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### *Political Realignment*

The anti-CPI(M) front which emerged in 1969-70 was called in the last chapter "anti-Communist Front—Second Edition". It continued for more than a full decade, i.e. till the end of 1979, though cracks began to appear even earlier. The two-and-a-half years that elapsed since the 1977 general elections which threw the Congress out of power at the Centre was, in fact, a period of intense struggle within the anti-CPI (M) front. Ranged against each other were those who fought for cooperation with the CPI (M) culminating in an alliance and those who persisted in the pro-Congress (I) and anti-CPI (M) line.

Although the CPI, the RSP and a section of the Socialists collaborated with the Congress in toppling the CPI(M)-led united front and Government in October 1969 and in bringing into existence the anti-CPI (M) front and Government headed by the CPI's Achutha Menon as Chief Minister, the Congress did not join the ministry. It was not easy for any of them or for the Congress itself, to work in a coalition Government. Each faction wanted to engage itself in one or the other manoeuvre.

These manoeuvres were facilitated by the apparently "leftist" demagoguery resorted to by the ruling Congress party and its Government at the Centre after 1969. Beginning with the nationalisation of banks and abolition of privy purses to princes, the leadership of the party and the Government went forward to the much-publicised programme of "garibi hatao".

This was, of course, the facade behind which the leader of the ruling party was trying to conceal her supremacy within the

party and in the Government, defeating her rival party, i.e., the Syndicate Congress and launching a full-scale attack on the most consistent force fighting on the side of the working people—the CPI (M). It, however, could be hidden behind a “leftist” screen which enabled the leadership of the ruling party not only to create a division and split in the Left movement within the country but also to win over a substantial section of the international movement, including the leaderships of several Socialist countries.

Unlike the anti-Communist front of 1959-60, the anti-CPI (M) front of a decade later was not openly right-dominated. Along with the major political forces of the right, the caste and communal organizations, which had rallied behind the earlier as well as the present front, a section of the leftist movement too was ranged against the CPI (M) and its allies. It included that section of Indian Communists whom, according to a majority of the fraternal Communist and Workers’ Parties, represented India’s Communist movement.

It should be noted further that the allies of the CPI(M) now included some who were part of the old anti-Communist front. The opponents of the CPI(M) made big noise about this making it appear as if the CPI(M) was allying itself with the “right” in order to fight the leftist front and Government.

In fact, however, all these allies of the CPI(M) were in the seven-party united front of 1967-69 when the CPI and the RSP too were in the alliance. The only “sin” they committed was that they did not agree with the CPI and the RSP in joining hands with the Congress-Kerala Congress opposition to topple the CPI(M)-led front and Government; when the toppling exercise was in fact over, they went into the opposition along with the CPI(M). The concerted political campaign organised by the anti-CPI(M) front with the powerful support of the monopoly press, concerning “the CPI (M)’s right reactionary allies” however made the struggle of the CPI (M) and its allies far more arduous than what the united CPI had to wage a decade earlier.

## II

The need of the ruling Congress and the CPI to maintain the “leftist” image gave rise to two contradictory features of the situation in the State : on the one hand, the Central Government had to adopt an apparently positive attitude towards the popular measure adopted by the United Front Government when it had been headed by the CPI (M) ; on the other, the new Kerala regime had to see to it that the programme of mass mobilization for the implementation of those measures—to which the CPI (M), its allies in the Opposition front as well as the mass organizations of workers, peasants, etc , gave leadership—was dealt with in a ruthless fashion.

In other words, while the CPI’s political leadership of the anti-CPI (M) front claimed that the good work that was done by the earlier United Front was being carried forward under the new Government, the full powers of the Government were used to unleash a campaign of police repression and goonda attacks against the most vital force in the earlier United Front.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the field of agrarian reforms. Unlike 1959-60 when the anti-Communist front trained its guns against the Agrarian Relations Bill adopted by the Legislature before the Communist ministry was toppled and when they saw to it that the Presidential assent to the Bill was withheld, the Land Reform Bill that was adopted a week before the seven-party Government had to resign was immediately given the assent. The Bill that was passed in the third week of October received the assent by the middle of December and came into force on the first of January.

