration," he added.

Mr. Chandrababu Naidu refused to answer any further questions on the party's preference, saying that its politburo will meet tomorrow to consider the issue.

Moopanar's remarks

And in Chennai, the TMC chief, Mr. G. K. Moopanar, said the emerging trend pointed to the possibility of a coalition headed by either the BJP or the Congress (I) at the Centre. The picture would become clear only after all the results were announced, he said.

Asked whether he would play a role in evolving a Congress(I)-led Government with the support of the United Front, Mr. Moopanar said "my party has now only three MPs now and I do not know what role I can play there. Let all other leaders sit together and decide on the proper course of action that would be acceptable to the people." Mr.Moopanar refused to answer any further question on this issue.

Elections '98: Trends (Won + Leads)

State	Seats	BJP + Allies	Congress(I) + Allies	U.F.	Others
Andhra Pradesh	42	4	23	15	—
Arunachal Pradesh	2	—	—	—	2
Assam	14	1	10	—	2
Bihar	54	29	22	1	1
Goa	2	—	2	—	—
Gujarat	26	19	7	—	—
Haryana	10	2	3	—	5
Himachal Pradesh	4	2	1	—	—
Jammu and Kashmir	6	—	—	—	—
Karnataka	28	16	9	3	—
Kerala	20	—	11	9	—
Madhya Pradesh	40	29	11	—	—
Maharashtra	48	10	37	1	—
Manipur	2	1	—	—	1
Meghalaya	2	—	2	—	—
Mizoram	1	—	—	—	—
Nagaland	1	—	1	—	—
Orissa	21	16	5	—	—
Punjab	13	11	—	1	1
Rajasthan	25	5	18	1	1
Sikkim	1	—	—	—	1
Tamil Nadu	39	30	—	9	—
Tripura	2	—	—	2	—
Uttar Pradesh	85	60	—	20	5
West Bengal	42	7	1	32	—
Andaman & Nicobar	1	—	1	—	—
Chandigarh	1	1	—	—	—
Dadra and Nagar H.	1	1	—	—	—
Daman and Diu	1	1	—	—	—
Delhi	7	6	1	—	—
Lakshadweep	1	—	1	—	—
Pondicherry	1	—	—	1	—
Total	543	251	166	95	19

BJP prepares to stake claim

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, March. 3

The Bharatiya Janata Party has begun preparations for staking its claim to form a government at the Centre — the exercise of contacting its 13 allies for a firm commitment of support and the task of drafting a common minimum programme has begun even as efforts were on to garner additional support from among the independents and "others" who fall outside the United Front and the category of the Congress(I) and its allies.

Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, the party's Prime Ministerial candidate, issued a statement saying the electoral verdict was such that forming a government would be difficult on the basis of political divisions and fragmentation. His appeal was that political parties should "look ahead and not back" and "reorient their approach to other parties." In fact, he even talked of the need for a "national consensus" and the replacement of "political hostility" with a new approach which would "dissolve all confrontationist trends."

Early support for the BJP came from the Haryana Lok Dal of Mr. Om Prakash Chautala who announced that all the four party members in the new Lok Sabha would support every effort to propel Mr. Vajpayee on to the prime ministerial chair. However, Mr. Bansi Lal, the Haryana Chief Minister and leader of the Haryana Vikas Party, one of the allies of the BJP, was quick to talk to Mr. Advani about this development and he has also reportedly lodged his protest with Mr. Vajpayee. The HVP and the HLD had fought a bitter Lok Sabha electoral battle.

Senior party leaders are not denying "such problems" will crop up when they make efforts to take on board those outside the pre-poll alliance, but a senior leader said "these contradictions would have to be papered over." Different party leaders are trying to establish contacts with one or two member parties and with independents asking them for support to the BJP to help it cross the half-way mark of 269 (with two nominated members in the 545 member Lok Sabha and five constituencies yet to hold elections, the effective current strength would be 538 after all the results come in). However, leaders were very tight-lipped and were not willing to disclose their cards for fear of spoiling the game.

Party leaders are also "relying" on problems between the Congress(I), the United Front and the Left parties, some of whom may be unwilling to be seen cohabiting with the Congress(I), their main political rival in the states.

The party general secretary, Mr K.N.Govindacharya, has already been given the task of hammering out a draft of a common minimum programme based on points put together from the BJP's own manifesto and those of its allies. This draft will be placed before the allies for approval when they are scheduled to meet here tomorrow. This morning some senior leaders met informally but no major decisions could be taken as neither party president, Mr. L.K.Advani, nor Mr. Vajpayee were present. The party's formal meeting of office bearers would be held on March 6 followed by a meeting of its newly elected MPs the next day.

