

Charan Singh's Shrewd Politics

ON the face of it the UP Chief Minister, Charan Singh, seemed to be unnecessarily adding to his troubles when, immediately in the wake of the resignation of the SSP and Communist ministers from his Government, he launched on a cabinet expansion-cum-reshuffle. The move, he must have known, would seriously upset the Jan Sangh, the largest constituent of the ruling Samyukta Vidhayak Dal. In the reshuffle the Jan Sangh ministers have been deprived of important portfolios like co-operation and local self-government. The Jan Sangh had exploited its control of these departments to pack co-operatives and local government bodies with party men. The sharpness of the party's initial reaction to the loss of the portfolios was, therefore, understandable – there was angry talk of the SVD electing a new leader in place of Charan Singh.

But the shrewd calculations on which Charan Singh had based his moves are now becoming clear. The SSP and Communist ministers resigned from Government over specific issues like abolition of land tax and release of those detained in connection with the State Government employees' strike, but the discomfiture of the two parties – particularly of the SSP, since it is the second largest party in the SVD – arose from the fear that the Jan Sangh by exploiting the portfolios in its control was worsening them in the struggle for political influence at the district and lower levels. By taking away some important departments from Jan Sangh Ministers, Charan Singh has mollified the SSP and the Communists who, though no longer in his Government may be expected to continue to support it. The move may also bring back the Swatantra Party which had left the SVD in July last year. The General Secretary of the party, N. Dandekar, has expressed 'satisfaction' over the reallocation of portfolios. The Party has only 12 seats in the Assembly, but in the precarious balance between the SVD and the Congress and between the different units of the SVD, even these matter.

For the moment, then, Charan Singh seems to have survived by skillfully exploiting differences between the parties constituting the SVD. The Jan Sangh has clearly backed down; it has withdrawn the demand for replacing Charan Singh, and the Jan Sangh leader, Ram Prakash, who is also Deputy Chief Minister, has expressed confidence that the crisis will blow over. The reason for the Jan Sangh's retreat is that the fall of the present Ministry may well lead to a mid-term election in the State, since because of the differences within the Congress it is improbable that a Congress ministry formed by C.B. Gupta will survive for any length of time. The Jan Sangh is clearly not anxious for an election at this stage and this strengthens Charan Singh's hands in dealing with the party. If these various considerations continue to carry weight with the different parties, resignation of SSP and communist Ministers and cutting down to size of the Jan Sangh may have left the Chief Minister actually stronger than before. In any case there is no chance of the SVD pulling together under anyone else.

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