The reason for this was, of course, not a change in the attitude of the ruling Congress party but a change in the situation. The CPI and RSP who were partners of the new coalition could not carry on unless the Central Government abandoned its earlier attitude to agrarian reforms and allowed the implementation of the legislative measure adopted before the United Front Government resigned.

The CPI (M) and its allies for their part had declared that, since the rural vested interests in collusion with powerful sections within the administration would do their worst to sabotage the implementation of the measure, the rural poor should organize themselves and see that the provisions of the legislation were implemented in practice. A massive rally of the rural poor organized under the auspices of the United Front of radical political parties and the mass organizations of peasants and agricultural labourers declared on December 14 that "whether the president gives his assent or not", the rural poor would consider the Bill as having become law and assert their right: the landless hutment dwellers would take possession of the area to which they are entitled under the provisions of the law and start enjoying the fruits of whatever is produced on that plot of land. The tenants would cease to pay any rent to the landlord.

At the very time when tens of thousands of peasants and agricultural labourers were gathering for the rally, the Central Government's notification came regarding the Presidential assent and the coming into force of the law beginning with January 1, 1970.

This announcement was obviously made with a view to reduce the militancy of peasants and agricultural labourers fighting for the implementation of land reforms for which the call was given by the organizers of the rally. In fact, however, it became a morale booster. The rural poor in their tens of thousands resorted to direct action by way of what was denounced by their opponents as "land grabbing". This denunciation by the opponents was countered by the organizations of the rural poor and by the radical political parties supporting them, with the assertion that what they were doing was actually to prevent "land grabbing" by the landlords. If they were to wait for the red tape through which the bureaucracy proposed to confer the benefits of the land legislation on the hutment dwellers and tenants, they would be powerless against the landlords who, with the direct and indirect support of the bureaucracy, would deprive them of the land to which they are entitled under the provisions of the law. It was, therefore, demanded on their behalf that the bureaucratic machinery should, instead of denouncing them for "land

grabbing" and unleashing repression on them, give formal administrative recognition of what they are doing on their own.

This militant action resorted to by the organizations of the rural poor supported by the radical political parties made a big difference between Kerala and the Congress-ruled States in the matter of implementation of land reforms. As a matter of fact ever since 1957 when the Communist Government took the initial step of banning all eviction pending the formulation of a comprehensive agrarian reform legislation, the rural poor under the leadership of the Kisan Sabha, the Agricultural Labour Organisation and the radical political parties have been resorting to direct action for supplementing whatever legislative and administrative measures are adopted.

Had it not been for similar militant popular action, the anti-eviction ordinance issued in less than a week after the swearing-in of the Communist Government would have remained on paper as so many legislations have been in Congress-ruled States. Here, however, was a relatively powerful Kisan Sabha with a long history of militant struggle over two decades. It saw to it that the provisions of the anti-eviction ordinance were enforced, that the landlords and their supporters in the administration were not permitted to circumvent the provisions of the legislation. Neither the toppling of the Communist Government nor the withholding of the Presidential assent for the Agrarian Relations Bill deterred the mass organizations of the rural poor supported by the radical political forces from organizing resistance to the vested interests and their supporters in the administration.

The result was that in the entire *jenmi*-dominated districts of Kerala, the tenants could stick to their land with no fear of eviction, paying virtually no rent. The Land Reform Bill of the 1967-69 United Front Government was a continuation of the earlier Agrarian Relations Bill, and these gains of the earliest legislation supplemented by mass action came to be consolidated. Together with these were new gains won by the mass of landless hutment dwellers who became entitled to their home-

steads with an area of ten cents each.

### III

As against this gain of the rural poor, however, was the toughening of the administrative machinery which followed the emergence of the United Front between a section of the Leftist movement and the rightist forces including the Congress Party.

