

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

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THE DRAMATIC dissolution of Parliament with the simultaneous announcement of the election have put a new spirit into the tardy political life of the country. It may be recalled that during the debates in Parliament on the extension of the life of the Lok Sabha, the Government asserted that the passing of the measure did not preclude the holding of elections earlier than March, 1978. Mrs. Gandhi has taken the wind out of the sail of the critics both at home and abroad that she is perpetuating her regime without a popular mandate. She has also redeemed her pledge that the emergency will not last a day longer than absolutely necessary. The growing strength of the nation on the economic front, steady prices, abundant supplies of food and industrial raw materials, the bulging foreign exchange reserves and the positive measures for the amelioration of the conditions of the weaker sections of society through the 20-point Programme, re-inforced by Mr. Sanjay Gandhi's five-point social programme, have wafted a gentle air of confidence in the country. The high sense of responsibility displayed by labour, students, the civil servants and the people generally has contributed, in no small measure, to the restoration of the health of the nation. Periodic releases of political detainees have produced a favourable response both from the public and the political parties themselves, proving that the calculated risk taken by the Prime Minister is a step in the right direction. In short, the law and order situation and economic regeneration have paved the way for the restoration of normal political life.

It is customary for persons in unquestioned authority to get used to it and resent even legitimate criticism and constructive suggestions. Mrs. Gandhi has proved herself an exception to the rule and has boldly come forward not only to relax the existing restrictions, such as pre-censorship of news and holding public meetings, but to encourage a free debate, which elections necessarily imply. By this stroke of political wisdom Mrs. Gandhi has destroyed all the vicious and vituperative attack on her as a dictator perpetuating herself in office.

One is not sure if the parties, including the National Congress, are prepared for a stupendous election campaign within the next few weeks. Even as late as a few days back, responsible Ministers were not only denying the prospects of an early election, but even questioning the need for it, lulling the partymen into a kind of stupor. The task of choosing over 500 candidates from Kashmir to Kanyakumari is not easy and the time to assess local opinion about the prospective candidates almost negligible. In the absence of constituency committees and an effective local organisation, the chances are that the views of the people at the root level may be ignored and pressure groups may dominate the selection of candidates. This is true not only of the ruling party but of almost every other party in the country. Unless the parties choose the best available talent endowed with a sense of duty and high integrity, the opportunity afforded to the country through the elections will be wasted.

Opposition parties, who had demanded polls, will now get the opportunity they sought. It is up to them to utilise the occasion for building up a constructive orderly and national organisation which can function as a responsible opposition. The People's Representation Act has been amended penalising resort to appeal to sectional and religious prejudices and vilification of candidates and, therefore, the unbridled abuse, which was the stock in trade of election propagandists, must yield place to reason and argument. Noisy demonstrations should be replaced by cold logic and facts. Bribing of voters should be despised by the public and condemned by the parties. The nation must demonstrate to the world that the elections in our country are fought according to the best traditions of a true democracy.

So far as the Congress is concerned, it has a well defined programme, clear policy objectives and competent personnel. It will offer to the country a programme of economic development through planning. But the diverse opposition parties with no coherent policies, nor a common programme, except winning office, will not be able to offer a viable alternative government. The country has faced the consequences of putting united front governments in office in 1967 and has clearly rejected them in 1971. It is not going to repeat the mistake of entrusting the sacred trust in the hand of disunited parties. So long as the bane of multi-party system prevails in the country there is no hope of ever achieving a healthy opposition.