All in the game

Plans for Cong-led coalition

By Our Special Correspondent

NEW DELHI, March 3

Finding the BJP and allies considerably short of a clear majority and emboldened by the Left parties' desire to prevent the BJP from forming the government, the Congress(I) today quickly readjusted its stand. If yesterday the inclination was reported to be not to attempt to form a coalition government in case the BJP and its allies should cross the 240-seat mark, today the mood was to work out a Congress(I)-led coalition.

Arguing that the "BJP has failed to muster the requisite number", Mr. Gulam Nabi Azad, convener of the campaign committee, asserted that "the Congress and the United Front will have to form the government. As Mr. Azad saw it, the "BJP and allies have failed to get the mandate to rule the country", and there would be "in-built instability" in any BJP-led coalition.

Mr. Azad also noted with satisfaction the statements made by the CPI (M) leader, Mr. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the Samajwadi Party leader, Mr. Amar Singh, and the Janata Dal leader, Mr. Ram Vilas Paswan, more or less, indicating that the various United Front constituents would have no reservation about extending support to a Congress(I)-led coalition. He also noted that the CPI (M) and others were keeping themselves off the question as to who should be the leader of the Congress(I) Parliamentary Party.

The Congress(I) president, Mr. Sitaram Kesri, had a meeting with Mrs. Sonia Gandhi this morning, and is believed to have discussed the possibility of a Congress(I)-led coalition. Other senior Congress(I) leaders, like Mr. Sharad Pawar, Mr. Vijayabhaskar Reddy and Mr. A.K. Antony have also met her and are understood to have conveyed their perceptions to her.

Though Mr. Pawar has acquired a new respect among the Congress(I) leaders after the party's very impressive performance in Maharashtra, there is a widespread recognition that the choice of the next leader of the Congress(I) Parliamentary Party would be essentially determined by Mrs. Gandhi. Mr. Pawar would not be inclined to be make way for someone else, according to some of his advisers. He will also have the advantage of being able to win over eventually some of the partners who are now tentatively aligned with the BJP. However, both Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress chief would want the party to decide the leadership question quickly and unanimously.

For now the Congress(I) is understood to be in touch with the United Front leaders, though Mr. Azad refused to divulge details of these interactions. Besides Mr. Surjeet, the Congress(I) leaders are reported to be in touch with the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mr. Jyoti Basu, and the senior Dal leader Mr. V.P.Singh. The Congress(I) also sought to downplay the "DMK factor". Mr. Azad noted that "fortunately for the DMK, and luckily for us, the DMK has lost its bargaining power."

Mr. Azad also rejected the suggestion that any attempt to cobble together an anti-BJP government would amount to one more instance of unfairly cheating that party out of its due ; he answered that "the Indian electorate has cheated the BJP out of power." The only choice before the nation, according to Mr. Azad, was a Congress(I)-led coalition, or an early election.

Jayalalitha to work for people's progress

By Our Special Correspondent

CHENNAI, March 3.

The AIADMK general secretary, Ms. Jayalalitha, while thanking the people for her party's massive victory in the Lok Sabha election, today rededicated herself to working for the progress of the people. The candidates elected on behalf of the AIADMK front would involve themselves in the development works for their respective constituencies, she said in a statement.

Expressing her gratitude to the leaders and the workers of the allies, she said the victory had showed that the AIADMK front had the backing of the people. Though the AIADMK was not in power, it continued to be in the hearts of the people. She had no other aim than to work for the people.

While noting that the AIADMK front had won 30 of the 40 constituencies in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, she said she had received information about the misuse of official machinery in the 10 constituencies won by the Opposition. Even so, the AIADMK front had lost only by narrow margins in those constituencies.

Some newspapers and private television networks were against the AIADMK, but the people supported the "democratic progressive front," she said.

Today's issue has 28 pages which include a 4 page section containing Business Review feature and OPPORTUNITIES — an exclusive appointments section

Tomorrow's issue will carry a 4 page feature on Inside, Outside Mega Show in addition to Science, Technology & Agriculture features

AIADMK combine's tally reaches 30

By Our Special Correspondent

CHENNAI, March 3.

The AIADMK juggernaut rolled on in Tamil Nadu securing 30 of the 39 seats in the Lok Sabha election.

While the major partner of the opposition alliance, the AIADMK, won 18 of the 22 seats it contested, the BJP won 3, the PMK 4, the MDMK 3 and the Janata Party and TRC one each.

The DMK managed only five of the 17 seats it contested in Tamil Nadu but won the sole seat in Pondicherry. Its allies, the TMC won 3 out of 20 it contested and the CPI 1 out of 2.

Notwithstanding the poor showing in the Lok Sabha election, the DMK retained both Coonoor and Aruppukottai Assembly byelections by defeating the AIADMK candidates.

The DMK president and Chief Minister, Mr. M. Karunanidhi, was not available for his reaction on the party's performance in the election but a sort of disbelief appears to haunt the rank and file as the ruling party began the process of introspection to analyse the causes for the defeat of its combine.

