

# EASTERN UNCERTAINTIES

THERE have been fewer surprises in the Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal polls than in elections to the Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra Assemblies. Arunachal may have a reasonably viable Government, but the emergence of an Opposition will call for greater sophistication in the handling of political issues than has hitherto been necessary in this Union Territory. In Meghalaya, the point to note is that the three main groups have taken their present shape as a result of defections from the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference and their relations are, therefore, subject to continuing and particularly close interaction. The Congress, which has emerged as the largest party, owes its strength to the group led by Captain Williamson Sangma, a former APHLC leader; but, on present showing, there is no question of an alliance between the Congress and the APHLC. The Hill State People's Democratic Party, which was formed by a militant APHLC group in 1970 and which kept its options open before this year's poll, would find it easier to join hands with the Congress. But such a coalition would be ironical in view of the HSPDP's regional extremism. A bigger imponderable is the attitude of the Meghalaya Congress to Mrs Gandhi. Although the Congress (I) did not fare well in the State poll—no one expected it to do better—it is no secret that tribal leaders of the State Congress, as well as large sections of the tribal population in general, have an emotional trust in Mrs Gandhi's leadership, even though they may have disapproved of the man-

ner in which she split the party.

The situation in Assam is more complex. After years of seemingly unassailable Congress rule, the State faces political instability which can perhaps be only temporarily avoided by such alignments as the Janata Party may be able to negotiate. One crucial question, as in other States, is whether—or how many—Congress MLAs are willing to reconsider their attitude towards the Congress (I). But even the two Congress groups, together with possible defectors from other camps, would not have anything close to a majority. Janata, on the other hand, can form a Government with the support of either the Congress or of the CPI(M) and the RCPI—in addition to some Independents whose support is probably already assured; in fact, either the RCPI, with which the CPI (M) had an electoral understanding, or a few Independents can sustain a Janata-Marxist alliance. In the State and regional context, Janata may be happier with an alliance with the Congress; but there would be an element of uncertainty about Congress MLAs' support—apart from such policy reservations as Janata may have about a formal link with any section of the Congress. On the face of it, an understanding with the CPI(M) would be politically more consistent; it may also be somewhat more stable—so long, at least, as the two parties subordinate their ideological differences to the political needs of the situation created by Mrs Gandhi's re-emergence on the national scene.

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