

Gandhi, Despite Party Crisis, Launches Pro-Growth Electoral Platform

Indian Food and Agriculture Minister Jagjivan Ram resigned from his cabinet position and membership in the ruling Congress Party on Feb. 2, announcing that for the last 18 months he has silently disagreed with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's economic and political policies. Ram's resignation and subsequent decision to join the undifferentiated non-communist Opposition, the Janata Front, in the campaign for the March 16 national parliamentary elections, has completely changed the character of the upcoming voting a mere ten days after Mrs. Gandhi announced the relaxation of the state of emergency so that they could be held.

The electorate, 80 per cent rural and 20 per cent urban, has been given a choice of either voting Mrs. Gandhi's ruling Congress Party back into office — based on her personal public commitment that all misuse of the state of emergency decrees against the population by right-wing circles in her party will be rigorously punished — or voting into existence a Janata Front government whose only unifying quality has been a violent anti-Gandhi campaign which has slandered the prime minister personally and presented no viable economic policy for the country as a whole.

Although Ram's resignation came as a surprise to the western media, the Communist Party of India (CPI) has warned since last September that right-wing circles led by the landlord and business alliance of the Birla family — the major funders of the Congress Party — had mounted a concerted effort to force the party rightward, into economic policies acceptable to the World Bank. To accomplish this, the CPI warned, various internal crises had been provoked inside the Congress Party, with the Birla group using Sanjay Gandhi, the prime minister's son, to build a personality cult, and Birla-initiated attacks on the socialist faction of the Congress Party.

Election Prospects

Mrs. Gandhi had intended the election campaign period to be a battle between her party's program for "peace and progress" and the non-Communist Opposition's call for decentralization, ruralization, and zero-growth. But the electoral prospects of all parties have radically changed with Ram's resignation. For the Congress, the immediate need is to prevent further major defections, under any pretexts. The Congress has never polled more than 40 percent at Lower House polls in previous elections.

The non-Communist Opposition front is composed of such unlikely campaign allies as the Communist Party of India-Marxist, the Hindu revivalist Jan Sangh, the landlord and big business based Congress-O, the rich

farmer party, the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD) and the Socialist Parties, who have never previously run on a common platform.

Mrs. Gandhi has observed that the "Opposition is a hodge-podge that would disintegrate at the first touch of office," bringing chaos and confusion to the country.

The major unknown in the present electoral campaign is the Communist Party of India (CPI), which has at best polled about 10 percent of the votes and is the only party to enter the electoral campaign period having delivered on its economic programs. The perception of the trust the electorate could place on the CPI has not gone unnoticed by either the Congress or Mrs. Gandhi herself; reliable sources indicate that in at least three states the two parties will form electoral alliances against the Opposition. The electoral alliance has repeatedly been sought by Congress leaders in such states as West Bengal, which holds a large heavy industrial worker constituency and is allotted 42 seats in the lower house.

Ram Resignation

In his resignation letter, Ram used New York Times-authored slanders against Mrs. Gandhi for "destroying democracy," carefully mixed with legitimate grievances about the party's failure to implement Mrs. Gandhi's 20-point economic program, which includes lands reform and peasant debt moratoria as its primary features. Ram emphasized repealing the state of emergency, and a halt to its use against democratic forces, a legitimate demand. Secondly, Ram charged that "the 20-point economic programme has virtually been pushed to the background thanks to emphasis on certain new programmatic points and through a whole series of concessions granted to vested interest while denying the working class their rightful claims. In this connection, it is necessary to visualize the grave consequences of the manner in which land reform has been relegated to a secondary position and the way the rule of law for all practical purposes has yielded place to rule of men."

Ram fails to answer critical questions which would give his charges more credence. One is posed by Mrs. Gandhi's question: First, why as a senior member of the cabinet, and one who was well briefed on the reasons for the imposition of the state of emergency, did Mr. Ram remain silent for 19 months? Second, as Food and Agriculture Minister, and Political Committee member under whose jurisdiction land reform and peasant debt moratoria lie, why did Ram fail to make his accusations earlier?

