

Indian elections give Congress-I party a jolt

by Ramtanu Maitra

As the dark clouds moved over India promising a normal monsoon and bringing hope to the people and administration alike, the ruling Congress-I party in Delhi received a sharp message from voters in the June 16 by-elections: Shape up or face the consequences.

Seven parliamentary seats and 11 state assembly seats—vacated because of deaths or resignations—were contested in the northern states. The Congress-I, which had held all seven parliamentary seats and five of the assembly seats, lost ground, conceding four parliamentary seats to the Opposition parties. The results in one contest in Haryana will not be counted until charges of fraud are settled, but it is one more seat Congress-I may well lose. In the assembly contests in six different states, the Congress-I broke even—no gain, no loss.

Under normal circumstances, these results would not have attracted much attention. But the contest for the parliamentary seat from Allahabad changed all that. Allahabad, a city noted for educational, cultural, and political activities in the pre-independence days, is the ancestral residence of the Nehru family and has always sent major political leaders to the national scene. In December 1985, the “Rajiv-wave” swept Amitabh Bachchan, a movie star hailing from the city and featured in B-grade Hollywood-type movies, into the seat. Bachchan, a close friend of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, defeated H.N. Bahuguna, an Opposition leader who had earlier been a Congress-I chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, with a massive margin of 157,000 votes.

Following Bachchan’s resignation last year in the wake of the Bofors arms-trading scandal and open accusation by the Opposition of involvement in illegal foreign exchange dealings, the vacant Allahabad seat became a subject of national interest. Former Finance Minister V.P. Singh’s subsequent “crusade” to expose “corruption in high places,” following his resignation as defense minister and exit from Congress-I, and his challenge to Bachchan for the seat, kept the juices flowing. In spite of repeated “leaks” that Bachchan, who is back in the movies, would pick up the gauntlet and contest Singh in Allahabad, at the 11th hour the Congress-I fielded Sunil Shastri, son of former Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. A political lightweight who had to evoke his father’s name constantly to give weight to his candidacy, Sunil Shastri had been brought into “big politics” by V.P. Singh in 1980. For a fleeting while a year ago, Shastri had

even bolted from the Congress-I and joined V.P. Singh’s “crusade.”

V.P. Singh’s political career would have been terminated if he had lost the election. This would also have put on ice, for a while at least, Opposition hopes of rallying behind Singh to oust the Congress-I in the next general elections. The Congress-I, for its part, made no bones that sending V.P. Singh to political oblivion was a priority. So, Opposition and Congress-I leaders converged on Allahabad from distant states, each claiming a resounding victory of their candidate of choice.

Another indication of the resentment against the Congress-I was the emergence of Kanshi Ram, leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, a party representing the lower-caste Hindus and minorities such as the Muslims, as the third major contestant for the seat. Who was Kanshi Ram going to “hurt”—Singh or Shastri—and how much?

As it turned out, the verdict on June 16 by 450,000 Allahabad voters was clear-cut. V.P. Singh romped home with a majority of 110,000 votes. The Congress-I, hurt by Kanshi Ram who mopped up 18% of the votes, finished by polling an all-time low (for them) of 24% of the valid votes. Only 45% of the voters exercised their franchise.

Opposition parties overjoyed

The result has brought a tide of joy to the fractious Opposition and thrown a pall over the Congress-I camp. The trend in these by-elections shows that the Congress-I has lost support in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat—two of the few remaining Congress-I bastions. The results also show that the Opposition parties can defeat the ruling party if they combine. In general, the Congress-I has been winning elections, securing 40-plus percent of the votes, while various Opposition parties split the rest.

However, the Opposition, which consists of such extremes of the political spectrum as the Communist parties, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Janata Party, Lok Dal, and a multitude of regional parties, remains in disarray. While the Communists do not like the Congress-I, for example, they consider the BJP as enemy number-one. While to the voters, the Communists evoke the image of Moscow and Beijing running Delhi, the BJP evokes the image of a Hindu state where the minorities will be unwanted. Within the BJP itself, a struggle between the orthodox Hindus and pragmatists has been widely noted.

The Lok Dal, on the other hand, evokes the image of Delhi being run by rich kulaks who hate the industrial workers. The Janata Party, whose real strength is in the southern state of Karnataka but whose control is in the hands of Hindi-belt politicians without a base, is suffering badly as the northern politicians try to clip the wings of southern leaders.

The Allahabad election is not going to change all these things. But, it did provide the people an opportunity to tell the government: “Shape up or else. . . .”