

11 *Congress Replaced By Coalition Governments*

The forgoing pages have shown that the Congress as a party cannot hope to win any election in the state. In no election since the 1948-49 years has the Congress won, on its own, more than one-third of the seats in the legislature (either in the former Travancore-Cochin state or in the subsequent Kerala state).

It is equally clear that the Congress cannot be expected to play a positive role in any coalition or alliance into which it may enter. The bitter experience gained by the PSP in 1954-55, and by the PSP and the Muslim League in 1960-62, shows that support to, and coalition with, other parties is, for the Congress, only a stepping stone to its own one-party rule. No self-respecting person or party can rely on the promises of support coming from the Congress.

A Congress government being thus ruled out, the only alternative is to have a coalition of non-Congress parties and groups which agree to defeat the Congress and form their own coalition government. Failure to forge such an alliance of non-Congress parties would mean that Karala would remain without a popularly-elected legislature and ministry.

This fact was sharply underlined by the result of the 1965 mid-term elections when, instead of joining the forces of opposition to the Congress, the right-wing Communists and RSP disrupted the electoral united front: disregarding reality, they insisted on a "left united front", i.e., a front excluding, and directed against, the Muslim League. The Muslim League

for its part insisted on its ties with the Kerala Congress which would not touch the Communists even with a pair of tongs.

There were thus three groupings of non-Congress parties—Muslim League-Kerala Congress alliance; Right Communist-RSP alliance; the Communist-SSP-KTP-KSP alliance (with several Independents supported by two or even three of these groupings). The mutual fight between these three groupings—particularly between the last two—helped the victory of Congress candidates in several constituencies. The result was that none of the three groupings had [an absolute majority of seats in the legislature—a fact which was used by the central Government to dissolve the legislature and impose President's rule in the state.

This led to rethinking on the part of all parties.

The "left" Communists, the CPI (M), saw that their 1965 line of "a left united front with adjustment of a few seats with the Muslim League" was inadequate. What was required was to have a united front of all who were prepared to join in defeating the Congress and forming a non-Congress coalition government.

The Muslim League for its part saw the wisdom of joining the Communists, rather than continuing their alliance with the Kerala Congress.

The right Communists, too, began to realise that their 1965 line was wrong; that it was necessary to rethink their attitude to the Muslim League.

The SSP realised that their "principled stand" of "no coalition or united front on the basis of a minimum programme" would not meet the requirements of the situation, that it was necessary to have closer bonds with other opposition parties.

This process of rethinking led, in the immediate post-election months, to unity of all the left opposition parties in the struggle for civil liberties, for food, for trade union and

peasant demands. Demonstrations, hartals, strikes, satyagraha and other forms of action were organized under the joint auspices of all these parties who formed a statewide Council of Action to guide these activities.

This trend towards the unity of the left opposition parties was, for a time, interrupted by the outbreak of the Indo-Pakistan war. The CPI (M) refused to be swept into the wave of anti-Pakistan chauvinism and campaigned for a peaceful political settlement with Pakistan (as with China). The other left opposition parties, however, moved with the chauvinistic current. The right Communists went to the furthest extent, denounced the CPI (M) as "anti-national". Unity of action, therefore, could not develop as it had begun.

This gave hope and encouragement to the Congress leaders who saw in the "isolation" of the biggest opposition party their own opportunity. They began to whip up popular passions, and organize hooligan demonstrations against the CPI (M). Congress papers gave vicious calls for "hounding the anti-national party out of public life". They gleefully "reported" that the meetings and rallies organized by the CPI (M) were being disrupted by angry people. Even the Governor of the state, Congressman A.P. Jain, joined the mischievous game.

They were, however, foiled in the game. The few attempts at disruption of meetings and rallies proved miserable failures. As opposed to a dozen or so of the "patriotic" disruptors, were the thousands who put them in the proper place, not a single meeting was, in fact, disrupted. The bold campaign for peaceful settlement not only with Pakistan but with China as well, the courageous call for an attitude of give-and-take in dealing with the two neighbouring countries built a new image of the CPI (M)—the image of those who speak the truth, even though it is unpopular to begin with. This endeared them to all those who saw that the Marxists were the only people who fearlessly exposed Congress policies and practices even when such exposure appeared "unpatriotic".

The result was that the rallies held in connection with the district conventions of the Party in November-December, 1965,

were the biggest in history. It was clear that those who tried to "isolate" the CPI (M) were themselves getting isolated.

Developments in the field of national politics helped this process. The chauvinistic campaign for a fight to the finish with Pakistan could not last for more than a few days. The U.N.-sponsored cease-fire had to be agreed to. The Indian and Pakistani leaders of Government met at Tashkent and signed an agreement. These developments showed all unprejudiced people that the Congress government at the Centre had to do precisely what the "Marxists" had advocated. They were thus proved to be not only courageous but wise as well.

