

From New Delhi by Paul Zykofsky

Congress Party's electoral gain

Indira Gandhi's national party wins a victory over localist, separatist groups.

India's ruling Congress-I Party made significant gains in the Jammu and Kashmir state election held on June 5. The Congress-I more than doubled the number of seats it held in the previous assembly, and has now posed a serious challenge to the victorious National Conference party, the local political party which has ruled the state for most of the past 30 years. The Congress-I campaign completely routed those parties based on ethnic bias, such as the Janata, the BJP, and Jamaat-e-Islam, and succeeded in making a noticeable dent in the ruling National Conference's bastion in these two states.

In recent months, numerous regional parties with a narrow local base have emerged on the Indian political scene, and have assumed state power in some cases. These parties have fought elections on merely local issues, and have created tension between the central government and the states, with the latter demanding increased decentralization of the political process. A strong Congress Party in Jammu and Kashmir can bring the major national issues before the electorate.

The state's location is of strategic importance to the region. Ensnconed in the northern Himalyas, the state borders both China and Pakistan. During the thirty-five year history of partitioned India, Pakistan has twice gone to war against India, while China has invaded India once. Sino-Pakistani construction of the Karakoram Road, and the Khunjerab Pass linking China and Pakistan through Pakistan-occu-

piated Kashmire, has created additional concern.

Following the partition of India, Pakistan occupied a part of Kashmir. The rest of the state opted to side with the Indian union, and Sheikh Abdullah, father of the present Chief Minister, provided stability to the state through secular rule. It was he who established the National Conference party and developed an arrangement with the Congress Party. From 1952 to 1972, the Congress made no attempt to dislodge the local party. In 1975, India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi reached an accord with Sheikh Abdullah, whereby the Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir stepped down to make room for the Sheikh.

Sheikh Abdullah died on Sept. 8, 1982, and with the central government's support, the chief ministership was passed on to his son, Dr. Farooq Abdullah.

It became clear that Dr. Farooq had neither the following nor the capabilities of his father. An attempt was made to form an alliance of the National Conference and Congress-I, which would have pitted them against the Hindu chauvinists in the Janata party and BJP, and the Muslim fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islam. However, the alliance was aborted when Farooq demanded that the Congress liquidate in the state. Dr. Farooq was already instigating the pro-Pakistan faction within Jammu and Kashmir against the center; he visited the neighboring Punjab and had himself photographed with local leaders agitating against the central government.

After the alliance talks failed in April, the campaign entered high gear, and violent incidents broke out both in the Kashmir valley, a traditional stronghold of the National Conference, and in the Jammu area, where Congress-I wields substantial political clout.

During the campaign period, Dr. Farooq Abdullah twice sought the support of the Maulavi Farooq, the head of the Jamia Islamia mosque, which made Indians skeptical about Dr. Abdullah's secular litany and probably cost him many more votes than he gained.

Maulavi Farooq, who heads a party called the Awami Action Committee, has gone on record in opposition to the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to India. There are reports that the Maulavi has working relationships with the Jamaat-i-Tulba group, which promotes Jammu and Kashmir's merger with Pakistan.

On May 30, Prime Minister Gandhi went to the state to campaign for her party. During her hectic three-day trip, Mrs. Gandhi made clear that she was not so much concerned whether her party returned to power; but she would oppose any attempt by the victorious party to "disintegrate secular, democratic and socialist forces to achieve their petty aims of trying to retain power."

Both Mrs. Gandhi and her son, Rajiv Gandhi, a member of Parliament and general secretary of the Congress-I, presenting themselves as "sister and son" of Kashmir—Mrs. Gandhi's family is from Kashmir—and strongly criticized the National Conference party's campaign which dubbed them "foreigners," and reminded the Kashmiris that it was the Congress Party that cooperated with local people to overthrow the feudal Hindu king in 1947.