

V. P. Singh's claim laughable: Vajpayee

"Did not favour launch of a new party as alternative to the Congress"

Neena Vyas

NEW DELHI: Bharatiya Janata Party leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Wednesday rejected the suggestion in the memoirs of former Prime Minister V. P. Singh that soon after Mr. Singh resigned from the Congress before the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, Mr. Vajpayee was in favour of the idea of leaders from different political parties coming together to launch a new party.

Describing Mr. Singh's comments in his book, 'Manzil Se Jyada Safar', as "laughable," Mr. Vajpayee denied that he was "unhappy" in the BJP and want-

ed to explore the idea of setting up a new party along with Mr. Singh and some others as an alternative to the Congress.

"Far from the truth"

In a statement here, Mr. Vajpayee said: "For Mr. Vishwanath Pratap Singh to say that at that time I was unhappy in the BJP is not only far from the truth, but is [also] laughable." He denied that he had ever talked to Mr. Singh or suggested to him that some selected leaders should get together on a common political platform.

Mr. Vajpayee said Mr. Singh's statements would have led to

should leave the BJP and help form a new party.

Mr. V. P. Singh's response was: "At that time, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was unhappy in the BJP. He was in favour of the proposal that some select leaders should make efforts towards starting a new political party. I feel that if that had been possible, a new kind of political alternative would have become a reality. Bhairon Singh Shekhawat [now Vice-President] was also of this view."

Later when asked about the role of former External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, Mr. V. P. Singh said: "As soon as I re-

signed from the Congress party, he [Jaswant Singh] came to my house. He encouraged me and said I had taken the right decision. He was continuously in touch with me. He was in favour of the coming together of various parties. His view was that I should bring together the good men in different parties under one party. I respect him. In very difficult times he helped me, not on behalf of his party, but personally."

On Tuesday, Mr. Jaswant Singh was reported to have described Mr. V. P. Singh's comments as more fitting for fiction than memoirs.

• **Vajpayee rejects suggestion that he was unhappy in the BJP**

• **Denies ever talking to V. P. Singh about a common platform**

wrong impressions. "I am making this statement to remove such doubts."

In his book -- written by Ram Bahadur Rai on the basis of questions posed by him and answers given by Mr. V. P. Singh -- Mr. Singh was asked what came in the way of BJP leader Jaswant Singh's efforts that Mr. Vajpayee

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LEFT HITS STREETS ON FUEL PRICE HIKE

Trial run of third front

Statesman News Service

Petroleum impasse

NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, June 13: The Left parties today virtually launched a "trial run" of a third alternative by joining hands with several "non-BJP outfits" against the Congress-led UPA government's decision to hike petroleum prices.

Top Left leaders Mr Prakash Karat, Mr AB Bardhan, Mr Sitaram Yechury, Mr Debabrata Biswas and Mr Abani Roy courted arrest here along with leaders of the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Lok Dal and Janata Dal (S).

In other parts of the country, the Telugu Desam Party and the Asom Gana Parishad joined the Left-sponsored All India Protest Day. A possibility of a general strike on the petroleum price hike is not ruled out.

Mr Karat hailed the joint protest and warned the government of more action if it ignored the "people's voice". He said the joining of other parties in the Left programme was a significant development. The BJP today accused Left parties of playing "deceptive politics" on the issue of a hike in prices of petroleum products. It said the Communists' protest rally over the issue today was "a classic case of opportunis-

KOLKATA, June 13: Neither Mr Murlidhar Deora, Union minister for Petroleum, nor Mr Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, chief minister, yielded ground at a meeting today on reducing the prices of petroleum products even as the city came to be rocked by a series of protest actions organised by the Left Front. "I have urged a sales tax cut," Mr Deora said and the chief minister, on the other hand, desired a lesser duty on petroleum products to begin with. He was echoing his party's opinion. The meeting in a city hotel was attended also by Mr Nirupam Sen, minister for industries and commerce, and senior officials. Progress was claimed in other areas, though. IOC would be the anchor investor in Haldia, the chief minister said, describing the development as "a good beginning." The Haldia oil refinery's capacity is to be raised from 6 million tons to 7.7 million tons, Mr Sen said. Some of the land now owned by Hindustan Fertiliser Corporation is to be given to IOC, he said. ■ SNS

tic policies of Left".

Before courting arrest, the Left leaders met at the CPI-M headquarters and prepared their note on two years of UPA rule at the Centre. Among other issues, the note rejects the government's view on petroleum price-hike, and seeks sizable cuts in Central customs and excise on petroleum products.

The note has listed the Left's demands on what it wanted or opposed, but the 15 June UPA-Left Coordination Committee meeting may not discuss it in detail. The Thursday meeting is likely to discuss Jammu and Kashmir and the North East mainly,

while another meeting will be fixed for the Left note.

The Left note covers diverse issues taken up by the CPI, CPI-M, RSP and Forward Bloc in the past two years. The parties are annoyed at the delay in the enactment of laws for the unorganised sector and on women's reservation in legislatures.

The Left leaders maintained a third alternative could take shape only through "joint struggles" and not through political manipulation.

The Left parties and their trade unions today hit the streets across West Bengal demanding a roll back of fuel prices.

■ Photograph on page 6

THE STATESMAN

The election results and coalition politics

How will the strong showing by the Left impact on the functioning of the United Progressive Alliance Government at the Centre?

