

Gandhi Announces Elections, Startles Opposition

Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stunned both her supporters and critics last week by announcing that parliamentary elections will be held in India this coming March. Subsequently, the government has conducted a series of other totally unexpected moves, lifting major provisions of the "state of emergency" declared in 1975 including the censorship of national media, to enable the press to cover the parliamentary campaigns and arguments presented by all parties who contest the elections.

Gandhi's bringing to a close the 18-month period of the state of emergency expresses her confidence that she can now successfully contest national elections with the opposition, infested with foreign agents as it is, because of the achievements she can show the electorate.

Prior to the announcement, Gandhi released all major politicians being held under provisions of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, destroying the stream of western press charges calling her a "totalitarian dictator." Her principal "crime" was her championing of the Third World cause of debt moratorium and a new monetary system. Her opponents are upset by her firm intention to hold "free and fair elections" and restore India's position in the world as the most populous democracy. But what has them most upset is that Gandhi has challenged her political foes to win parliamentary seats based on *the economic policy* they propose for India.

Gandhi and the left wing of the Congress Party will enter the electoral campaign period with India's best economic performance in the post-independence period as her record, substantial grain reserves and close to \$3 billion in foreign exchange reserves — the outcome of her embattled pursuit of foreign and domestic development policies premised on the early realization of a new world economic order.

In a brief national broadcast Jan. 18, Gandhi announced the election and her "unshakable faith in the power of the people." She warned against misuse of election campaigns: "May I remind you that the Emergency was proclaimed because the nation was far from normal. Now that it is being nursed to health, we must insure that there is no relapse." This warning is well taken by the coalition front of Opposition parties (Janata Front), which in the pre-emergency period attempted to topple Mrs. Gandhi from power through provoked strikes and mass disruption of the economy, in many cases with direct aid from the U.S. CIA. Jayaprakash Narayan, the opposition leader on the Ford Foundation payroll, called for the army to mutiny, which led to the declaration of the emergency in June 1975.

Congress Campaign

The economic policy that Mrs. Gandhi has defined as her party's campaign platform has also resulted in considerable apprehension within parts of the Congress itself. As all national parties begin meetings to determine their election strategy, the central issue has become not what the Opposition will do, as the western press has suggested, but whether the Congress Party will make an electoral alliance with the Communist Party of India (CPI) in crucial states such as West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Kerala. The first three represent the heavy industrial sector of India with a working class that is receptive to the CPI's even stronger development programs. The fourth state, Kerala, has been governed for the past six years by a CPI-Congress coalition.

Such an electoral alliance will be hard for the Congress Party to resist. At the time of the state of emergency, Prime Minister Gandhi also announced a 20-point economic program that included major land reform and moratoria on peasant debts, but the CPI has done much more than the faction-ridden Congress itself to implement the policy. Consistently throughout the past 18 months, the right-wing landlord base of the state Congress Parties has delayed implementation of the 20-point program, while their business associates, principally the Rockefeller-related Birla family interests, have pressured Mrs. Gandhi to "liberalize" her policy toward multinational corporation. Spokesmen for this pointedly attacked the Congress Party Youth Program declared that national elections were not in the political agenda for the immediate future, and were willing to discuss national economic policy only to give impetus to the "family planning" programs and in particular, the Ford Foundation's campaign for mass forced sterilization.

The CPI at this time announced its own five point economic program to supplement Mrs. Gandhi's, and pointedly attacked the Congress Party Youth Program which proposes an end to illiteracy, "family planning," slum clearance, and an end to the dowry and tree planting. This "does not solve the problems of poverty and unemployment faced by our country," the CPI has charged. The CPI asked for immediate nationalization of jute, textiles, and drugs (all Birla); national takeover of the grain trade to both end speculation and maintain price stability on essential commodities; payment of withheld bonuses to industrial workers and cost subsidies for the peasantry to counter the impoverishing effects of private hoarding operations. The CPI has also publicly announced that it does not support the compulsory

sterilization program that Youth Congress representatives have endorsed, saying that the population question cannot be separated from general economic development.

