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“Choice is between liberal nationalism and a communal Frankenstein”

‘The BJP has always sought to divert the attention of the people from the core issues’

Called out of the Council of Ministers to join the Congress party’s panel of spokespersons ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, Union Minister of State for Industries Asghwani Kumar tells ANITA JOSHUA the choice before the people is between the Congress and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) as the Third Front is still born and has nothing in common except anti-Congressism.

There is a view that the Congress is just groping its way through the election. Does the party have an election strategy ?

Yes. It is premised on presenting to the nation a clear choice between an agenda of national empowerment and renewal as against the brazenly and blatantly pursued divisive agenda of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Quite clearly, two poles are vying for a chance at governance. The pole represented by the Congress represents the secular conscience of this country, the voice of progress and inclusive economic growth as against the ideology of the BJP whose core competence has been to exploit emotional issues and divide people in pursuit of political power. The aspirations of a young and resurgent India can be secured only by the politics of inclusion.

You speak of two poles. What about the Third Front ?

In my view the Third Front is stillborn simply because the motley crowd that has come to define its character and leadership has almost nothing in common

except anti-Congressism to define its raison d'être. In any case, the Left parties – the principal pivot of the Third Front – have demonstrated their lack of vision and a total absence of a sense of the future in choosing to part company with the Congress over the Indo-US nuclear deal. I believe that one can't look backwards into the future and the rhetoric of the Left is passé.

But, many of your key allies – particularly in the big States – have deserted you.

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) is not disintegrating as is being made out. In fact, it is the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) which is dwindling. I call it the Natural Dithering Alliance. From 24, it is now down to four. Yes, some of our allies have decided to fight separately, but they have repeatedly asserted that they remain a part of the original UPA formation and that they support our prime ministerial candidate, Dr. Manmohan Singh.

The Congress would like the election discourse to be focused on development. But, can you hope to do that when you yourself create issues by initially giving tickets to Sajjan Kumar and Jagdish Tytler. How can the Congress hope to nail the BJP over Narendra Modi then ?

The leadership of Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh has always rested on their moral authority... It was Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh who secured the resignation of Jagdish Tytler after the Nanawati Commission Report and ordered a fresh investigation. This shows that the Congress has always remained sensitive to people's sensitivities. For the same reason, Congress rejects the use of offensive and harsh language in political discourse.

How does the Congress propose to keep the discourse centred around development when it is clearly emotive issues that attract attention ?

No, doubt, it's a difficult task. The BJP has always sought to divert the attention of the people from the core issues before the nation – security, good governance and empowerment of the weaker sections – by bringing to the fore emotive issues which tend to cloud rational choices. However, the results of past elections have shown that the wise electorate of India will eventually make its final choice on the basis of their judgment on core national issues.

Barring secularism, the general view is that there is not much to choose between the BJP and the Congress. How do you hope to counter that ?

The BJP has neither the vision for the future nor a credible programme of its own for the betterment of the daily existence of the millions who still live on the margins. The choice is between a party anchored in the finer traditions of liberal nationalism and the communal Frankenstein that is rearing its head once again. Besides, the leadership of the BJP is defined not by its ability to inspire the nation but its inclination and penchant to depress it.