K.V. Prasad

THE RESULTS of the five Assembly elections show the parties supporting and in coalition with the Congress at the Centre have done well. In West Bengal, the Left Front has not only won an emphatic victory, it has stopped the Congress from making any gains; in Kerala, the Left Democratic Front has ousted the United Democratic Front Government led by the Congress. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam-led alliance, which includes the Congress, has swept to power.

What impact will this have on the coalition at the Centre? Will the Left become more vocal in its opposition to foreign direct investment or privatisation? The broad view is that while the United Progressive Alliance has itself been strengthened, the results will have a definite impact on its functioning in the days to come.

The verdict, the Left parties have said, points to the people endorsing the approach of supporting a secular formation at the Centre despite serious differences over the economic and foreign policies being pursued by the Manmohan Singh Government. Congress leader Margaret Alva has lamented: the Left has taken credit for whatever good

was done by the Centre and that the Congress has had to pick up the bill for all that went wrong.

The Left leaders maintain that in the past two years they have protested against government policy only when they felt the Centre was deviating from the agreed Common Minimum Programme. This voice is bound to become louder. After all, whatever the Left has been doing seems to have paid handsome electoral dividends and there is no reason for it to change tactics.

Prakash Karat, general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), made this point clearly when he said the results had added to the overall strength of the Left parties and their role in national politics. "We look forward to increased intervention by the Left," was how he summed it up.

There are already known areas of disagreement. The Left parties have repeatedly expressed the view that the Congress and its Ministers continue to do what they wish to, ignoring their advice. The charge is that behind the façade of 'consultations' with the Left, which in fact are nothing more than "mere informing," the Congress pushes forward economic policies that are not in the interest of the people. Perhaps the Congress will have to learn to genuinely consult its

allies and supporting parties on crucial policy issues. Besides economic issues such as opening up of retail trade and related matters, foreign policy has been a sore point. The Left parties have a strong view that the Manmohan Singh Government is increasingly moving towards Washington. The Iran nuclear issue and the approach towards Palestine are cases in point.

These were issues the Left parties had raised during the election campaign. The impressive mandate is certain to encourage the Left to sharpen its attack on the Centre, at least on these issues. The Left leaders can be expected to bring pressure on the Manmohan Singh Government to alter some of these policies if not change them altogether.

The form and fashion of the intervention will be honed in the coming days. The Left parties had earlier this year decided to carry out an assessment of the working of the UPA Government. This would be done now against the comforting backdrop that in its own bastion the elections have been fought and won handsomely.

The last time the relations between the UPA and the Left parties came under severe strain was when they stopped participating in the Coordination Committee meetings. When they did return to the table, the four

supporting Left parties — the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the CPI, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and the All India Forward Bloc — distanced themselves from the UPA.

There is no immediate threat to the UPA Government but the Left parties are expected to make it clear that they cannot be taken for granted. They are aware that while the larger objective of keeping the Bharatiya Janata Party out is intact, the Congress-led formation cannot test the limits of the patience of partners and supporters. Even in Assam, where the BJP made a concerted attempt to considerably improve its score and political presence, the result would hardly create a ripple of discomfort in the UPA ranks. And in Kerala and West Bengal, despite an all-out political battle between the Left and the Congress, the BJP could not get the foothold it was desperately seeking.

As CPI general secretary A.B. Bardhan put it: "We hope that after this the Congress would listen more to us [the Left] and people's voice with humility." This appears to be a gentle way of reminding the Congress leadership that it needs to convey to those in the Government that the current arrangement was a coalition arrangement and unilateral decisions are just not on.

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No Sonia-Jaya face-off

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Lucknow: Samajwadi Party General secretary Ram Gopal Yadav on Friday said Congress president Sonia Gandhi had resigned under duress after the ruckus over MPs holding office of profit.

"There was no element of sacrifice or morality in her resignation," he said, denying rumours doing the rounds that actor Jaya Bachchan would contest against Sonia in the Rae Bareilly by-poll. Jaya, he said, would be contesting for the Rajya Sabha. Yadav also maintained that party leader Amar Singh would not resign.

Meanwhile, the Congress on Friday announced that Sonia would visit Rae Bareilly, her Lok Sabha constituency, on Monday. Soon after resigning as MP on Thursday, Sonia had said that she would contest from Rae Bareilly again. Sonia also urged Congress MPs not to get emotional over her resignation

and put in their papers.

Sonia was obviously referring to Mumbai Regional Congress Committee president Gurudas Kamat, who submitted his resignation from the post and also as an



Friends once, they will not take their personal battle to poll field

MP to her on Thursday.

On Friday, Congress MP Kapila Vatsyayan became the third person

after Sonia and Karan Singh to resign over the office of profit issue. Vatsyayan, chairperson of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, sent her resignation to vice president Bhairon Singh Shekawat.

Despite the Congress buckling to the opposition pressure, its vital ally, the CPM, remained firm on the issue and rejected the demand for the resignation of Lok Sabha speaker Somnath Chatterjee, who is facing a disqualification petition. The party also sought an immediate legislation to resolve the issue of incumbent MPs holding offices of profit.

Meanwhile, the ruckus in Delhi had its echo in Madhya Pradesh. On Friday, the MP assembly was adjourned sine die amidst uproarious scenes after Congress members repeatedly stormed the well demanding the resignation of chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and nine ministers for allegedly holding offices of profits. Agencies

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