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PARTICIPATION OR BOYCOTT

The Government's decision to have elections for the South African Indian Congress in November this year has set before the Indian community the problem (which has dogged Black politics for years) of boycott or participation.

Those in favour of boycott have argued that participation = acceptance and that to participate means to give credibility to reactionary government institutions because such participation means "working within the system".

Those in favour of participation deny that participation (plus rejection of the SAIC) means acceptance and that to boycott means to isolate the progressive section of the community from the community as a whole and thus to weaken the community.

Participation on the other hand will result in a strong progressive organisation being built which will assist in the struggle for a democratic South Africa.

Who is right and who is wrong? Thus two questions are to be answered - the question of principle and the question of organisation.

The most important question is that of principle. If participation = acceptance then, of course, it would be wrong to do so. But if boycott is not a matter of principle but a special method of struggle then one must judge whether participation or boycott strengthens the struggle or not.

On the question of whether participation = acceptance we have a number of historical examples. In all these examples participation took place in reactionary institutions for the purpose

- (a) Of opposing and exposing these institutions
- (b) Of building up the organisations of the progressive elements.

In the following examples participation did NOT equal acceptance. We refer to them not because they are decisive in South African conditions; but merely as a guide on this issue.

RUSSIA

Early this century militants of the Social Democratic Party (representing the working class) called for participation in the toothless Dumas after the 1905 Revolution had failed there. These militants went

so far as to expel the boycotters from their organisation because boycott would have resulted in isolation from the people. And when final victory was won in 1917 the anti-boycott decision was credited with being largely responsible for that successful outcome.

INDIA

In India in 1936/1937 the Indian Congress was faced with the challenge posed by the 1935 Government of India Act. It appeared to provide virtually complete responsible Government in the provinces of British India and the framework for a loose all-India Federation of the provinces and as many of the 600-odd princely states that wished to join. But much care had been taken to ensure the ultimate authority of Great Britain in the affairs of India, through an array of special powers vested in the Viceroy and, to a lesser extent, in the Governors of the provinces. Over 90 articles conferred "discretionary powers" on the Viceroy. There were, as well, "reserve powers" which gave him exclusive control over the defence, external affairs, ecclesiastical affairs, and certain frontier areas. Finally came the "safeguards" or "special responsibilities" which were all-embracing, for example, "the prevention of any grave menace to the peace or tranquility of India or any parts thereof", the prevention of discrimination against British imports, corporations or individuals, protection of the rights of Princes etc. Moreover, representation in the Federal legislature was to be heavily weighted in favour of the Princes; and the States' representatives were to be appointed by the Princes themselves.

Nehru termed it a "slave" constitution.

The Congress nevertheless decided to participate in the

elections. The Congress election campaign was explained in simple straight forward terms : "Fight for Indian Freedom; build the Congress into a mighty army of the Indian people; organise to remove poverty and unemployment".

Congress won a notable victory because of its broadly based organisation network throughout the country and the mass appeal of its election manifesto, especially its pledge for agrarian reform. Nehru himself used the elections to carry the Congress message throughout the whole country. It was from this experience that his genuine discovery of India dated. And it was from that time onwards, that he possessed, in only slightly less measure than Gandhi, a capacity to feel the pulse of the Indian masses.

Nehru himself had no objection to the election campaign but favoured a rejection of taking office. But in a compromise resolution Congress did accept office. But no one accused the Congress of "selling out". Nehru himself, although with misgiving, participated in taking office.

GERMANY

Another example is Germany which (from 1871-1918) had a Parliament (The Reichstag) which had no real effective power. The Executive authority was vested in the German Emperor (the Kaiser). He exercised his power with the assistance of a Chancellor responsible only to him. The constitution provided no bill of rights, no ministerial responsibility and no civilian supervision over military affairs. But it introduced uniformity in currency, weights, measures, commercial practices, industrial laws and financial regulations. It created the economic unity desired by the middle classes - but not political freedom; for example in 1913 the then German Chancellor was defeated

in the German Reichstag by a vote of censure, by 293 votes to 54. Yet the Chancellor did not resign.

