

## The Landslide and What Lies Ahead

THE LANDSLIDE IN favour of the Congress (I) headed by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in the Seventh General Elections to the Lok Sabha has certainly proved many a pre-poll assessment absurdly wrong and has almost certainly gone beyond the most optimistic expectations of even the winning camp. The manifestations of rapid popular disillusionment with the character of governance that marked the period 1977-79 and the inevitable beneficiary of these trends have been rather obvious for some time, but it is the depth of the qualitative change emerging from the interplay of various socio-economic and political factors during the past three years that has provided the most stunning part of the surprise element. At any rate, the massive majority won by the Congress(I) has transformed the overall political picture of the country. A Central Government will soon be formed with overwhelming clout and, at least on paper, characterised by rare stability. The changed political configuration, and in particular the rout of the opposition with the exceptions of West Bengal, Kerala, Tripura and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, anticipates a new phase in India's political development — where the temptation to ride roughshod over dissent and opposition might be powerful even to start with and calls for the most conscious adherence to the rules of the game by all concerned.

The results derived from the Congress(I) wave will, however, be qualified by two kinds of immediate contra-realities. The first will be the variance between the political composition of the Lok Sabha and that of the Rajya Sabha — a problem that Mrs. Gandhi might be confronted with early enough. The second significant tension might surface in the area relating to the current political results achieved in all those States where the Congress(I) and its allies have pulverised the opposition and the existence of non-Congress(I) Governments in such States (barring Andhra Pradesh and possibly Karnataka, now that Mr. Devaraj Urs has resigned). The precedent set in 1977 under instructions from the Janata Home Minister, Mr. Charan Singh, was not approved at that time by anybody other than the ruling party at the Centre and is hardly the one to follow under the circumstances, especially in a federal set-up where swings could appear and disappear (as has, indeed, been amply proved) in a matter of mere months. In any case, the attitude of a powerful Centre to the States is a sensitive and vital issue even where the two levels of Government are in the hands of the same party. It is, after all,

the State regime that has to carry out or implement most of the policies or decisions made by the Centre. Nevertheless, these qualifying factors do not affect overmuch the fact that 1980 signals a sharp reversal of the process that threw the Emergency regime out of office in March 1977. At that time, the South had constituted — for various complicated reasons — the exception and it bears emphasis that once again the land south of the Vindhyas has elected overwhelmingly in a particular direction. Be it by design or otherwise, this region went grossly underrepresented in the Central Government during Janata rule, but with the solid contribution — 132 seats — it has made to Mrs. Gandhi's tally, she may be expected to put an end now to that sort of skewed pattern in the Cabinet.

While paying due heed to the mood and feelings of the people who have this time expressed their verdict on a clinching all-India scale, THE HINDU would reiterate the essential thrust of the arguments and facts it placed before the public a few weeks ago in the three-part editorial titled "In Painful Quest of Political Solutions." The talent held by a vast, populous, multi-structural and uneven society needs the most generous space and democratic methodology to develop; attempted solutions that ignore the fundamental challenge in the situation are likely to come to grief sooner rather than later. In fact, the chief lesson spotlighted by the election results is that the hard-pressed ordinary people will no longer brook delay in changes and improvements in their lives and are going to be increasingly demanding in the matter of real performance on the part of the politicians vested with power. In this context, those who attribute the present verdict solely to the personal quirks and angles of a few ageing personages are missing the elementary point about the lesson of the Janata debacle — the need to produce meaningful answers along the promised lines within progressively short time spaces. At least after the event, it can be unambiguously recognised that, given the kind of uninspiring and petty performance the many-headed conglomerate showed itself capable of in office, its collapse at the hands of the people was only a matter of time. At best for it, 1980 might have — with somewhat more favourable incidental developments — come in 1982.

And the nation, and those who are going to be put in control of it shortly, would do well to remember — especially bearing in mind the dangers that lurk in regional and international affairs — that the factors that led to the unifying eclipse of the Janata constitute (for all the obscuring effect created by the electoral landslide) the very reasons that render any euphoria on the part of Mrs. Gandhi's party inappropriate. In the first place, Mrs. Gandhi as Prime Minister will be taking charge of an economy that is very sick — highlighted by the collapse of the industrial growth rate in the current period, galloping prices affecting every section of society and most of all the rural poor, a 20 per cent rate of inflation, the mass of misery left over by the drought, formidable unemployment and, above all the absence of a planning process worth the name. The task of managing this economy will undoubtedly be the real measure of the quality of the new regime. Secondly, it will be instructive to see how in a social context scarred extensively by conflict and tension, the slogan of restoring "law and order" is to be worked. Apart from caste and communal disharmonies and the disturbingly rising crime rate, there will be the larger political problem of tackling chauvinism of the type that has gained the upper hand in Assam. By now, enough experience has been gathered to show that the methodology of establishing "law and order" through strong arm measures or through repression and intolerance yields only superficial — and typically counter-productive — results. The third important area that the new regime will be called upon to handle is the structure of civil liberties and democratic rights, including the people's right to dissent and criticism. Another kind of challenge is located in the complex field of external relations. The Congress(I) response in all these areas will be watched and assessed closely by the public in the period immediately ahead.