The final question Mr. Ram will have to answer for the electorate: why, with allegedly legitimate grievances

and with backers who are both leftists and socialists, and who all vigorously supported Mrs. Gandhi against the internal disruption operations of an admitted recipient of Ford Foundation funding, Jayaprakash Narayan, has Ram now agreed to an electoral alliance with Narayan?

Congress Response

That Ram and the Janata Front can emerge as even a half-credible threat to Mrs. Gandhi's government and its 19 months of laudable economic achievements directly addresses numerous political shortcomings in Gandhi's own policies and a basic inconsistency between her pro-growth economic policies and the delaying tactics of the Birla grouping that ostensibly continues to back her. Unlike the decisive actions she took in June 1975, when a state of emergency opened the road to the 20-point economic program, for the past eight months Gandhi has counted on political stability to avoid confrontation with all those in her party who have failed to implement her programs.

With the election scheduled for March, Gandhi now faces a total destruction of the economic gains of the emergency period in the hands of the Birlas who are pushing for a zero- to negative-growth "Brazilian miracle" economy for India unless she takes resolute action against them.

The current political impasse is further complicated by the fact that Mrs. Gandhi's son, Sanjay, has been built up as the rising star of Indian politics by the Birlas, who have used him to launch their programs and promote his own personal ambitions through the Youth Congress. While the Western press accusations that Mrs. Gandhi is grooming Sanjay for a "family dictatorship" are absurd, a psychological soft spot in her dealing with Sanjay has played a role in Congress internal politics and in the election itself. Most significant in this has been the role of the family planning campaign, where Sanjay has launched compulsory sterilization as a major Youth Congress program. The coercive actions of this program, as have been documented by *New Age*, the CPI's weekly, have never been endorsed by Mrs. Gandhi herself, but have become a rallying point of the Janata Front.

Gandhi Initiatives

Mrs. Gandhi's determination to address all election issues frontally has already begun to place great pressure on the right-wing of her party. Officially releasing the Congress electoral platform on Feb. 8, Mrs. Gandhi pledged that India's foreign policy initiatives to "work for a new world economic order, for the extension of détente and the creation of an Indian Ocean zone of

peace" are the top priorities of her government — all priorities that will clash with the positions of the Carter administration and sour business contact as well. The Congress platform then commits the country to integrated industrialization and the application of science and technology to agriculture to remove the dire poverty of 80 per cent of India's population. Gandhi reiterated this decision by stating: "World peace will be achieved only when the disparities between developed and developing countries are resolved through a new world economic order."

On both domestic and foreign policy, Mrs. Gandhi has expressed her intention to run a campaign that highlights the agreements her party has with the CPI. On domestic policy, the platform characterizes family planning as a "voluntary movement" where no compulsory measures will be permitted. Minimum wages for both agricultural and urban workers will be enforced.

The final party candidates list contains few Youth Congress leaders, a move by Mrs. Gandhi to curtail the actions of this group. The *London Financial Times* reports that West Bengal chief minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray was given a free hand in composing the Congress slate for his state. This is another blow at the Birla group, which, along with the World Bank, has been trying since last December to bring down Ray, their staunchest critic.

With these announcements, the Congress has come closer than ever before to an alliance with the CPI, even though it still holds back from an open endorsement of such an electoral arrangement. Carrying a swing vote in its pocket, the CPI has in turn offered its support to the Congress around specific programmatic issues, taking the Congress to task for failures during the past 19 months. In an executive committee statement, the CPI termed the Ram resignation a serious development and a product of Congress misuse of emergency powers, through the sterilization programs, violation of democratic institutions and "the misuse of the machinery and resources of the state to build up a personality of no official status," Sanjay Gandhi. The CPI has urged the Congress to meet with all "left and democratic forces" and to lose no time in remedying the situation, particularly in measures that have affected the working class and peasantry. The strategic decision by the CPI executive is to give Mrs. Gandhi the option to move into an alliance with them to destroy the Birla forces and curtail Sanjay's actions as well, two necessary measures if the Congress is to stop supplying the CIA-funded reactionary Janata alliance with fuel to bring down Gandhi at the polls.