OF late there have been frequent comparisons between the Congress Party of India and the Kuomintang of China. Parallels have been drawn between these two parties and the thesis has been put forward that there is real danger in India of the Congress Party following the fate of the Kuomintang in China. However, the analogy sought lacks historical basis. A brief discussion of the history of the Indian National Congress and of the Kuomintang makes the point clear enough.

Origin of the Two Parties

Even in their origin the Congress and the Kuomintang are dissimilar. Coming as it did much earlier than the Kuomintang the Indian National Congress was from its inception an open political party while the precursor of the Kuomintang—the Tung Meng Hui—was, at any rate all its leaders were members of a secret society. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 as a moderate and reformist organisation. By the turn of the century however it had already become an all-India Party with a programme of full independence for the country. In 1905 the Tung Meng Hui was just founded; it had little influence on the course of Chinese politics. The abolition of Manchu royalty was as much the product of court intrigues as of the revolutionary forces of which the Tung Meng Hui was only a very small part. When the Kuomintang held its first congress in 1924, the Indian National Congress was already in the thick of the national movement. The Congress ranks became radical as days passed. The opposite was the case in the Kuomintang. After the death of Dr Sun Yat-Sen in 1925, the Kuomintang grew more and more conservative. The Congress in India unified the whole country under one effective Government—a thing the Kuomintang was unable to do in China at any time of its life.

Rise to Power

The rise to power of the two parties was equally different. Apart from techniques of struggle the Congress achieved power through its own efforts whereas 'from its very inception the Kuomintang had counted upon the active assistance of the Chinese Communist Party. As is well known, at the moment of victory the Kuomintang betrayed the revolution and its allies. It compromised with the foreign imperialists externally, and with native landlords and commercial bourgeoisie internally. This fact marked a fundamental turn in the history of the Kuomintang. Whatever may be said about the Congress decision to accept the partition of India no one would now go so far as to suggest that it was a betrayal of the cause of independence or a compromise with imperialism.

From 1928 onwards, the history of the Kuomintang was one of abject surrender to foreign Imperialism and native feudalism. It abandoned its earlier revolutionary economic and political ideals and instead resorted to opportunism to retain its miserable hold on power. It connived at Japanese aggression until almost the whole of China was run over, and it put off all programmes of economic and social reforms indefinitely. The self-seeking policies of the Kuomintang leaders annoyed even the progressive minded landlords and the industrial capitalists of China; so much so that some of them even found it easier to cooperate with the Chinese Communist Party than with the Kuomintang.

Such a description hardly fits in with the practice of the Congress since independence. The Congress has abolished the princely feudal lords (whatever view one may take of the compensation clauses), introduced the urgently needed land reforms (however inadequate they may be) and has made sincere efforts to liquidate the foreign pockets in India. In contrast to the Kuomintang which did nothing to relieve the sufferings of the women of China, the Congress legal reforms have accorded the Indian women most full equality with men in practically every sphere of life.

The Kuomintang seized power through betrayal and treachery. And this left a permanent stamp on its career. From the very start it was a house divided: Chiang Kai Shek and Wang Ching-Wei. Despite shifting alliances the rift in the Kuomintang was never completely healed. From the very start of its political ascendency the Kuomintang had to spend most of its energy in fighting its own ranks and the people by the Communists. This incessant armed conflict made Kuomintang leadership highly intolerant of any criticism however mild and led to an iron dictatorship. The Kuomintang virtually made it illegal for any opposition to function politically within the borders of China. Evidently no such parallel can be found in Congress conduct. Whatever may be the attitude of the Congress Party to the Communists or others it has put up no legal or military bars to opposition parties.

No Civil Liberties

The Kuomintang rule was as one non-Communist Chinese Professor characterised it, a bandit rule. There was no rule of law. Every body was at the mercy of the secret police of Tai Li. Matters came to such a pass that even foreigners, highly sympathetic towards Chinese aspirations, found themselves supporting the foreign extraterritorial courts in China, since their people could at least demand and get formal justice. For the Chinese however the protection of the extraterritorial courts was not available, and they were completely at the mercy of the local KMT Chiefs. No Chinese, unless he had enough money and high connections, could expect any justice even as a formality. There would be no trial in most cases and the prosecuting police would sit on judgment as often as not. Can such a thing be said of Congress rule? Whatever its other deficiencies, rule of law obtains in India; and nobody can question that fact.

No general election was held in China during the 28 years of Kuomintang rule. A show of election was made (from which the main opposition—the Communists were
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barred) just before its final doom but it came to nothing, since no responsible Chinese took those elections seriously. The Indian experience is too well known to require recounting. The Congress organised general elections on the basis of universal adult franchise in less than five years time and there is no question that the elections were free and fair.

There was no freedom of speech or assembly in K M T China. The Chiang clique refined the technique of thought control. All liberal professors and writers were persecuted —including the great Lu Hsun. Miss Agnes Smedly describes in her book Battle Hymn of China how Lu Hsun’s closest friends were liquidated one by one on his very face. The “Blue Shirts” of Tai Li killed the noted Chinese professor Wen 1-to in cold blood and in full public knowledge. No such thing ever happened in Congress India.

Inner Party Democracy

The K M T was organised on the model of the Soviet Communist Party while the organisational pattern of the Congress ran on federal lines. The Congress bodies are elected but in China the K M T organs were mostly nominated. The cliques existing within the Congress can hardly be compared with those, like the ”C C”, Whampoa Tai Li, Chiang and other cliques, within the K M T.

