

The old resignation routine

R. K. Hegde wins a small victory against the dissidents and pulls his favourite 'resignation' stunt again

If 28 March had been the day of the dissidents in Karnataka, 3 July unexpectedly belonged to the loyalists. In March, the Janata rebels had nearly spiked the elections of the party candidates to the Rajya Sabha. In July, the loyalists recovered lost ground. In the elections to the Legislative Council from the local authorities' constituencies (the *zilla parishads*, *mandal panchayats*, etc.), the Hegde faction won 13 of the 24 seats contested, while the rebels, who had confidently and adamantly fielded six candidates, wrested only two. Promptly, the press hailed the election results as a sort of renewed mandate for Ramakrishna Hegde. "The people want Mr Hegde and the Janata government to continue," said the *Indian Express*. "The dissidents have little public support," it concluded. Amen, echoed the rival *Times of India*. The election was certainly a setback for the dissidents, who had been flexing their muscles since March. The two seats they won, Mandya and Hassan, had practically been conceded to them anyway. More important, they lost the controversial Tumkur seat, which was the main stumbling block in the patch-up efforts initiated by the Janata high command in June (SUNDAY, 10—16 July, 1988). That seat, ironically, went to the Congress(I), which was the gleeful beneficiary of the Janata fratricidal war. The party won nine seats in all, four more than expected.

The election results provided chief minister Ramakrishna Hegde the chance he was waiting for. The crucial victory of more than half the candidates and more so, the loss for the dissidents, gave him the much-needed shot in the arm. On that day itself, Hegde went on the offensive. He launched a two-pronged attack: against the Karnataka dissidents and against the national party leadership.

He fumed that if Ajit Singh had not refused to recognise an official list of candidates, the Janata would not have lost the four seats to the Congress(I).

"This encouraged indiscipline resulting in a free-for-all," said Hegde. He accused the party high command of following a dual policy on the dissidence issue. The next day, loyalist and party president M.P. Prakash suspended six MLAs for their anti-party activities during the elections: M.S. Narayan Rao, N.S. Khed, B. Guruprasad, C. Byregowda,

S.D. Jayaram and M. Varadegowda.

That was not all. Hegde also threatened to resign on the issue of the high command's encouragement to the rebels. He told newsmen that he had sent a letter to Ajit Singh saying that he could not continue as CM under the existing conditions in the Janata Party. Let them find a new leader, he said.



Ajit Singh (left) and R.K. Hegde: a showdown, at last?

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It was with a sense of *deja vu* that mediamen heard the CM's threat (or promise, as the dissidents would have it). Hegde has starred in this scenario so many times, that like the boy who cried wolf, he finds few who believe him. Even Ajit Singh seemed puzzled by that one. In a telephonic interview from New Delhi, he quipped, "Ask your CM whether he really intends to resign." He added that resignation letters were usually two-liners, whereas the letter he had just received was so long that he had

not even read it through till then. Asked whether he would accept the chief minister's resignation, he said, "I have to discuss this with Hegde first."

In what has become a battle royal, with name-calling on all sides, it is, perhaps, Ajit Singh who has been the most restrained so far. The hapless Janata Party president dismissed as a greenhorn in politics has refused to conduct his campaigns through the press. Even his reaction to Hegde's charges has been muted. Hegde had accused Singh of actively sponsoring dissidence in the state unit by not exercising his authority, especially before the recent elections. But according to one theory—and this one is favoured by the dissidents—the only reason Ajit Singh did not commit himself to any official list of candidates was because he was afraid of upsetting the *status quo*. He admitted to SUNDAY that by the time he reached Bangalore in the last week of

never really accepted the sudden ascendancy of Ajit Singh in the Janata Party. Now that he has gained the upper hand in the factional fight, he intends to press his advantage. Perhaps, he has calculated the risks involved and seems prepared to have it out with Ajit Singh.

Meanwhile, the dissidents are convinced that Hegde is trying to pull down the party along with himself. In fact, Vajjnath Patil, MLC, one of the earliest Janata dissidents, made a startling allegation. "Hegde has done this before," he said. He claimed that Hegde was one of the primary people responsible for destabilising the national Janata government in 1978-79. At that time Hegde, who was the party general secretary, was on friendly terms with Chandra Shekhar. Hegde, alleged Patil, wanted to retain the primacy of the Congress(O) in the Janata coalition. So, he tried to undermine the Socialist faction and the Bharatiya Lok Dal fac-

tion. Ramakrishna Hegde, said Patil, forced the chief ministers of Bihar and UP (Karpoori Thakur and Ram Naresh Yadav) to seek votes of confidence on the pretext that he had received letters of complaint against them. And, although they both won the challenges, said Patil, it was enough to sow the seeds of dissidence in those states.

The dissidents are not taking the loyalist offensive meekly. The suspended MLAs have challenged their expulsion, saying that the order violated the party constitution. They have written to Ajit Singh that the state president M.P. Prakash has no authority to suspend them. In turn, they have asked Singh to dismiss Prakash. Some dissidents are also pressing for the chief minister's resignation. In fact, it has become the obsession of the dissident lobby. Unless Hegde goes, they say, nothing in the party will be resolved.

What then of Deve Gowda, the rebel leader? The two candidates in Deve Gowda's constituencies of Mandya and Hassan won comfortably. But that, if anything, only confirmed that Deve Gowda's base is limited to the Vokkaliga stronghold. For the moment, the dissident leader is on the defensive. He has strongly denied the chief minister's recent allegation that he tried to topple the government. Hegde's somewhat underhand election-eve gimmick has queered the pitch for Deve Gowda, especially since both sides have been anxious not to appear as party-wreckers.

Now, the dissidents are in an awkward position because they have no platform for an immediate show of strength. The elections are over and the Assembly has been adjourned *sine die*. They will have to find a new forum to press their demands. Meanwhile, Hegde seems in no hurry to force the final showdown. At this point, it seems that he has the least to lose whether the party splits or not. If it does, he can join forces with V.P. Singh. If it does not, and if Deve Gowda is prepared for a compromise, he will accept it only on his own terms. In any case, his image as a chief minister has been permanently sullied.

Funnily enough, the dissidents and Hegde both agree on one point. Hegde has threatened to resign, and the dissidents want nothing more than his resignation. Meanwhile, Ajit Singh has been looking for a common ground between the two factions. Will he accept Hegde's resignation (if the chief minister is serious)? The answer to that question will decide the fate of the Janata Party.

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Suspended MLAs M. Varadegowda, M.S. Narayan Rao, C. Byregowda and B. Guruprasad; (Inset) dissident leader H.D. Deve Gowda: on the defensive

June, the situation had already got out of hand. What could he do, he asked rhetorically. So he took the easy way out and suggested (somewhat strangely) that there should be a "friendly fight" between the loyalist and dissident candidates. Now that the dissidents have lost four seats, however, he refuses to term it a defeat for the rebels. "The elections are over. We will work harder now to bring the party together," he said.

Ramakrishna Hegde, however, is not about to give in so easily. He has

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