

# Four Years Hence

CLAIMS advanced, explicitly or implicitly, by political opponents or the Congress are, no doubt, exaggerated. But there are, unmistakable indications that the Congress has lost its robust faith in its future. It would be, foolish to presume that, had the general elections been held now, the Congress would have lost the battle. But it would be a reasonable inference from the state of affairs since January last that the United Left would have bettered its position had the elections been delayed by six months. To-day, the situation is much more acute. Even the Congress now knows something about the implications of shrinking foreign assets. In the next few months, he will feel the impact more directly as some of the necessities of life become scarce because of the drastic cut in imports.

Transient economic troubles are not the only issues which are prejudicing the prestige of the Congress. Sophisticated political prophets had been proved wrong by the verdict of the January elections. Prophets had then confidently predicted that the electoral marriage among parties of the Left would prove a failure as the Congress was itself a Party of the Left. That was what the Congress wanted the voter to believe. It had formulated a bolder Second Plan. It was assuring the people that the Plan's bias to employment was deliberate. Time and time again, the Congress tried to convince the people that its emphasis on employment and small-scale industries reflected its concern for the small, common man.

Not all were convinced by the claims and assertions of the Congress, Kerala voted against it. Calcutta and, for different reasons, Bombay rejected the Congress. In all urban, industrial, constituencies, the Congress was grievously mauled, though not always defeated. Community Projects, National Extension Service, the State Bank's advertised new functions and the Second Plan's rural bias paid good dividends. In the countryside, the Congress experienced little opposition. But the country's educated in the middle class and the workers voted against the Congress. Organised, vocal, urban voters showed their growing irritation against the Congress. Their doctoral behaviour left no room

for doubt that they either had no faith in Congress proclamations, or did not regard the Congress as a sincere Party of the Left.

In the interest of democracy, the emergence of a growing Opposition is to be welcomed. More than once, the Congress has openly expressed appreciation of the emergence of an Opposition. But its 'soul-searching' post-mortem analysis of the election verdict reflects its anguish over its partial discomfiture in the elections. It is mortified that the people no longer equate it with the country. Since independence, the Congress has shown symptoms of self-deception. Over and over again there are talks and discussions about purifying the party organisation. Discussions are held, but nothing tangible implemented. Never before have Congressmen themselves so openly admitted that they and the party are losing touch with the people.

A growing feeling within the Congress that it is not regarded by the people as a true party of the Left explains the Prime Minister's and the Union Finance Minister's repeated emphasis, immediately after the general elections, that the Plan will not be slashed. That also explains the spartan budget for mobilising internal resources for the Plan. But the reaction of the Congress Party to these policies is a visible symptom of its growing weakness. Congress members of Parliament and secretaries of the Party have, in their hostile attitude to austere economics, feigned concern for the common man. But Congress members of Parliament have made no secret that they are worried about the political implications of the tax proposals. That is the main reason why they imply that a curtailed plan is preferable to such high taxation. Here, the economics of the Plan is not under reference. But the implicit request of Congressmen to slash the Plan for political considerations shows their eagerness to pursue a line of least resistance.

In the prevailing socio-political conditions in this country, such an attitude by members of the largest single political organisation shows that the Congress is losing touch with the people. Simultaneously,

there is another political trend within the Congress which is disquieting. While Shri U N Dhebar, the Congress President, dilates on the incompatibility between the Gandhian ideal and the Congress Government's over-emphasis on heavy industries, he and his two secretaries seem interested in reviving the Party's control over the Government. As long as Pandit Nehru continues to be the Prime Minister, neither of these internal conflicts is likely to divide and disrupt the organisation. But these schisms may, in the absence of Pandit Nehru's magnetic charm and leadership, damage the chances of the Congress. Repeated talks about Pandit Nehru's retirement from the Government for galvanising the party organisation and the absence of fresh blood in his new Cabinet after the elections underline the lack of new leadership within the Congress.

No less disturbing are the faint indications that the Union Finance Minister may have been barking aggressively, but is afraid to bite. No definite concession as regards the new direct tax proposals has been announced during his discussions with representatives of industry in Calcutta and Bombay. But the tenor of discussions in Bombay deepens suspicions that industry may have succeeded in its persuasive tactics. Some minor adjustments may be necessary. But any major concession in respect of direct tax proposals can only lead to a further estrangement between the Congress and the people. To-day, the Congress is neither a Labour nor a Socialist Party. Since the elections, it has been trying to woo labour. Its insistence on implementing the Plan, even if it means drastic taxation, is supposed to emphasise its socialistic bias. Apart from these deeper ideological considerations, its chances at the next general elections depend on whether the Second Plan's aims and objectives can be achieved in the next four years. For the second time, the Congress has been voted to power in the hope that it has a programme to ensure economic progress. Such hopes and assurances may not help the Congress for the third time. In the next general elections, it will be judged by results, and not by its promises.