Gandhi Responds

Mrs. Gandhi herself has placed the right wing of the party on alert by a two-pronged strategy that strengthens the CPI efforts. In her first campaign speech, Gandhi addressed foreign policy, an area in which the Congress and the Communists have no disagreements: "Detente cannot be if it is confined to one continent alone. It must be expanded to other areas deeply affected by tension and conflict...Our first priority is the question of world peace, which is tied to the resolution of the North-South dialogue." She then added "all our influence will be directed toward resolving world problems, bilateral and multilateral."

In a meeting with chief ministers of all states, she ordered a halt to all acts of coercion in the so-called family planning drive, especially compulsory sterilization. "Any act of compulsion or harassment will be dealt with severely," she warned. Then, she demanded strict implementation of the 20-point program with an eye on essential commodities' prices which have begun to rise after a 12-month period of zero inflation. The same day, finance ministry officials announced that bonuses of a minimum of \$8 will be paid to all workers in industrial units showing a profit. This decision falls short

of the 8 percent cost of living demand of the major trade unions, the Congress based Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and the Communist-linked All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), but it is a gesture aimed at the very states where the Congress party base has collaborated most closely with the CPI.

Opposition Parties

The Indian Parliament's Lower House that Mrs. Gandhi dissolved last week had the following composition: Congress — 355; Communist Party of India-Marxist — 26; Communist Party of India — 24; Jan Sangh — 16; Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam — 12; Congress-O — 11; Independents — 28.

The issues Indira Gandhi posed for economic debate to determine India's development strategy have found no echo in the anti-Communist Opposition parties. The day new elections were announced, the government released Morarji Desai, a former finance minister who leads the Congress-O, the far rightwing that in 1969 split from Gandhi's party. Desai immediately joined "socialist" Jayaprakash Narayan, leader of the undifferentiated Opposition, in meetings to determine a common strategy. On Jan. 20, the two men, both in their seventies, emerged from the meetings to announce a joint electoral front of the rightist Jan Sangh party, the Congress-O, the Bharatiya Lok Dal and the Socialist Party. This coalition, the Janata Front, has since picked up the support of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) on "civil liberties" issues.

The Janata Front has received front page coverage from the *New York Times* which on Jan. 21 cited the charges made by an aide of the ailing Narayan that Indira Gandhi has "murdered democracy in India." The Times reported these charges as the lead item in its international news coverage. "All that has happened shows that the choice is nothing less than democracy and a fascist-type of dictatorship," he charged.

Narayan's Ford Foundation links have not gone unnoticed in the press, while his present proposal for economic "decentralization" and "ruralization" of India is not only unfeasible but in a country as diverse and complex as India, a call for outright chaos. Morarji Desai, the other stalwart of the Opposition is hated by urban and rural populations alike for his association with the policies of the International Monetary Fund during his tenure as finance minister in the 1960s. Desai is favorable to the U.S. multinationals, and has repeatedly attacked India's state sector as a source of industrial waste.

Despite the remarkably warm reception it has received in the western press, bad omens have already appeared in the horizon for the Janata Front. The Hindu revivalist Jan Sangh announced yesterday that it may not participate in the elections if all party members are not released from jail by the government. The Jan Sangh's militia, the Rastriya Sevak Sangh (RSS), remains banned for its violent activities. The loss of the Jan Sangh to the Janata Front would be significant, for it is the largest anti-Communist opposition party, and the only one which has used its significant militias to

Who Is Jayaprakash Narayan?

Jayaprakash Narayan, the leader of the Opposition coalition or Janata Front, is 76 years old. He made headlines in 1974 for leading the mass demonstrations against the Gandhi government which culminated in his call for the Indian army to mutiny. This, a destabilization operation against Gandhi, was part of World Bank pressures on the government to forego development in favor of foreign exchange earnings to pay the foreign debt. The campaign included total disruption of the economy through strikes incited by Narayan's followers, all brought to an end by the state of emergency in June, 1975.

Narayan and hundreds of other subversive politicians were arrested. Mrs. Gandhi accurately charged that they represented the internal arm of a larger "conspiracy" against India similar to that which the CIA ran against the Chilean government of the late Salvador Allende. The major portion of Narayan's funds came through the "Gandhi Peace Foundation," a "cultural center" that receives its money from the Ford Foundation. Calling for his release from prison immediately after his arrest was Willy Brandt and that section of the Second International under Brandt, controlled by U.S. intelligence agencies. Along with Socialist Party leader George Fernandes, Narayan has been charged by the Communist Party of India with direct connections to the CIA.

physically attack the Communists during past election periods.

