

20. ELECTIONS IN INDIA

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The campaign which is proceeding at the moment of writing, in connection with the third general election to the parliamentary bodies in India, introduced by the reforms of 1919, is the most outstanding feature of the Indian political life. During the last year the nationalist movement has been torn asunder by a controversy on this question. No less than six parties, all calling themselves "nationalist", are participating in the election.

The reforms granted in 1919 established in India the central legislative assembly and legislative councils in the nine provinces. The franchise on which the provincial legislative councils are based embrace little less than five million people, that is, 2.2 per cent of the entire popula-

tion is represented in these parliamentary bodies. The central legislative assembly is based on a still narrower franchise, the electorate for that body being less than two million. The right of vote is determined by property qualifications which are excessively high in relation to the very low economic condition of the Indian masses. The electorate includes the landowning class, the big bourgeoisie, a section of the upper intellectuals and a small stratum of rich peasantry.

When the reforms were first granted, they were boycotted by the nationalist movement. It was considered that the reforms were very inadequate to meet the situation, that they did not come anywhere near the self-government promised by British imperialism during the war. Only the landowning class and the upper stratum of the bourgeoisie accepted the reforms. The first legislative assembly and councils were therefore composed entirely of the representatives of these two classes. Less than 20 per cent of the electorate participated in the elections. Under these conditions the legislative bodies were naturally very docile and supported the British government in suppressing the nationalist movement led by Gandhi under the slogan of passive resistance.

The strength of the nationalist movement during the years following the conclusion of the war was the widespread revolutionary discontent of the masses. The boycott of the pseudoparliamentary institutions only reflected the grievances of a section of the bourgeoisie and the middleclass intellectuals. Nevertheless these elements were the leaders of the entire nationalist movement which was very revolutionary owing to its mass composition. The conflict between nonrevolutionary, timid, petty-bourgeois leadership and the dynamic forces of the mass following, eventually led to the collapse of that big movement. The result was dissatisfaction against the program of boycott, and, in course of time, this dissatisfaction crystallised into a definite demand for the repudiation of the boycott program. The bourgeois and the petty-bourgeois elements in the noncooperation movement parted company with the revolutionary masses and decided to enter the

legislative councils, ostensibly with the object of opposing the British autocracy through that channel.

The nationalist movement was split on the issue of entering the legislative councils. The section that advocated participation in the ensuing elections with the purpose of capturing the legislative bodies, at the end of 1922 constituted themselves into the Swaraj Party. A year later, the second election took place. The Swaraj Party contested the election but failed to get a majority in the central legislative assembly. Of all the nine provincial councils, only in one was a clear swarajist majority returned. In another province the Swaraj Party became the single largest party and with the support of other radical nationalist elements formed an opposition bloc.

The Swaraj Party entered the legislative councils with a program of blocking the administrative machinery by constant and consistent opposition. It pledged itself not to accept ministerial office. During the lifetime (three years) of the second legislative, the policy of obstruction was gradually abandoned, just as previously the policy of boycott had also been abandoned. Towards the end of the term the Swaraj Party was rent by the controversy over the acceptance of office. A very strong right wing had developed inside the party which declared that the policy of obstruction had proved impracticable and that the logical consequence of entering the councils was to accept the responsibility of government.

In the central government the question of accepting office does not rise because all the members of the government are appointed by the viceroy. The reform has introduced a peculiar system of government in the provinces. The government is divided into two parts—one appointed by the governor and acting independently of the legislative council; the other, also appointed by the governor but subordinated to the council to the extent that their salary is to be voted by the council. The second part of the government is responsible for the local selfgovernment, sanitation, education and agriculture—the so-called "nation-building departments". Now the controversy is whether

the nationalists should accept the responsibility for administering these nation-building departments.