But the Social Democratic Party, which in 1912 became the largest single party in the Reichstag and at that time "clung to revolutionary theories" had no hesitation in participating in a Parliament that was dominated by the aristocracy of Germany and supported by the capitalist class (as this parliament secured the economic interests of that class).

WESTERN EUROPE

The general example of Western Europe is also interesting. To Left Wing socialist parties the Western Parliaments are bourgeois parliaments set up to deceive the working masses - yet the left wing parties as a whole support participation while attacking the concepts of bourgeois parliaments.

Venessa Redgrave, for example, stood for parliament in the recent British elections representing an extreme left wing party. Yet, after the 1st world war, there was a concerted demand by left wing militants for the boycott of all bourgeois parliaments. On the grounds that such parliaments were reactionary institutions designed to deceive the people. Though, in left circles, this analysis of Western parliament was generally accepted, the boycott attitude was vigorously opposed as being contrary to the interests of the people and the decision was generally taken to participate in such parliaments, while rejecting and exposing them.

AFRICA

In Africa itself, we have many examples of sham government institutions being used by the Nationalists to achieve final independence. We need but quote one example. In 1962 Kenneth Kaunda and his party (UNIP) participated in the elections of the then Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which election was loaded against the Black Nationalist. The White party the UFP with less than 20% of the votes had 16 members elected while UNIP with more than 60% of the votes got only 14 seats. (2 years later Zambia became independent and shortly thereafter cast of this ridiculous voting pattern). What would have happened to Kenneth Kaunda had he boycotted the 1962 elections?

These examples thus disprove the argument that participation must equal acceptance in all cases. Where participation has been coupled with outright rejection of the institution concerned it has not meant acceptance.

SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa too there have been many examples of participation (plus rejection) in reactionary South African institutions.

In 1943 the C.P.S.A. during the 1943 elections put up candidates for the South African Parliament.

Thereafter in ^{the} 1940's the C.P.S.A. also put up candidates in Durban; Johannesburg and Cape Town for the City Council elections. In 1948 it had one of its members elected in the Cape Western seat (on an African Communal role). This Cape Western seat was thereafter won by such persons as Brian Bunting, Ray Alexander and finally by Lee Warden. Lee Warden was a member of the Congress of Democrats which congress was part of the Congress Alliance. It was with the permission of the Congress Alliance that Lee Warden took his seat in Parliament as a representative of the Cape Western Africans. He occupied that seat until about 1957, or so, when African representation in Parliament in the Cape was abolished.

The Springbok Legion, a progressive ex-servicemen's league (which dissolved itself in 1952/1953 to form the South African Congress of Democrats which we have already pointed out was part of the Congress Alliance) called for full participation in the 1948 Parliamentary elections (to keep the Nationalist Party out). The Springbok legion went on a special campaign to enrol as many Coloureds as possible on the voters role. (In the South African Parliament of 1948 only Cape African Males with certain qualifications were allowed to vote on a communal role. Coloured males were allowed to vote but not Coloured women and Coloured males had to face a qualified vote

while Whites had no such qualification to meet.

At present Inkatha under Chief Buthelezi in Zululand and the Labour Party among the Coloured people are participating in institutions which they openly reject.

Thus in South Africa we have a number of examples of different types of organisations who have all used the policy of participation plus rejection. These include the C.P.SA; Springbok Legion; Labour Party; Inkatha and the Democratic Party in the Transkei.

How do these examples affect the problem of participating in the SAIC elections in November.

The above examples clearly illustrate one point - that the policy of participation (plus rejection) clearly does NOT = equal acceptance. But it has been stated that in the examples quoted from outside South Africa the Franchise was open to all sections of the people while the system of Government might have favoured certain groups (such as vested interests). In the November elections the elections will be open to the Indian community while NOT to the African masses.

Up till now all the other communities (except the Indian community) has been allowed ^{to} "elect" representative bodies. (The Africans for Homeland Governments and the Coloureds for the CRC). All these institutions including the SAIC are reactionary institutions. Yet progressive elements -- among the Africans (Inkatha in Zululand the Democratic Party in Transkei) and progressive elements amongst the Coloureds (The Labour Party) have all participated in their institutions while rejecting them. Surely there cannot be any criticism against progressive elements among the Indian people doing the same.

years the NIC has not really grown. It has remained a small body without a mass following, without mass organisation and without close contact with the Indian people.

