

The Emerging Pattern

INDIA'S FOURTH GENERAL elections will go down in history as one of the most significant landmarks in the evolution of democracy in Asia and the world. Never has a ruling party, so well entrenched in office for two decades over so vast a country, been administered such compelling shocks by a resentful electorate. Whatever agonising reappraisal of its policies and performance the Congress may make in examining the reasons for its reverses, it will have to realise that the electorate has shown in unmistakable form its dissatisfaction with Congress rule in many States and at the Centre. While the vote against the Congress is clear enough, it is doubtful whether the picture is equally clear as to the alternative which the voters want. There is no definite swing to the Right or the Left over the country as a whole. While in Kerala, the vote is obviously for the Left parties, in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh it is the Swatantra and Jan Sangh that have been the principal gainers from the vote against the Congress. What the general elections have brought about is not a polarisation of parties, but a new pattern in which there will be a fairly strong Right Wing and a slightly less strong Left Wing, with the Congress remaining as the major party of the Centre. It is some consolation to the Congress that in an election in which it lost its majority in half a dozen large States including Madras, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, it has been able to secure a working majority at the Centre, but it will be facing a really formidable Opposition for the first time in the past fifteen years.

If the defeat of many senior Ministers and the poor representation of some of the States in the new Congress Parliamentary Party will pose a difficult problem in the formation of the new Ministry, the more important tasks are the choice of a leader who will command the respect and support of not only the party but also the entire nation and the formulation of new policies to meet the challenging crises confronting the country. Whoever may be chosen as leader must be assured of complete and loyal support from all members of the Cabinet. Nothing has so much damaged the image and good name of the Union Ministry as the general impression that on every major issue it was a house divided and that members of the Cabinet were anything but a happy and harmonious team. With a strong Opposition in the Lok Sabha and several non-Congress Ministries in the States, unless there is a united and resolute Government at the Centre, which has a clear awareness of its responsibilities and can display both firmness and tact in dealing with the difficult situations it will have to face, the divisive and subversive forces that have reared their heads in recent years will engulf the country.

It is in the reassessment of its past policies and the formulation of new measures to deal with the economic situation (which largely accounted for the Congress's electoral debacle) that the Congress leadership has to show wisdom, resilience, realism and statesmanship. No useful purpose will be served by searching for scapegoats or extraneous factors for explaining away the party's reverses. The major factors that have contributed to the unpopularity of the Congress are high prices, shortages of food and other essential commodities, high taxation, corruption at various levels and the general feeling that Congressmen in leading positions were more concerned about feathering their own nests rather than attending to the needs of the masses. The Congress's argument that sacrifices were needed for carrying out the Plans did not obviously satisfy many who felt that these were not being borne equally by all. The Third Plan was an unmitigated disaster. The Congress leadership must recognise that the electorate's verdict clearly means that it does not accept the thesis that the people exist for the Plans and not the Plans for the people. Out of this recognition must come a new order of priorities relating to the immediate economic tasks and the series of measures required to provide reliefs to various sections of the people and to impart a new momentum to the economy as a whole. When the Prime Minister said the other day that the results of the elections did not call for any changes in the Government's policy, we hope she was not reflecting the considered views of the Congress leadership. Many vital changes are called for over a wide range of policies and a new Government that hesitates or fails to make these changes will be doing a disservice to the country.