

From New Delhi by Susan B. Maitra

Congress (I) loses big in Tamil Nadu

It is a bitter pill to swallow for those who do not want reformation of the party.

The ruling Congress (I) party in New Delhi received a rude shock on Jan. 21 when the electorate of Tamil Nadu, India's southernmost state, tersely rejected it and elected the local DMK party at the hustings. Congress (I), however, did win a slender majority in both the northeastern states, Mizoram and Nagaland, which went to the polls the same day. While defections and resignations of legislators had collapsed the duly-elected governments in Mizoram and Nagaland last year, in Tamil Nadu the death of a popular chief minister in December 1987 led to the total disintegration of the ruling AIADMK party. All three states were under Governor's rule, controlled directly from Delhi.

Of the three, the Tamil Nadu election drew the most attention. The death of Chief Minister M.G. Ramachandran, the undisputed leader of the AIADMK who had kept the party in power in Tamil Nadu for 10 years, and the ensuing collapse of the ruling AIADMK, provided a chance for contending political parties to seize power. Congress (I), which had been out of power in the state since 1967 and had kept its political presence only in alliance with the AIADMK, campaigned hard to win the elections on its own steam, but fell flat on its face, coming in a poor third with only 26 out of 208 seats contested.

DMK, the regional party which has promoted the Dravidian interests to attract its backers, had long been well-established in the state. The DMK leader and new chief minister, M. Karunanidhi, had been Tamil Nadu's

chief minister earlier. Still, the margin of the DMK victory—151 seats out of 202 contested in the 232-member Assembly, and thus an absolute majority—shocked many. The magnitude of the DMK victory reflects more the utter fragmentation of the AIADMK and the hapless state of the Congress (I) than its own strength.

The elections in Mizoram and Nagaland produced more expected results. The contest in both states was between the Congress (I) and tribal parties promoting local interests. In both states, the Congress (I) secured slender, yet absolute majorities, in Mizoram with 40 Assembly seats, and Nagaland with 60 Assembly seats. Both states are located in the northeast where instability has been a national security concern. In both states, long periods of armed insurgency against the central government by tribal groups seeking independence had been complicated by the involvement of Chinese and Burmese insurgents. The Congress (I) victory suggests that tribal belligerence is on the wane, and a political process has begun to take root.

With the victory of the DMK, a member-party of the newly formed National Front against the Congress (I), all the states in southern India now have non-Congress (I) governments. In Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the ruling parties cater to state interests only. In the other two southern states, Karnataka and Kerala, the ruling parties belong to the Janata Dal and a left coalition led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist, CPI(M), respectively.

The DMK has always been a critic of India's policy toward the Sri Lanka Tamils and had denounced the stationing of the Indian Peace Keeping Force in Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan situation has shown a marked improvement and the issue did not seem to figure in the elections. Still, DMK's moves on this issue will be closely watched.

Since these are the last three electoral contests before the scheduled parliamentary elections next December, political pundits have written thousands of lines of copy predicting and analyzing the outcome. Since Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had put in many long hours of campaigning in Tamil Nadu, the results there have given rise to the general forecast that the Congress (I) and Prime Minister Gandhi are going to face a hostile electorate in the coming parliamentary elections.

However tempting it may be to generalize on the basis of a major state election, it is in fact neither rigorous nor valid. In the midst of all the noise and din, all that can be truly said is that the defeat of the Congress (I) in Tamil Nadu is not going to improve its prospects in the parliamentary elections. Those prospects are as yet to be determined, where they always have been, in the northern "Hindi belt."

What the Tamil Nadu election does show is that wherever the Congress (I) is organizationally weak—as it has been in Tamil Nadu for decades—the party cannot latch on to the prime minister's coattails and expect to ride to power. The problem that the party faces is the same one that Prime Minister Gandhi eloquently pointed out at the party centenary celebrations in Bombay in 1985. He said that the party had been taken away from the people by power brokers with vested interests, who have turned it into their private fiefdom.