

From New Delhi by Ramtanu Maitra

Congress Party wins the vote

The issue now is one of leadership, in the political crisis left by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

With a handful of results yet to be announced as of this writing, the Congress (I) has staked its claim to form the next government in India. The Congress won twice as many parliamentary seats as any other single party, but is still short of an absolute majority and will have to secure the formal support of another party to obtain a working majority in the parliament, or Lok Sabha.

The 10th Lok Sabha elections, which were spread over nearly three weeks due to the ghastly assassination of Congress (I) president and former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, were marred throughout by violent incidents. Punjab, whose voters go to the polls in the third week of June, in particular took a violent turn. There were also violent incidents in the states of Gujarat, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh prior to the elections. The overall impact of the violence was a poor voter turnout, averaging only 53%.

Still, the election results show a definite pattern. The Congress (I), which has ruled India for the last 40 years, emerged as the single largest party, winning more than 215 out of the 511 seats contested. It is also evident that the party has weakened significantly along the Gangetic plains where only 15 out of 179 seats contested were won.

The party's performance was particularly poor in Bihar, where it is unlikely to carry a single one of the 54 parliamentary seats. The performance in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh was also extremely poor.

As a result, the party's traditional

northern leadership is in total disarray.

While the Congress (I) was given a firm mandate in both the southern and central states, its performance in the western part of the country was mixed. A firm majority for the Congress in Maharashtra is contrasted by the party's virtual extinction in neighboring Gujarat, where the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) swept the polls.

Significantly, the much-heralded social reformer and former prime minister V.P. Singh failed to lead his Janata Dal party to any real success. Beside the fact that the Janata Dal's tally in the present election is about half of what it was in 1989, V.P. Singh's party was wiped out in most states. Its sweeping success in Bihar, where the caste factor and raw muscle power were used to obvious advantage, and its moderate success in Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, an eastern state, have reduced the party to a three-state political phenomenon, at best.

The Janata Dal's image, and even the prospect of emerging as a national party, have been severely tarnished. The electorate refused to be drawn into a divisive political game under the guise of social reform, Western media support for such a destructive scenario notwithstanding.

As we reported in *EIR* of May 17 ("The Caste Factor in Indian Elections: A Poll Analyst's Myth"), the pollsters were having a field day in the weeks before the election, calculating and recalculating caste and ethnic combinations, based on demographic

figures extrapolated from an ancient census carried out by the British Raj. As we forecast, all this had little to do with reality.

The fast-rising BJP improved upon its earlier position, but not to the extent some anticipated. Riding on the disputed Mandir Mosque issue and promoting Hindu chauvinism, the party is now expected to add not more than 30 seats to its earlier 86 seats. In the process, it has, for the first time, secured four parliamentary seats in Karnataka, a southern state. In Kerala, where the BJP did not win any seat, the party nonetheless showed strength and has reportedly helped to humble the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-dominated Left Democratic Front (LDF).

But the BJP has also shown that it has feet of clay. The party failed to secure the majority of Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Himachal Pradesh—all three states which are presently governed by the BJP.

Although it is certain that the Congress (I) will form the government with support from other parties, the Congress will have to deal immediately with the issue of deciding the new parliamentary leader and thus prime minister, a potentially divisive problem thrust upon the party's leaders by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

Reports from party insiders indicate that the process will not be smooth. Top-level party leaders who were playing second fiddle to Rajiv Gandhi will try to assert themselves and establish their power bases. The leadership question will also be vital to forming a viable ruling alliance. If the parliamentary party leadership question is not settled quickly, the party will face dissension within, and may even head for a split, thus in effect collapsing the government before it is established.