

India's fragmented opposition

The viability of India's opposition is in inverse proportion to the media fanfare it enjoys in the West, writes Susan Maitra from New Delhi.

With less than three months left before Indian voters elect the party that will govern this sprawling nation for the next five years, the opposition parties are failing to generate even as much enthusiasm as Mondale's insipid presidential campaign in the United States. This will no doubt come as a surprise to readers of the major Western press, who have been treated in recent months to a stream of stories on Indian opposition-party exploits.

Opposition leaders and their foreign cheerleaders have been beating the drums since September, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi confirmed that the Lok Sabha (Lower House of the Indian Parliament) elections will be held by January as required by law. But the government has continued to solve problems and develop policy. The reconciliation with the Sikhs in Punjab has advanced, the Seventh Five-Year Plan is on the drawing boards, and foreign policy initiatives in Southeast Asia and elsewhere are under way. Indira Gandhi's ruling Congress-I party is also working to shore up the party organization in preparation for the elections.

All this has left the opposition rushing from pillar to post looking for a magic formula to unite its wildly disparate ranks in time for some credible electoral effort. The troubles in Punjab have been seized on to denounce Mrs. Gandhi's government, and the leadership of the Sikh Akala party there has been lavishly courted, but the population has kept its confidence in the government. The central government's ouster of the Farooq Abdullah government in the sensitive border state of Jammu and Kashmir in July also looked like a firm basis for propelling a national opposition front into a winning electoral fight. But the whole country knew that whether or not he was personally, directly involved, grave threats to national security had been allowed to develop during the Abdullah reign. Within weeks, the opposition's hooting and hollaring petered out, and Farooq Abdullah is now a forgotten man. Then came the infamous N. T. Rama Rao episode of a similar sort, which the opposition was certain—and assured its cheerleaders abroad—heralded the final demise of Indira Gandhi and the Congress-I and their own accession to power and possibly heaven also.

A policy for the nation, a vision for its future, and a scientific or even serious program to realize it is the farthest thing from the minds of opposition leaders. Since the opposition spectrum is heavily weighted with assorted brands of religious, sectional, and other obscurantisms, it is not surprising that the unity which is necessary to actually defeat the Congress-I remains elusive. Thus, even if expected alliances among some of the parties enable the opposition to cut down the ruling party's margin in the Lok Sabha, the opposition remains no more than a nuisance, certainly not an alternative.

A mixed bag

Indian opposition parties are a mixed bag ranging from the extreme right-wing Hindu fundamentalist-controlled Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the pro-Moscow communist groups such as CPI and CPI-Marxist. There is, however, one characteristic common to each of them—besides being virulently anti-Gandhi and absent a credible program—and that is their lack of a nationwide base. While the Hindu fanatics are able to whip up anti-Gandhi fervor in some of the northern Indian states, the Marxists' influence is limited to a few pockets in the east and south. While many regional parties are also vocal on the local and state issues, the absence of an opposition party with national appeal has never been so apparent.

The "mother" of this motley crew is the Janata Party, a conglomerate of Hindu fanatics, rich peasant landowners, and some pseudo-socialists that fragmented following its three years of misrule (1977-80). Most of the present-day opposition leaders had their first taste of centralized power during that period, and as many Indians recall, they were busier pushing each other around and pulling each other down in quest of absolute power than in running an efficient administration. Each of these badly tainted leaders has now formed his own little party to promote his own career.

The **Janata Party**, now led by Chandra Shekhar, is perhaps the largest of them, although it is still undergoing constant fragmentation. Just recently, two more groups of party dissidents, one led by Raj Narain, a socialist of strange stripes,

and the other by Hindu chauvinist Subramaniam Swamy, left the party over their differences with Chandra Shekhar.

The **Lok Dal**, another faction of the former Janata Party, is now led by the 82-year-old rustic and former prime minister, Charan Singh. Lok Dal is the representative of rich peasant landowners and has its base in some of the northern states. Primarily an obscurantist, Charan Singh is most prominently associated with the break-up of the Janata Party during its final gasps in power. Not forgotten is his ignominious role in ousting Janata Prime Minister Morarji Desai, placing himself in the prime minister's office for a few fleeting months before the whole Janata house of cards collapsed. In fact, it is almost impossible for the opposition to come up with a leader who is not tainted. It is quite likely that Charan Singh, tainted image and all, will be able to lure some of the opposition leaders anew into his fold, by sheer default.

