

India's Election Campaign Enters Homestretch

The parliamentary campaigns of India's major political parties have swung into their final three weeks, and the entire country is now engaged in the liveliest debate ever on the Gandhi government's economic and political policies. With the election set for March 16, all the major contending parties have issued public election manifestos, in all cases attempting to evaluate the gains and losses of the 19-month state of emergency period relaxed only last month.

The electoral manifestos of all major parties, including the non-Communist Opposition Front (Janata), refute the New York Times argument that the election is a battle between the "return of democracy" or continued "totalitarian" rule under Mrs. Gandhi. The Congress platform is solidly pro-economic growth but fails to express the political will to implement its own policies, reflecting the party's uneasy compromise between pro-development planners and the landlord-business alliance which funds the party. The Communist Party of India's (CPI) platform is a strong attack on the World Bank's austerity strategy, with a call for rapid industrialization through stronger relations with the socialist nations and emphasis on the need for the creation of a new world economic order. The CPI platform is basically what the left wing of the Congress Party would implement if it controlled its own party, but what the CPI cannot implement alone because it lacks a national party base to gain electoral majority.

In contrast, the Janata platform calls for the reversal of all pro-growth policies. The Janata glorified Mahatma Gandhi's self reliance programs, calls for decentralization of India's vast economy, and a return to the villages — in a nutshell, a zero growth "democracy."

Pro-growth economic planners, the CPI, and Mrs. Gandhi have all seized on the opportunity to demonstrate the total stupidity of the Janata strategy for India. On behalf of these forces, the *Patriot*, a major Indian daily, has delineated a program for "left and democratic forces" demanding that all parties address the issue of "application of science and technology for Indian development." Simultaneously, Mrs. Gandhi began her campaign rallies charging that the Janata Party is a vehicle for social chaos. Gandhi argued that the "hodgepodge party" aims at "dismantling India's state sector, and destroying the basic principles of socialism, secularism, and non-alignment" — all fundamental commitments of Indian government. Responding to these charges, one Janata spokesman indicated that it would be likely that the Soviet Union would end its friendship treaty with India should his party come to power!

Mrs. Gandhi's problem is that almost regardless of her own commitments to her popular base and campaign, the ruling Congress has continued to vacillate in the middle of an internal party conflict. When the election was announced Jan. 18, many believed the Congress could win handily. This prediction has melted away as the party has undergone rapid, unpredictable internal

changes in the past three weeks.

The Congress Party is funded by big landlord financial group alliance led by the Birla family, which is basically opposed to the strategy proposed by both Mrs. Gandhi and the left Congress. The Birlas have repeatedly voiced their agreement to an austerity drive for "Brazilianization" of India involving cuts in consumption of the working class and peasantry and an export drive that drives industries to maximum output with minimal capitalization. On behalf of this strategy, an agreement has been made to hold back Mrs. Gandhi's 20-point economic program — land reform and peasant debt moratoria — to the advantage of the state landlord backers of the party. But Mrs. Gandhi is campaigning on the 20-point program.

The political backlash to the indecision inside the Congress, and the role of Sanjay Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi's son, who has served as a tool for the Birla control, has been evidenced in the defection of Jagjivan Ram, former Agriculture Minister and powerful Congress faction leader. Ram has formed his own party, the Congress for Democracy, and has made unprincipled alliances with the Janata Front to bring down the Congress at the polls. Ram's political manifesto is highly critical of the defects of the Congress policies, but offers no alternatives.

Election Prospects

If the Congress is able to resolve its current internal strife to the benefit of Mrs. Gandhi and her pro-growth supporters, there is not question that it will win. Overall slate selections have demonstrated this already. The Congress will contest 492 out of 542 seats from the comfortable position of being able to consolidate a majority in the Loksabha (Lower House). The Janata will contest 391 seats, leaving 153 to various local, regionally-allied parties. The CPI will contest 98 seats, and unlike the last election, will not have alliances with the Congress in Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The most solid Congress-CPI alliance is in the heavily industrial West Bengal, where a joint campaign is planned. In the state of Kerala such a joint action is likely. On a state-by-state breakdown, the Janata challenges appear to be strongest in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Gujarat, the first two where the Janata has appealed to India's most illiterate ruralized communities and the latter because of its traditional landlord control of the state government.

Like the Congress, the Janata has put forth the familiar faces it has to the electorate — a policy that could well backfire. Officially it is a melange of four parties: the Hindu revivalist Jan Sangh, the Congress-O, led by former finance minister Morarji Desai; the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM); and the "Socialist" parties led by Jayaprakash Narayan, who is funded by the Ford Foundation. Almost all the Janata's major candidates have been part of the "pro-U.S. lobby" and the CPI has charged that Desai and J.P. Narayan are CIA agents.