

NEHRU'S CONGRESS PARTY ROUTED IN GOA

An Analysis of the Election Results

By Kailas Chandra

BOMBAY [Delayed] -- Prime Minister Nehru's Congress party was completely routed in the first "democratic" elections ever held in the former Portuguese pockets of Goa, Daman and Diu on December 9, 1963. The Maharashtrawadi Gomantak party [MGP], a coalition of dissident Congress members and Praja Socialists who advocated Goa's immediate merger with the neighboring state of Maharashtra, won a majority of 16 seats in the 30-member Goa-Daman-Diu assembly and both the seats for the Indian parliament. The United Goans party [UGP], a new formation which has advocated the status of a separate state for Goa within the Indian Union, won 12 seats in the assembly.

The Congress party, which contested all 30 seats to the assembly and both parliamentary seats, won only one place -- a lone uncontested seat from Daman, a small pocket in Gujarat state.

Of a total electorate of 350,039, those voting were listed at 260,372. The Maharashtrawadi Gomantak secured nearly 110,000 votes; its principal opposition, the United Goans, 74,081; the Congress party, 43,100 (eighteen Congress party candidates forfeited their deposits); independents, some 17,000. A high number of invalid votes were cast -- 10,837 -- a consequence of illiteracy among voters.

The "Frente Popular," sponsored by the Communist party, ran eight candidates and secured only 4,589 votes, winning no seat. The Commun-

ist party advocated the "gradual merger" of Goa with Maharashtra.

Unpleasant Surprise for Nehru

The elections in Goa were an important barometer for the Congress party. In December 1961, the former Portuguese territories were integrated by the Indian government through a "police action." Two years later, the Congress party -- although recently organized in Goa -- made an all-out bid to win the elections. Its complete rout came as a big surprise even to its opponents.

The wound is a sore one but Congress party leaders can draw some consolation from the fact that although they lost the vote, the Goans showed that they favor closer integration with the Indian Union.

The smashing victory of the MGP leaves no doubt about the popular appeal of merging Goa with neighboring Maharashtra. Nehru, however, refused to concede this, claiming that "the majority" had not voted for merger. Technically, the MGP won only 45% of the vote. But some sections of the Congress party also advocated merger. However, the Union government may hold out for some time.

Dayanand Bandodkar, president of the Gomantak and now the leader elect of the Gomantak Assembly party (a small mine owner himself), has announced that the first act of the new assembly would be to pass a resolution demanding immediate merger of Goa with Maharashtra. (If Goa is merged with Maharashtra, the remaining two pockets of Daman and Diu will be merged with Gujarat.)

[The first session of the assembly held in January did not adopt a resolution on Goa's merger with Maharashtra. Under pressure from the Central government at New Delhi, Dayanand Bandodkar, chief minister of Goa, assured Nehru that he would not precipitate a crisis on the merger question at this time.]

In principle there is nothing wrong with maintaining that Goa should have the status of a Union territory, keeping its cultural entity, until the Goans themselves clearly show that they have decided otherwise. Nehru assured the Goans their right of self-determination when they were liberated from Portuguese imperialism.

Damaging Blow to Congress Party

The Goa elections in themselves may not have any direct impact on the revolutionary movement in India; but the defeat of the ruling Congress party, at a time when popular discontent is rising against the regime, is bound to help inspire militant struggles of the masses.

Of course, the possibility of the victorious MGP joining the Congress party, should its demand for merger with Maharashtra be conceded, must not be ruled out. The United Goans party, a combination of former pro-Portuguese elements, is also bargaining for fusion with the Congress party on condition that the "status quo" be maintained

and that the former Portuguese pockets be treated as a separate "state" within the Indian Union.

What cost the Congress party so dearly was not so much the ambivalent, often contradictory, statements made by its leaders on Goa's future as their association with unpopular vested interests linked with Portuguese colonial rule before liberation.

Their talk about preserving the cultural entity of the Goans applied to the elite, the educated middle-class Goans who did not really suffer under the Portuguese.

The majority of Goans see things differently. To the semiserfs on the land, the agricultural laborers and underpaid mine workers who never enjoyed any legal protection against undue exploitation, merger with Maharashtra is attractive. They hope to benefit from the relatively progressive tenancy legislation and labor laws prevailing in Maharashtra.