Already, the Janata Party has tentatively agreed to join with Lok Dal in the coming elections. Under a new arrangement, Charan Singh will be the President and Chandra Shekhar the Working President in a prospective government. The two parties are expected to campaign jointly, making voting arrangements with other opposition and regional parties.

Meanwhile, the **Bharatiya Janata Party** (BJP) has decided to maintain its separate identity, but will seek voting-bloc arrangements with all other opposition parties including the communists. This would mean a left-right alliance, which has been seen more and more frequently in recent years. BJP, the extreme right-wing fragment of the Janata Party, is dominated by the Hindu fanatics belonging to the Raahtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (RSS), the organization that masterminded the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948.

BJP head A. B. Vajpayee was an active RSS cadre in the pre-independence days and retains ties to the organization today. Subramaniam Swamy, the Harvard-trained professor who recently left the Janata Party, is also RSS-linked. The RSS claims one million members in India, and has various organizations abroad under different names. The RSS has a large reservoir of money and trains its cadres in the old Nazi-style. The organization has been accused of many assassinations.

The two leading leftist parties, the **Communist Party of India** (CPI) and the **Communist Party of India-Marxist** (CPI-M), are not a product of the Janata Party. The former began the latter in the image of China's Chairman Mao. Burdened with ideological obsessions—to which Indians tend to be quite allergic—neither of the parties could expand their base beyond West Bengal, Kerala, and the tiny eastern state of Tripura. Working on a formula backed by Moscow which supports Mrs. Gandhi's foreign policy and opposes her domestic policy, the communists have lately shown a great deal of ideological "flexibility" in order to grab any political opportunity that may come their way.

It is becoming evident that both CPI and CPI-M are mov-

ing toward developing a "clear electoral understanding" with regional parties such as the Telegu Desam in Andhra Pradesh, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, and the National Conference in Jammu and Kashmir. The Marxist parties' existing ties with the Akali leadership in the Punjab have also come to public attention.

The chimera of unity

The opposition strategy, such as it is, rests on the effort to polarize the population around the Gandhi government's ouster of the National Conference party government in Jammu & Kashmir and the failed ouster of N.T. Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh by a dissident faction within his own Telegu Desam Party. But like the former, a faint memory for the population, the more recent toppling episode seems to be fading fast.

Although N.T. Rama Rao, the obscurantist Hindu-chauvinist movie star, became the opposition's hero of the hour, it is by no means clear at this point just how long this card can be played. The BJP, CPI, CPI-M, and the Janata Party, who rushed to set up camp in Hyderabad, shed pools of tears and roundly accused Mrs. Gandhi of masterminding the drive against him. But they are already on the defensive. They have expressed the fear that Rama Rao is unlikely to adopt a confrontationist posture against New Delhi. One newsman has pointed out that Rama Rao's speeches since being restored to power in Andhra Pradesh are considerably mellowed. He has, of course, supported them in the "crusade to safeguard democracy." But both the communist parties and the Janata Party have declined Rama Rao's offer to join the state ministry. The BJP central leadership is still making up its mind.

Distrust among the opposition leadership became endemic with the fragmentation of the Janata Party and the infighting of those days. The "Dean of Doublecross," octagenarian peasant and Lok Dal head Charan Singh, recently commented on the prospect for opposition mergers. "You can't prophesy human behavior. No rules guide human conduct. Today, you are good friends, tomorrow slippers may fly."

That a similar view is held by the Lok Dal's new bedfellow, the Janata Party, does not surprise many in India. Talking to the press, Chandra Shekhar reacted to the unity question thus: "Why raise the question of having one party when the BJP, the Communists, and the Akali Dal and other regional parties have decided against merger! There cannot be a single party against the Congress-I at the moment."

Already, the break-up of the Janata Party-Lok Dal alliance is in the air. The day after a Lok Dal leader had briefed the press on the new arrangements, Charan Singh flatly denied that they had decided to work together. And this is the "most possible" of generally impossible merger propositions! Other opposition leaders are just watching on the sidelines. They are waiting to see when the "slippers start to fly."