The present election saw four Union ministers bite the dust. Mr. T.G. Venkataraman of DMK (Tindivanam), and Mr. M. Arunachalam (Tenkasi), Mr. S.R. Balasubramaniam (Nilgiris) and Mr. Dhanushkodi Adithan (Tiruchendur), all of TMC, lost to their AIADMK front rivals. Mr. Murasoli Maran (Central Chennai) and Mr. T.R. Balu (South Chennai) of the DMK, besides Mr. P.Chidambaram (Sivaganga) of the TMC emerged victorious beating AIADMK and BJP rivals.

While many of the victories in the AIADMK camp came with huge margins, the DMK front win in Tiruppattur was on a slender difference of 274 votes. The Tiruppattur result was declared by rejecting an AIADMK plea for a recount in the constituency. Party sources said the result would be challenged in a court of law.

The biggest win for the AIADMK front was in Coimbatore where the BJP candidate, Mr. C.P. Radhakrishnan, romped home by a margin of 1.44 lakh votes. The other one lakh plus difference for the AIADMK front were in Gopichettipalayam (AIADMK), Salem (TRC), Sivakasi (MDMK) and Tiruchengode (AIADMK).

For the DMK the greatest margin was in Central Chennai where Mr. Maran had a victory margin of 71,697.

Apart from Tiruppattur, the election witnessed close contest in Tirunelveli (victory margin 6,954) and Chidambaram (7,955).

Although the Congress (I) front lost its deposit in almost all the seats, the party effectively spoiled the chances of the TMC in several constituencies.

In Cuddalore, Nilgiris, Palani, Tiruchi and Ramanathapuram, the Congress(I) obtained more votes than the margin of defeat for the TMC. Similarly, Puthiya Tamizhagam, floated a little before the election by the Dalit leader, Dr. K. Krishnasamy, made a dent into the DMK front support base in Dindigul, Tirunelveli and Tenkasi.

Reacting to the poll outcome, the TMC president, Mr. G.K. Moopanar, told a press conference that an impression seemed to have gained ground that the DMK and the TMC were unduly favouring the minorities which was not true.

"I have repeatedly mentioned in all the election meetings that though as political parties we have to safeguard the interests of the minorities in a secular democracy, We are second to none in taking stringent action against religious and communal fundamentalism", he said.

Mr. Moopanar also did not agree with the view that the DMK Government had failed to initiate preventive action against the perpetrators of the serious crime at Coimbatore. He felt that the Government had taken the required action based on reports available to it but "I am sure it will take sterner action to stem the rot without delay. And I agree it is my duty to impress on the Government the need for taking effective action against the fundamentalists wherever they belonged."

Stating that he had never expected such an outcome, Mr.Moopanar explained that he was hopeful of the success of his party's candidate in Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tiruchi, Dindigul, Palani, Cuddalore, Rasipuram Arkonam and Krishnagiri. The defeat of the party's candidates in these constituencies was a real disappointment to him.

Asked whether the situation could have improved if only the CPI(M) had been accommodated in a couple of seats, Mr.Moopanar said all such issues would not have become a subject of discussion now if only the serial bomb blasts had not become a turning point.

However, he agreed that Sonia Gandhi's visit had some impact in Tamil Nadu as could be seen from the sizable votes polled by the Congress(I) candidates in some constituencies including Palani. He did not agree with the suggestion that local issues like corruption of the AIADMK leaders had contributed in this election. Nevertheless, it would be a futile exercise if anyone tried to interpret the verdict as an approval of the actions of the AIADMK leaders during their rule in the State.

Mr. Moopanar said "I have already made my feelings known immediately after the polling that I am not very happy about the performance of my partymen in some constituencies." He had contemplated a number of steps to streamline the organisation based on lessons learnt from this election. Asked whether the results of this election would have a negative impact on his partymen, Mr.Moopanar said he did not think so because every political party at some point of time or other had faced this situation.

The TNCC(I) President, Mr. K. V. Thangabalu, who unsuccessfully contested at Salem and secured the third place, said "the party would have improved its performance if only the high command had announced Mrs.Sonia Gandhi as the Prime Ministerial candidate." He said that the main reason for the low key performance was total shortage of funds. However, he added that many candidates had done well in keenly contested constituencies like Palani, Nilgiris and Tenkasi and "I feel that the party would emerge as an alternative force if it continued to work hard."

Mr. Thangabalu said that he took over as the State unit president only in July after the party elections and there was not enough time to regain the party's lost moorings.

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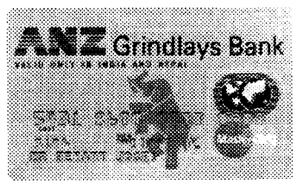

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