It was not surprising therefore that the thread of unity in the ranks of the left opposition could once again be taken up. The Council of Action, formed before the outbreak of the war with Pakistan, was activated once again. When the government decided to effect a one-fourth cut in the rice ration (from 160 to 129 grams), the Council of Action called for a one-day general strike and hartal (Kerala bandh). Popular response to the call was so magnificent that every political party, including the Congress, participated in it (though the Congress subsequently withdrew from it).

It was against this background that the State Committee of the CPI (M) called for unity of all those opposition parties—whether left or non-left—who are prepared to accept a minimum programme on the basis of which they agree to defeat the Congress, win a majority and form a non-Congress coalition government. This meant that the Party was prepared to have a coalition (and not mere adjustment of seats) with the Muslim League if the latter was prepared to accept a minimum programme.

This was followed by the right Communists whose state leadership announced that, unlike 1965, they would not non-cooperate with any left party which makes adjustments with the Muslim League, even though they themselves would have no such adjustments.

A few days after this, the All-India Council of the Muslim

League came out with a declaration that the League would be prepared to join any opposition party—whether Swatantra, Jan Sangh or Communist—in a programmatic united front to defeat the Congress and form a non-Congress Government.

This declaration of the League was hailed by the right Communists as a welcome development. The League having agreed to accept a minimum programme, the right Communists said, they would have no objection to joining the League in a united front.

The 1965 allies of the right Communists—the RSP—however, did not agree with them. They held the view that the acceptance of a minimum programme did not change the character of the League. They, therefore, would not join any united front which included the League. They were, however, prepared to make adjustments with such a united front. As for the non-Congress government to be formed after the election, they would not join it if it included the League, but would support it, since it was by and large a leftist government.

These developments in Kerala were facilitated by the growing unity of left opposition parties in other states—unity in such mass struggles as the Bengal Bandh, Bihar Bandh and so on. This unity in struggles was also sought to be extended to the field of election; several opposition parties including four operating in Kerala (the two Communist parties, the RSP and SSP) met in Delhi in July and declared as follows:

“Nineteen years of Congress misrule have brought extreme hardship and sufferings to the common people. Rising prices of essential commodities, growing unemployment, widening disparities of wealth and income, increasing dependence on outside assistance, loans, foreign capital and food imports, crushing tax burdens, wasteful government expenditure and monopoly profits have brought the country to the verge of disaster.

“It is necessary to fight these anti-people and anti-democratic policies through sustained mass struggle and give relief to the oppressed people. We pledge ourselves to work ceaselessly for

developing the movement and rid the country of Congress rule.

“The coming election provides the people with an opportunity to break the Congress stranglehold on the government, increase opposition representation and even replace the Congress administration by non-Congress popular governments.

“We declare that in order to defeat the Congress which is running the country by its reactionary and anti-people policies, we have agreed to achieve electoral adjustment with a view to avoiding mutual contest. We will also try to coordinate our election campaigns on the basis of mutual support to each other’s candidates.

“We are further agreed that outside of the seats conceded to one another, these parties will be free to seek, if they so desire, adjustments with other parties which are not party to this agreement.

“We give a solemn assurance to the people that should the electorate throw the Congress out, we shall provide alternative, popular non-Congress governments and will see to it that stable legislative majorities are created for these non-Congress popular governments.”

The basic question of electoral policy having thus been cleared both in Kerala as well as at the all-India level, nothing stood in the way of the emergence of a united front if agreement could be arrived at on the outlines of a minimum programme and on the distribution of seats. Congress leaders hoped, and Congress papers predicted, that the various constituents of the emerging United Front would break on either or both. They were, however, disappointed to find their hopes misplaced. An unanimous agreement was reached on the policies to be pursued by the non-Congress Government; the magnificent demonstrations for Kerala’s demands jointly organized by seven opposition parties, and the final agreement on distribution of seats put an end to all speculation, and made the United Front of non-Congress parties a reality.

Within three months after the formation of the United Front in Kerala, the Fourth General Elections took place. The Congress was defeated and several non-Congress parties and Independents together received an absolute majority of seats in five states—the Punjab, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa and Kerala. In the state of Madras and in the Union Territory of Delhi, single-party governments were formed by the DMK and Jan Sangh respectively.

In an eighth state, Rajasthan, there was a constitutional deadlock, since neither the Congress nor the opposition had an absolute majority. The Congress used this uncertain situation as well as the office of the State Governor, in order to manoeuvre itself back into power.

As against this gain of one state, however, the Congress lost in a few days—the state of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. These states had returned a majority of Congressmen into the legislature: Congress governments were therefore formed after the elections. In a few days, however, a section of Congressmen defected from their own organization, forged an alliance with non-Congress parties and formed non-Congress governments. Within a few weeks of the General Elections, therefore, there arose a situation in which 9 out of 17 states and one Union Territory did have non-Congress governments.

This was an entirely new all-India situation, which could not but have its impact in Kerala.