Leadership

Only in respect of the immobility of the higher leaders is there any similarity between the Congress and the Kuomintang. But the objective outcome of such a phenomenon in the two countries has been fundamentally different The Indian National Congress has maintained great vitality and has retained popular appeal and support which the K M T lost much earlier in its career. The results of the Second General Elections in India make this point clear enough.

Opposition in China and India

The foregoing analysis discloses little resemblance between the Congress and the Kuomintang. Neither in origin, history or development, nor in social, economic policies and leadership do the parties resemble one another. While in China the K M T actively suppressed all opposition, in India the Congress Party has allowed maximum possible scope for the emergence of the opposition and in Kerala a Provincial Government has been formed through popular vote for the first time in the history of the world.

Conclusion

The charge that the prestige or the Congress Party is militating against the emergence of an effective opposition hardly bears any examination. The growth of opposition in every country is determined by historical, political and economic forces. An opposition, cannot be created by the ruling party, nor forestalled for ever. The failure of the Turkish experiment of officially encouraging an opposition is a pointer to those who would tend to blame the Congress for not helping to create an opposition. However, in the same Turkey after the Second World War when objective factors were conducive to the growth of opposition it, grew and ultimately was able to wrest power from the ruling party. On the other hand while almost every body is agreed on the unhealthy character of the relative numerical preponderance of French political parties there has been no noticeable trend of any decline in that number. In the U S A and U K an effective third party has failed to emerge. From this it is seen that the party system is a product of history.

At this point an examination of the bearing of an opposition on democracy is called for since in common parlance the two terms are wholly interchangeable. While as a matter of fact the existence of an opposition may facilitate the democratic functioning of society there is no absolute guarantee that it would do so in all cases. Despite the existence of very strong opposition in South Africa, Turkey and Egypt (before Nasser) none of them can be said to illustrate a democratic society. On the other hand, almost everybody agrees that the present one-party States of Egypt, Yugoslavia, China and the U S S R are far more democratic than they previously were under multi-party systems.

It is idle to blame the Congress for the weakness of the opposition the reasons for which must be traced elsewhere—in the great diversities of Indian life and the political immaturity of the opposition. Except the Communists, none has an all-India organisation conforming fully to central guidance. The second largest political party in India the Praja Socialist Party presents the picture of a house divided. It is not the first time that its provincial units have openly disobeyed central direction in fighting elections and forming Government. The Congress certainly never stood in the way of the internal solidarity of the P S P. Even during the Second General Elections the West Bengal unit of the P S P flouted the directives of National Committee and formed electoral alliances with the Communists. (The merits or demerits of the actions are not under consideration here).

The opposition is divided on many lines: ideological, political, economic, religious, linguistic, cultural and regional. There is little in common between the Communist Party and the Muslim League though both are opposed to the Congress. The major opposition parties, the Communists, the Praja Socialists and the Jan Sangh are also divided amongst themselves. The numerous opposition parties may be classified into several broad groups. Apart from the national parties (Congress, Communist, P S P and Jan Sangh) the organisations are: 1) communal bodies: The Hindu Mahasabha, the Muslim League, the Akali Dal, the Dravidia Munnetra Kazagham. the Scheduled Castes Federation, the Ram Rajya Parishad, the Jharkhand Party and others; 2) Regional Political Groups: Janata Parishad of Orissa, the Jagirdar Party in Rajasthan supporting the vested interests of landlords and ex-rulers; 3) Splinter Political Groups: Revolutionary Socialist Party, Revolutionary Communist Party, Peasants' and Workers' Party, the Forward Bloc, the Socialist Party (of Dr Lohia), the Kerala Socialist Party and others. Apart from their anti-Congress stand (which is determined by mutually conflicting motives) these parties have nothing in common among themselves. The result is that during the Second General Elections though the non-Congress votes upto March 12 exceeded those of the Congress by three millions, the Congress got twice as many seats as did the anti-Congress Parties combined.

It is no wonder then that the opposition is weak in India The direct responsibility of the Congress Party in keeping the opposition weak and divided is nothing unusual for any ruling party and is hardly to be called significant. The differences within the opposition ranks arise from historical causes and cannot so easily be removed until the social basis of such differences are done...
away with. Moreover such divergent political forces, it should be noted are by no means peculiar to India alone—history shows that such political confusion has been characteristic of almost all societies in transition. Stable politics is impossible without a stable economic background. In the world of today stable party system can be found only in countries with marked economic and social stability—in the highly industrialised countries of Western Europe and North America. The countries of Eastern Europe and Latin America on the other hand, because of delayed reforms, present a very unstable political scene. In the transitional society, of Asia and Africa such instability is bound to be very marked and there is nothing for ridicule or amazement in that situation. While it is fashionable in certain quarters to put all the blame upon the Congress in India and the ruling parties in other Asian lands for the weaknesses of the opposition the responsibility of opposition leaders themselves for such a state of affairs is generally overlooked in the discussions. Suffice it to recall that the main political opposition in the Chief Asian countries—the Communist parties in India, Indonesia and Burma—have since openly admitted their grave mistakes in the assessment of political events, forces and personalities immediately upon the close of the Second World War. The acceptance of their policies would have spelt disaster for the countries concerned. This fact has gravely shaken the confidence of the masses in the wisdom of the opposition—at least temporarily.

Blaming the Congress Party in India for the weakness of the opposition in the face of the aforementioned historical facts may satisfy one's vanity but can hardly be accepted as a reasonable proposition. This is not to idealise whatever the Congress has done, nor even to identify oneself with the Congress ideals and policies. The Congress has also committed grave blunders willy nilly. But the opposition failed to gain by Congress lapses because of its inherent weaknesses. That is a hard fact which one with an objective view can hardly deny.

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