Western Press

Western press accounts of the Indian election campaigns have invariably predicted that the elections will be close and promoted the fortunes of the rightwing Opposition front. The *New York Times*, has led one group of editorialists suggesting that Mrs. Gandhi note how "our (U.S.) civilized transfer of power has impressed the

rest of the world." If Mrs. Gandhi allows "fair elections" the election will be "close."

More accurate coverage has prevailed in the British press. The *Financial Times* aptly noted that Gandhi's critics stand on weak ground if they intend to shift from charging the Prime Minister with anti-democratically calling the 1975 state of emergency in order to consolidate her power, to accusing her of calling elections to strengthen her personal base of support. What then is "democracy," asks the *Financial Times*.

Gandhi Lifts Emergency Restrictions and Calls for March Elections

The following is the text of a speech given by India's Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and broadcast to the Indian nation Jan. 18:

It is some time since I last spoke to you on the radio. However, through my continuous travels in various parts of the country and through the groups and large numbers of individuals whom I meet in Delhi and elsewhere I have continued to be in close touch with you all. Your support, your affection and your trust enable me to serve India to the best of my ability....

Some 18 months ago our beloved country was on the brink of disaster. Violence was openly preached. Workers were exhorted not to work, students not to study, and government servants to break their oath. National paralysis was propagated in the name of revolution. The democratic way would have been to work towards the next elections which were not far off.

The government had to act and did act. Without a purposive government a nation, especially a developing one, cannot survive. At that time I made it clear that the restrictions imposed would be temporary. They have been gradually eased. The leaders and many of the rank and file who had been detained have been released. For some time, past press censorship has been relaxed and newspapers have been reporting the activities of people and parties. Restrictions could have been lifted earlier had violence and sabotage been given up, had there been no attempt to stir up communal and other unrest.

This discipline and feeling of hope enabled us to initiate and pursue many policies to help those sections of the population who had not greatly benefited from development plans. The constitution has been amended to remove impediments to policies which are designed to serve the people. We have also undertaken programs to combat social evils such as dowry, which is a burden on our middle classes and family planning which aims at healthier and better-cared-for children. Any act of compulsion or harassment will be dealt with severely.

May I remind you that the emergency was proclaimed because the nation was far from normal. Now that it is being nursed to health we must ensure that there is no relapse.

Normality means the orderly conduct of business. This is possible only if people live by certain codes and norms of behavior. Democracy also has certain rules. Government functioning cannot be obstructed. None should imperil the welfare of any section of the people or the safety of the nation. If India is to live and prosper, there can be no preaching of hatred, no practicing of violence, no encouragement of subversive activities, or lowering of standards of public life.

The economic situation has vastly improved. Others are studying our anti-inflation strategy. Production has increased thanks mainly to the new spirit of dedication which we see in our farmers, in our industrial workers and in our scientists, technicians, managers and administrators. The public has cooperated in spite of difficulties.... The 20-point and 5-point programs have shown tangible results. Even though much remains to be done, they have generated an attitude of confidence and have galvanized young and old. In spite of criticism there is a new respect for our country abroad.

I am conscious of the difficulties which farmers, industrial workers and some other sections of our population are experiencing. We are studying each problem so as to find quick solutions. Cyclones, drought and floods have caused hardship in some areas. My sympathy to all those affected. In recent months prices of a few commodities have slightly increased. But we have already initiated corrective action which will soon show results.

We have the largest grain stocks in years. Elements which wish to stir up economic trouble will be sternly dealt with. As long as there is close cooperation between the government and the people, our economic battles can and will be won.

Anyone can see that today the nation is more healthy, efficient and dynamic than it had been for a long time. The question now before us is how to restore substantively those political processes on which we were compelled to impose some curbs.

Change is the very law of life. This is a time of great fluidity in the world. Contemporary society is beset with dangers to which developing countries are especially vulnerable. Hence all change must be peaceful. This is the legacy of our freedom struggle and of Mahatma