It may be recalled in this connection that more important than the legislative and administrative measures adopted by the Communist Government of 1957-59 was its police policy which did not permit the police to intervene in labour, agrarian or other struggles of the working people. This was acknowledged to be a significant departure from the methods adopted by the earlier Congress Governments who made it their first and most important job to meet every popular resistance to vested interests with brutal repression. Not even the anti-Communist, PSP-Congress Governments of 1960-64 could go back to the pre-1957 Congress Governments' practices.

The new alliance between a section of the Left and the Congress, however, made it possible for the top echelons of the police machinery and the vested interests not only to go back to the pre-1957 months but to make them still tougher. No sooner had the seven-party coalition Government resigned in the latter half of October 1969 than was terror unleashed on the mass of the rural and urban poor. The much-denounced "land grab" movement was made the excuse for letting loose the most unprecedented terror against those who were trying to assert the rights which have been conferred on them by law. Beginning with the Muslim League Home Minister who took over on November 1969 and subsequently under the Congress Home Minister who took over in 1971, the anti-CPI(M) front and its Government became notorious for its brutal repression which assumed the most inhuman forms during the nightmarish emergency regime. The torture camps organized under the Congress Home Minister became notorious throughout the country, its exposure in the now well-known Rajan case of 1976

forcing the Congress Home Minister (who subsequently became Chief Minister) to resign.

This, however, was only the culmination. Its beginnings could be seen during the days of the hutment-dwellers' struggle of 1970 itself. Men and women belonging to the rural poor were subjected to unheard of repression - firings, lathicharges, tortures in the police stations and even rapes in several cases. All these were exposed in the Opposition Press and on the floor of the Legislature. They were all dismissed not only by the leaders of the Congress party but by the CPI-RSP constituents of the anti-CPI(M) front. The Congress headed by Indira Gandhi could therefore claim the credit for securing the support of a section of the Left for its anti people brutal attacks on the democratic movement.

The working class and middle-class employees in the urban areas too came under attack. Their struggles were crushed with an iron hand. Several hundreds were thrown out and other punishments meted out. The attack on the rural poor assumed huge proportions.

The CPI-RSP Leftist combination in their turn thought that, by giving their support to the Congress in these brutal attacks, they were strengthening the so-called "anti-imperialist and radical" trends in the Congress. They also thought that their united front with the "progressive" section of the bourgeoisie would help them to isolate the "sectarian" CPI(M) and its allies. They, therefore, gave continuous calls on the ranks of the CPI(M) to revolt against their leadership and join the "mainstream" of the Congress-Communist combine.

The CPI(M) and its allies, however, were able not only to weather the storm of this many-sided offensive but also to mount a counter-offensive, and to lay the basis for the future return to the fold of those who were misled by their political line. While resisting the police and other administrative attacks on them and while carrying on an ideological-political offensive against the collaborationist line of the CPI and the RSP, the Left Opposition appealed to the thinking

sections of the ruling coalition including those within the Congress. While being firm on questions of immediate struggle, they adopted flexible attitudes on the relatively long-ranging issues, so that at least the middle leaders as well as the ranks of the parties belonging to the ruling coalition may gradually be won over to a policy of struggle against the vested interests and against the Congress leadership which was becoming more and more authoritarian.

#### IV

These efforts on the part of the CPI (M) and its allies had some partial success in that divisions began to appear among those who had originally formed the anti-CPI(M) front. The Muslim League and the Kerala Congress were the first to start demarcating themselves from the rest of the anti-CPI(M) front.

The Kerala Congress, in fact, joined the other parties of the Opposition on some campaigns in resistance to repression, defence of civil liberties and democratic rights as well as on questions of mass struggles on such issues as food, and working class rights. The developing unity of action on issues was sought to be crystallized into a political united front culminating in an electoral alliance on the basis of a common minimum programme. The process however was interrupted during the emergency when, after a short period of joint struggle against the emergency, the Kerala Congress leaders allowed themselves to be ensnared into the anti-CPI(M) front.

As for the Muslim League, it did not adopt the course which the Kerala Congress did. A section of its leadership and ranks however demarcated themselves from the main organization and, as "dissident" wing broke away from the dominant majority of the party to join the CPI (M) and its allies in the Opposition.

