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Assam's pre-poll scene confusing

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GAUHATI, Sept. 1. : The political scene in Assam is confusing with halting trends of polarisation on the eve of the Lok Sabha mid-term poll. Over 80 lakh voters are likely to exercise their franchise to elect 14 members including one each reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes (Plains) and Scheduled Tribes (Hills).

In the March 18, 1977, Lok Sabha poll about 72.29 lakh voters cast their votes at 8,589 polling stations to choose 14 representatives from among 40 candidates. The main contest was between the Congress, the Janata alliance and the C.P.I. (M). There were straight contests in five constituencies. In other constituencies also the contest was virtually straight. The CPI candidate or the SUCI nominee intervening in some constituencies failed even to retain security deposits. Only one RCPI nominee succeeded in polling substantial votes in a triangular contest in which also the main contenders were of the Congress and the Janata.

Out of the 14 seats, the Congress secured ten and the Janata Party alliance four including one by the PTCA. By and large the contests were quite close. The Congress won the Dhubri seat with a margin of barely 590 votes. The highest margin was about 65,000 and that was secured by the Congress candidate from Lakhimpur.

The Congress secured the following ten seats — Karimganj (SC), Silchar, Autonomous Districts (ST), Dhubri, Barpeta, Nowgong, Kalibor, Jorhat, Dibrugarh, Lakhimpur.

The Janata Party won Gauhati, Tezpur and Mangaldoi, seats while the Janata-supported PTCA wrested the Kokrajhar (ST) seat.

Following the Congress split in January 1978, Mr. Nihar Ranjan Laskar (Karimganj-SC), Mr. Biren Ingty (Autonomous District-ST), Mr. Tarun Gogoi, (Jorhat) and Mr. Lalit Kumar Doley (Lakhimpur) joined the Congress (I) reducing the Congress strength to only six.

The Mangaldoi seat won by the Janata is now vacant owing to the death of the sitting member Mr. Hiralal Patowary. The ensuing mid-term poll will be much different from the March, 1977, Lok Sabha poll or even from the 1978 elections to the Assam Assembly. Despite

complications caused by the appearance of the Congress (I) and the newly floated regional parties the Janata Party-P.T.C.A. combination emerged as the largest single force inside the State Assembly and formed the Government which received support from the R.C.P.I., the CPI (M) and some independents.

JANATA PROSPECT

The split in the Janata at the national level and defections from the party by substantial numbers at the State level have undoubtedly reduced the Janata Party's pulling power. The emergence of forces of regionalism and chauvinism have also cut into sizable electoral supports of all the parties including the Congress, the Janata, the CPI (M) and the Congress (I). The alienation of religious and linguistic minorities has also adversely affected the Janata Party. But this factor may not pay dividend to the Congress as the Congress (I) continues to compete for this electoral support which is crucial in a State like Assam. The Janata (S) may also take some advantage. But in Assam so far the Janata (S) is yet to make an organisational dent. The CPI (M) also reasonably expects to get considerable support from this section of voters.

Against this background it is extremely difficult to make any forecast about poll prospects. Multiplicity of political parties and candidates will mark the Lok Sabha election scene in Assam this time. Much will depend on the type of electoral alliance or adjustments. No party can expect to sweep the polls without the support of some others. Even the Congress (I)'s chances are not rated high despite the joining of the party by such stalwarts like Mr. Mahendra Mohan Choudhuri. But one thing is clear: the entry of the Congress (I) with renewed vigour has posed a serious challenge to the Congress. If the Congress fights alone it will be the greatest loser. On the other hand an alliance embracing the Congress and the Left and democratic forces including the CPI (M) has a better chance. The Janata Party's only hope is the splitting of the anti-Janata votes. However as things stand today, the Janata prospects are not bright.

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