Such has been the experience of the NIC in carrying out the boycott policy.

All elements in the Indian community (including the NIC) must take into account the results of the boycott policy of the NIC. There is nothing wrong in an organisation carrying out a policy and checking whether such policy is correct or not. In Russia, for example, in 1905 the Progressive Social Democrats first boycotted the Duma . This was considered a correct boycott. In 1906 they again boycotted the Duma . This was later considered a mistake. But they learnt from this mistake. Then from 1907 to 1914 they followed the policy of participation having learnt from the mistake of boycott.

If therefore the boycott policy of the NIC is criticised now this is done in a constructive manner. The leadership is not blamed for that policy. But the results must now be examined. On the other hand others in the Indian community who have participated in reactionary institutions have done very little to build up the strength of the Indian people.

Thus the Indian community have two examples in front of them neither of which seem to have prove successful.

However if we now look at the perspective in front of us we find that if the Indian community or the progressive section of the Indian community continue to boycott, the perspective will be that the progresives will remain a small body weak and ineffectual.

However if they participate in the elections the following perspectives are open to them.

1. The building of a powerful organisation.
2. Close contact with the community.

To participate properly in the elections the progressives will have to do the following :-

1. Form an election machinery for the whole of S.A. Thus it will have to be a South African organisation and not a Natal organisation.
2. Election committees in every constituency will have to be formed. (Later these can be changed to branch committees).
3. The progressives will have to issue manifestos^{es} of their program and policies in the constituencies.
4. The constituency election committees will have to canvass (person to person) every voter in the different constituencies.
5. Public and house meeting will have to be arranged in every area.
6. Cards will have to be made for every voter.
7. On the day of the election huge machinery will have to operate throughout the country to bring the voters methodically to the polls.

In other words participation in the elections will (if properly done) build a huge progressive organisation which will cover Natal, Transvaal and the Cape.

Further it must be remembered that during an election period an election fever grows on the people. It is at such time that everybody is receptive to the publicity of each party and to attending meetings and to having house meetings and

to listening to canvassers. It is at such a time that a powerful organisation can easily be built up.

If the progressives succeed in winning a majority of the seats in the elections they will have a progressive leadership officially representing the Indian people in South Africa. Such leadership, which can unite with progressive sections among the Africans, the Coloureds and the Whites can play an important role in South Africa's inevitable progress towards a democratic South Africa.

To sum up :

Boycott will lead to the isolation of the progressives among the Indian people;

Participation will lead to a powerful organisation with grass roots among the people.

The real purpose of participation (plus rejection) is thus NOT to give credibility to the institution concerned but to expose it while using the institution to build a powerful organisation and to have platforms to propagate the program and policy.

Unfortunately those who favour boycott fall into two traps :

1. They argue (quite illogically and without reference to historical experience in South Africa and abroad) that participation = acceptance.
2. That boycott (despite all experience in South Africa and elsewhere) in conditions such as exist presently lead to ineffectual small irrelevant organisations.

The key question is not whether or not the institution is reactionary. Boycotters and progressive participants

agree on that score namely that the institutions are reactionary.

Some progressives have agreed that if the Indian people participate in the elections they will arouse the hostility of the Africans because an attempt is being made to bring Indians, Coloureds and Whites under one barrier as it were.

The answer to the Africans is that it is better to have progressives lead the Indian people in a struggle against such policy of discrimination. Just as the Inkatha (in Zululand) and the Democratic Party (in Transkei) are opposing the Homelands Government policy, so will the progressives lead the Indian people to oppose a policy of splitting South Africa between Africans and non-Africans.

It is necessary to unite all forces in the struggle for a democratic South Africa. If the progressives in the Indian community ^{remain} weak and ineffectual their contribution to the struggle for a democratic South Africa must remain weak and ineffectual.

If, however, the progressives are able to build up a powerful organisation their contribution will be proportionately greater.

Once the issue is explained to the African people they will see from their own experience (example in Natal and in Transkei) the logic of the argument and they would obviously prefer a strong Indian progressive organisation working with them than a weak one.

And today for the progressive Indian elements there is no other way to achieve this object.