Within the Congress too, a section calling itself the "Congress radicals" allied themselves with the Left.

Added to these developments within the various constituents of the ruling coalition were the mass agitations and struggles organized by the CITU, Kisan Sabha, Agricultural Labour Union and other militant organizations of the people. These were denounced by the spokesmen of the ruling coalition as "politically motivated", with a view to "topple the elected Government". It is true that in the surcharged atmosphere of embittered relations between the CPI (M) and its Left allies on the one hand and the CPI-RSP combination on the other, no serious dent could be made into the ranks of the parties that constituted the anti-CPI (M) ruling coalition. That was why Kerala became an exception to the general all-India trend of the "Janata wave" of 1977. Despite the coming together of the various constituents which were subsequently to form the Janta Party as well as the CPI (M) and its allies, the anti-CPI (M) front could win a massive majority of seats both in the State Legislature and in the Lok Sabha from Kerala. In fact, never before had the Left Opposition been reduced to such a miserable force in the State Legislature and with no representation at all in the Lok Sabha.

This apparent "rout" of the CPI (M) and its allies, however, concealed the truth that, although failing miserably in terms of seats in the State Legislature and in the Lok Sabha, the CPI (M) and its allies secured over 40 per cent of the votes polled in the 1977 election. Furthermore, the fall in the number of elected representatives from Kerala was counter-balanced by the victory of the Janata Party and its allies on the all-India plane. In contrast to 1957 when the Congress was successfully challenged in Kerala but was in firm control at the Centre and in all other States, the Congress was now successfully challenged at the Centre while it was in firm control in Kerala in alliance with other political parties, including the Leftist CPI and the RSP.

It was therefore clear that the situation could not continue as it was for long. In fact, it did not continue even for a month after the massive victory of the Congress-led united front. The unanimously-elected leader of the Congress-led coalition—the former Congress Home Minister who now be-

came the Chief Minister—had to bow out after remaining in office for just over three weeks.

## V

With this began a chain of developments which, in less than a year's time, led to the division of the Congress itself into the Congress (I) and the Congress (S). A few months later, the Congress Chief Minister bowed out of office in protest against the pro-Indira stance adopted by his all-India leadership in relation to the by-election in Chikmagalur. The CPI had, in the meanwhile, held its 11th Congress at Bhatinda and had been involved in serious introspection, coming to the conclusion that it was wrong in some major respects (as shown in the extracts from the Bhatinda document in the previous chapter).

These changes in the Congress and the CPI inevitably led to approaches by the CPI-RSP on the one hand and the CPI(M) on the other. The latter too, were pursuing the policies calculated to take full advantage of every move by the other parties which help the process of a new alignment of political forces in the State as well as in the rest of the country.

That it took over two and a half years after the 1977 defeat of the Congress at the all-India level for the CPI, the RSP and the Congress (S) together with one wing of the Kerala Congress, to join the CPI(M) and its allies against the Congress (I) shows the tenacity with which the anti-CPI(M) front could continue. However, after the significant changes that were taking place on the all-India political scene and review of the policies adopted by the two major all-India Left parties, the CPI(M) and the CPI—as well as the Kerala unit of another all India Left party (RSP)—it could not continue any more.

In the latter half of 1979 a Left-Democratic United Front was formed consisting of three Left parties and four other democratic parties—a front which was powerful enough to reverse the trend. Kerala in fact became an exception to the

“Indira wave” which was once again sweeping the major part of the country. The Front made possible defeat of the Congress (I) here, as the continued existence of the anti-CPI (M) front in 1977 made an exception of Kerala in the matter of the sweeping “Janata wave.”

## VI

History repeated itself once again. As in 1967, so now, a coalition of three left parties and four other Opposition Parties came into existence and fought the election on the basis of a common programme; it won a handsome victory following which a coalition Government of seven parties was formed.

This left-democratic Government carried forward the traditions built by the first Communist Government and the subsequent CPIM-led united front Government in formulating and implementing policies which are of immediate benefit to the common people. It followed the example set earlier by the left-front Government of West Bengal which introduced such welfare measures as pension for the aged agricultural workers and allowance for the unemployed youth. Much-needed relief was provided to the peasants and other sections of the working people.

