

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

No surprises for India . . . yet

The Congress (I) rout continued, but in three states no party could gain an absolute majority.

Eight Indian states—five in the north, two in the west, and one in the northeast—went to the polls on Feb. 27, along with the tiny southern union territory of Pondicherry, to elect new state assemblies. The poll results, which in some cases took almost a week because of unprecedented violence, reaffirmed the trends set in the parliamentary elections last November.

The Congress (I) party, which was in power in all eight states, bowed out in six, won an absolute majority in Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast, and managed to form a government with the help of a few independents in Maharashtra in the west. The six states lost by the Congress (I) went with the Janata Dal (JD)-Bharatiya Janata (BJP) combine. Although the JD could win an absolute majority only in Orissa, the BJP bagged absolute majorities in both Himachal Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. The other three states will be governed by a mish-mash coalition of the JD and BJP.

The results were no surprise to most observers here. The Congress (I), which apparently never recovered from the November electoral setback, conceded meekly in most of the states and lost a significant amount of strength in Maharashtra, the large and important state where Bombay is located, and a traditional Congress stronghold. It is generally expected that the Congress (I) will have to restructure its organization before it can again pose a real challenge to either the BJP or JD in these states.

As in November, voters made it clear that ruling parties had better deliver or get out. In the crucial northern

and western states, which together account for about 55% of the parliamentary seats, a three-party system has emerged. While the JD and Congress (I) had already established their credentials, the assembly elections in the six northern and western states established the BJP as a party to reckon with in the future.

Uttar Pradesh, the largest northern state, elected its assembly at the time of the parliamentary poll. At that time the JD emerged as the single largest party, and is now running a minority government with BJP support from outside.

But if the elections brought no surprises, they didn't bring as much comfort to the ruling Janata Dal in Delhi as they might have, beholden as it is to the outside support of both the right-wing BJP and the Left. All eyes are now on the three states where no party won an absolute majority. The question is, will the formula which has kept the national front government at the center stable, also hold good in these states?

A falling-out, or prolonged wrangling among the National Front constituents at the state level would inevitably play back to seriously erode the central government in Delhi, a prospect which has Congress (I) stalwarts salivating already. In Bihar, for example, the emerging scenario suggests that the JD, the largest single party, will require help from either the Left or the BJP, or both, to form a stable state government. But already rumbles have been heard to the effect that the Left has put a price on its support: JD denunciation of the BJP. So far, the BJP has not spoken, and

it is not clear how deep-seated the Left's demand is. In the other two states, Gujarat and Rajasthan, the chances of the JD-BJP combine unraveling are less.

But the rumbles are there, as they were in December when the National Front was forming its government in Delhi. As much as anything it is the rivalry within the leadership of the JD itself which keeps any kind of coalition in a perpetually precarious state. Neither Chandra Shekhar nor Devi Lal, two faction leaders in the JD, have reconciled themselves to the fact that V.P. Singh holds the prime minister's chair.

Chandra Shekhar, an avowed socialist, backs a Left-JD coalition and is highly allergic to the BJP. Devi Lal, presently the deputy prime minister and a denizen of the Haryana farmbelt, is close to Chandra Shekhar, though the friendship is founded more on political convenience than principle or even ideology. Both of these senior leaders have been distinctly marginalized of late, and this provides them a good excuse to create problems within the party.

V.P. Singh's decision to give up the post of JD president will tend to bring these issues to the fore. The prime minister announced his resignation from the top party post on a matter of principle—one man, one post—but has been asked to keep the portfolio until alternative arrangements can be worked out. Singh's announcement left the jaded political pundits gasping—you can't mix principles with politics and expect to survive, they insist.

The coming days will see a fierce jockeying within the JD, and perhaps a significant amount of realignment of forces. Not all of this may cause instability, but the outcome is as difficult to foresee as it is important for the future of the present government.