The experience of the last three years has proven that even with a nationalist majority the legislative councils do not possess the power to shake the position of imperialism. Real state power is beyond the control of these legislative councils. The purpose with which these legislative bodies have been set up is to draw the upper classes of the Indian population closer to imperialism. The economic concessions made to the Indian bourgeoisie since the war have effectively reconciled the contradiction between imperialism and native capitalism. This being the case the legislative bodies representing the Indian landowning and capitalist classes cannot be the organ of nationalist opposition; they are bound to be the medium through which a compromise between bourgeois nationalism and imperialist domination will be realised.

When the Swaraj Party decided to enter the legislative councils and staked its future on the success of parliamentary victory, it bound itself entirely to the dictates of the narrow and enfranchised minority, that is, the landowning and capitalist classes. Now the landowning and capitalist classes find it convenient to come to an agreement with British imperialism in order to have a period of political peace conducive to the development to trade and industry. Any party seeking the vote of the landowning and capitalist classes must act according to the demands of these classes. The Swaraj Party is disintegrated owing to the contradiction between the necessity to have the support of the landlords and the bourgeoisie, and the desire to have a broad nationalist following by means of radical phraseology and opposition to the British bureaucracy.

As a matter of fact, on principle, even the Swaraj Party has agreed to accept office and work the reforms which were rejected as totally inadequate only six years ago. But the big bourgeoisie without whose support no party can have a majority in the parliamentary bodies demand a clear statement of program. They demand that the task of the nationalist politics should be to come to a

speedy agreement with imperialism. A large section of the Swaraj Party has accepted this order of the bourgeoisie. They have declared unconditionally in favour of accepting the office. Of the six parties participating in the election five are united into a bourgeois bloc against the Swaraj Party which still formally maintains its position—not to accept office.

But it is a foregone conclusion that under the present franchise it is not at all likely for the Swaraj Party to secure an independent majority.

The leaders of the Swaraj Party have often stated that the policy of the party will have to be changed after the results of the election are known. That is, if the Swaraj Party loses in the election, as it is almost sure to, it will change its policy according to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

But the social basis of the Swaraj Party is the middle-class intellectuals and the urban petty bourgeoisie. These are largely unfranchised. Side by side with the development of the consciously bourgeois right wing there has been a marked revolutionary left wing crystallisation among the rank and file. A defeat in the election will strengthen the position of the left wing which has been protesting against the parliamentary degeneration of the party.

The Swaraj Party is formally a part of the National Congress. In fact, the loose organisation of the National Congress has, during the last two years, been used by the Swaraj Party as its election machine. The incongruity of the situation is obvious. An organisation mainly of unfranchised masses is being used as an instrument of the bourgeoisie. This situation cannot continue for ever. The annual session of the National Congress will be held at the end of December, that is, immediately after the results of the election are known. The Swaraj Party will have to appear before the National Congress and have the change of its policy approved. It is sure to meet with great difficulties. As soon as the bourgeois leaders of the Swaraj Party will appear before the National Congress with a resolution approving acceptance of office, the

mask will be pulled down. The contradiction between the interests of the bourgeoisie and those of the masses including the middle class will stand out in all its nakedness. This will open the eyes of the left wing who till now are not quite free from the influence of bourgeois nationalism.

Of course, it will be premature to state that the coming session of the Indian National Congress will mark a turningpoint in the history of this nationalist struggle. But what is indisputable is that the process of class differentiation inside the nationalist ranks had advanced so far that it is no longer possible for the bourgeois leaders to dominate the entire nationalist movement. The revolutionary left wing may not be able to capture the leadership of the movement this year but it will certainly shake the position of the bourgeois leaders.

The growing activity of the proletariat and a renewed wave of peasant revolt objectively strengthens the position of the revolutionary wing of the nationalist movement. The petty-bourgeois radical element inside the nationalist movement will not be able to overthrow successfully the compromising bourgeois leadership until they come into closer contact with the proletariat and the peasantry. The work for the formation of this united fighting front is going on in spite of all difficulties. The political organisation of the working class is advancing satisfactorily. It is on this organisation that the task of uniting the petty-bourgeois revolutionary nationalists with the worker and peasant masses into a fighting united front devolves.

International Press Correspondence

Vol VI, No 84, 2 December 1926