The contrast between the earlier Congress-dominated Government and the new Left-democratic Government was clear to everybody. It was clear also to the vested interests who resorted to new intrigues, as they had done earlier against the first Communist Government and the subsequent CPI(M)-led United Front Government. They succeeded in the end in organising defection—not of individuals but of parties. The Congress (S) and the Kerala Congress (M) which were constituents of the Left-democratic front and partners of the coalition Government were persuaded to change sides from the Left-democratic Front to the Congress camp.

This led to the fall of the Left-democratic Government and to the installation of a short-lived Congress (I)-led coalition

Government, followed by new elections in which the Congress (I)-led coalition won a narrow majority: while in terms of seats it secured 55% (77 out of 140), it got only 48.27% of the votes polled (46,16,908 votes). The Left-democratic front on the other hand secured 47.28% of the votes (45,21,681). The difference in the popular vote between the two combinations was only 95,221.

The "victory" of the Congress (I)-led front was in other words a political defeat for its main organiser, the Congress (I). For, with a view to securing such a "victory", the Congress (I) which claims to be a modern secular party had to rely on the support of all the casteist and communal organisations and parties in the state. Had it not been for the support of this collections of casteist and communal forces, the Congress would have been reduced to a position still more miserable than in 1967. (It will be recalled that the pre-split Congress had in 1967 "managed" to get a mere 9 seats out of 140).

#### IV

It is 20 months upto the time of writing these lines (Jan. 1984) since the Congress (I)-led Government was sworn into office. This relatively short period has witnessed such major and minor crises for the coalition that the Government was on the verge of a fall more than once.

Two constituents of the front—the Indian Union Muslim League and the Joseph group of Kerala Congress—had threatened to walk out and join the Opposition. They are still sulking.

Discontent is brewing inside the Congress (I) itself, three MLAs belonging to that party refusing to vote with the ruling front against the Opposition-sponsored no-confidence motion when it was put to the house.

The Nair-based NDP and the Ezhava-based SRP are putting forward mutually contradictory demands on the reservation issue.

Serious allegations of corruption have, in the meanwhile, been levelled against the Chief Minister himself which he is unable to refute with credibility.

It has thus become a matter of speculation how long this coalition can continue and how it will be replaced by the other coalition as the ruling force in the state.

All these developments have been taking place against the all-India background which is by no means favourable to the leader of the ruling coalition—the Congress (I). Having won two electoral victories in 1980—first to the Lok Sabha and then to 9 state legislatures—the ruling party has had to witness the gradual erosion of its political base among the people.

The two state elections which took place in 1983 saw the total defeat of the ruling party in the two Southern states which had so far been considered Congress strongholds—Andhra and Karnataka. In the series of by-elections which took place before and after these elections as well as in the recent state elections in Jammu Kashmir, the Congress could not improve on its earlier performance.

Add to these political setbacks the fact that organisationally the ruling party has become completely faction-ridden. Former Congress (I) Chief Ministers like Andhra's Chenna Reddy and Maharashtra's Antulay have publicly challenged the authority of the state leaders of their party, while another former Chief Minister Mir Qasim has joined one of the Opposition Parties.

These developments in all-India politics are giving courage to several elements in the Congress Party in Kerala to become "dissidents" in their party. The allies of the Congress (I) in the ruling coalition are seriously considering whether they stand to gain or lose by sticking to the alliance.

Parallel to these all-India developments unfavourable to the Congress (I) are the moves in the Opposition camp. The growing unity of the Left Opposition Parties and increasing

co-operation between the Left and other Opposition Parties projects the possibility of a united Opposition Front minus the RSS-dominated BJP. This emerging combination of the Left and other Opposition forces would be in a position to throw a successful challenge to the Congress (I)'s claim of being the champion of the struggle against imperialism and for peace in the world and against divisive forces and for national unity at home. The change in the co-relation of political forces which is thus taking place at the all India level will indisputably be having its impact on Kerala developments.