Under Portuguese rule, government employees were treated as a privileged cast, a postman drawing a salary of Rs. 350 [one rupee = \$.21], and a bailiff Rs. 250. An agricultural worker could never hope to get even Rs. 15 a month.

This disparity in economic status still persists in Goa two years after liberation. The outmoded feudal land-tenure system perpetuated by the Portuguese still exists, too.

It appears that Goa with a population of 600,000 spends Rs. 2.50 crores [one crore = 10,000,000] on government administration; whereas the neighboring Ratnagiri district with double the population spends less than Rs. 50 lakhs [one lakh = 100,000]. The new commitments under a "democratic" set-up would raise the capital budget on administration alone by another Rs. one crore, thus foisting a top-heavy administrative apparatus on Goa, if the "status quo" continues.

It is in this context that the popular verdict of the Goans must be considered. In a situation like this, all parochial and communal sentiments are bound to be roused. Undoubtedly the electorate in Goa were divided into two major camps, along communal lines, the Catholics (who constitute 30% of the population) predominantly voting for the United Goans and the majority of Hindus voting for MGP. On religious grounds, the Catholics received preferential treatment under the Portuguese.

Regional Interests

Regional chauvinism was an unhealthy aspect of the campaign. This was worked up by elements under the influence of middle-class parties and regional bourgeois interests in the neighboring states of Maharashtra and Mysore who are eyeing the rich mineral resources of Goa and therefore want an immediate merger. The big bourgeois interests of India would prefer continued central administration for Goa.

At election meetings addressed by Defense Minister Y. B. Chavan, a pertinent question was repeatedly put to him: "One hundred and five persons had to be offered as martyrs to the Congress to secure the linguistic state of united Maharashtra. Tell us how many would be needed to secure Goa's merger with Maharashtra?"

Chavan, who is a Maharashtrian and represents the regional aspirations of the Maharashtrian bourgeoisie and rich peasants, finally responded at the end of his election tour in Panjim with the categorical statement that an overwhelming majority of Goans favor merger with Maharashtra. This cut right across the campaign statements of other Congress leaders like Morarji Desai and S. K. Patil (both known to be trusted representatives of big business) in favor of a Union territory status for Goa.

Chavan's declaration tilted the balance in favor of the "mergerists" and led to polarization of popular sentiment on an issue that was made to look crucial for the future of the Goans.

The outcome of the Goa elections has evoked a strange reaction from the other neighboring state of Mysore. The Congress party government in Mysore, under pressure of the regional bourgeoisie, has protested against the move to merge Goa with Maharashtra.

Stand of Left-Wing Parties

Unfortunately, the left in India has forgotten its class and ideological loyalties. The traditional left parties, like the Communist party of India, the Socialist party and the Praja Socialist party, have behaved like local patriots on disputes arising out of border adjustments between Indian states.

On the conflict between Maharashtra and Mysore, for example, these petty-bourgeois leftists on either side of the border acted like stooges of the regional bourgeois interests and not like Communists and Socialists who have an international outlook.

Their attitude has been similar in the dispute over the allocation of water from the two major rivers, Godavari and Krishna flowing through the South Indian states.

That is why the working-class and left parties which led powerful democratic movements for reorganization of states on a linguistic basis could not use these movements to further the cause of socialism. They were caught in the tow of regional bourgeois interests.

One cardinal principle in all these disputes, forgotten both by the "right" and the "left" parties in this country, is the inherent right of the people of a particular territory to democratically determine their own juridical set-up. The popular decision of the majority should be binding on all. Leftists, at least, who stand for the unity of all the toilers should have held firmly to this basic principle.

In the absence of militant class struggles of the proletariat,

however, regional chauvinism has found an exaggerated expression in India in the recent period.

So far as the future of Goa is concerned, the outcome of the December 9 elections is a positive indication. The Goans, who speak Konkani, a dialect closely allied to Marathi, are close culturally and socially to Maharashtra. A majority of them desire to be integrated with Maharashtra.

They should be allowed to determine their future with but one proviso: the rights of linguistic or religious minorities should be fully protected by the majority.