

# Notes on the 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India

AJIT SINGH RYE

## End of an Era

"The collective judgment of the people must be respected. My colleagues and I accept their verdict unreservedly and in a spirit of humility." With this statement, Indira Gandhi brought to a close a long era of Congress Party hegemony in Indian politics. Mrs. Gandhi and her controversial son Sanjay both suffered humiliating defeats at the polls. Popular resentment against the abuse of power during the Emergency was such that, in the home state of the Nehrus—Uttar Pradesh, the Congress Party did not even win a single seat. All 85 seats were won by the Janata coalition. Similarly, in Bihar State, all 54 seats were won by Janata.

Out of 542 seats in the Lower house, Congress won only 153; Janata and Congress for Democracy won 299. In fact all over northern India—from Punjab to Assam—the Congress Party was virtually wiped out by the united opposition. In addition, more than two-thirds of the Central Ministers in the Cabinet who contested the elections, including Mrs. Gandhi, were defeated. Congress was for the first time since 1946 forced into opposition in the Central Parliament.

Many explanations have been advanced for the Congress rout at the polls. The most widely-held view is that Indira Gandhi and the Congress Party were defeated primarily because of their brazen misuse and abuse of power during the period of Emergency rule. Her

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attempt to arrogate power and authority to herself and a small coterie of advisors alienated the Congress Party from the electorate. She lost the confidence, not only of her party colleagues in parliament and Cabinet but also of the rank and file in the Congress Party. More significantly, important segments of India's mammoth bureaucracy were also angered because of the pressure exerted by Sanjay Gandhi and other associates of the Prime Minister. The emasculation of the Constitution through hurriedly passed amendments, in order that the Gandhis may acquire arbitrary power in the conduct of the emergency government, angered the judiciary as well as the politically-conscious segments in the country. All these ill-conceived moves gradually isolated Mrs. Gandhi from the main current of popular feelings in the country.

The enraged Indian electorate radically upset the pattern of domestic politics. The traditional alliances and loyalties that Congress had so meticulously built over the years were torn asunder by a sudden upsurge of popular resentment. The defeat and political humiliation of Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party have been taken to mean as a triumph of democracy and a rejection of authoritarian personal rule. The rise of the Janata Party—a new political coalition—and its capture of power at the center is considered a radical ideological shift to the right in Indian politics. Janata is a hurriedly devised alliance of convenience among four major political factions—the ultrarightist Jan Sangh, the organization Congress of Prime Minister Desai, Socialists and the Bharatiya Lok Dal. They were brought together to form a united front by their common feelings of resentment against Mrs. Gandhi, her son Sanjay and their close associates. The excesses committed during the Emergency provided the opposition an excellent weapon to punish the Congress Party specially in the North, where the impact of Emergency was felt most. Congress fared better in the Southern states because, unlike in the North, the South was unaffected by the political excesses of the Emergency.

The political upheaval in India was indeed phenomenal. Mrs. Gandhi and her associates have been humiliated and humbled. But, nevertheless, Mrs. Gandhi cannot be counted out. Whether she will ever regain power seems a remote possibility. However, she is still a political factor to be reckoned with.

In the following pages, an attempt is made to look back into some of the significant developments in the Post-independence history of the Congress Party. Because of the baffling nature of recent

developments, it may be profitable to draw some impressions from the past happenings to throw some light on the significant aspects of Indian politics.

### **Politics of Factionalism**

Indian politics is factionalistic. Almost all political parties are faction-based. The Indian National Congress has always been a grand alliance of divergent factions held together by intricate alliances, ideological considerations and parochial interests. It was Mahatma Gandhi who first gave the Congress Party a real sense of political purpose, ideological cohesiveness and a mass character.

He built the Congress Party into a Sangham—congruence-of all persuasions so long as they adhered to his dictates and were willing to subsume their ideological differences to the larger interests of Indian nationalism. The Mahatma, although he was not even a member of the Congress Party, always enjoyed the support of several factions within the Party who, in order to win the support of the rank and file in the organization, stayed close to the path of the Mahatma. The Mahatma played favourites too. Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira's father, was his most favoured ward and Jawaharlal always had his way with the Party, even though he seldom organized factions to support him—a common practice in the Congress organization. Mahatma—the Guru of all factions—generally provided Nehru the needed support in organizational affairs. For instance, Mahatma's partisan attitude towards Subhash Chandra Bose drove him out of the Congress Party. It has been often said that the exit of Subhash cleared the way for Jawaharlal to become an unrivaled leader of the Congress Party.

When Indira Gandhi's father died, he left her a grand legacy of political service, but no faction in the party to which she could turn for political support. She was given the insignificant portfolio of Minister of Information in the cabinet of Lal Bahadur Shastri, who succeeded Nehru. It was more out of sympathy and love that she was given a place in the cabinet by the "syndicate"—the controlling core group of Congress Party bigwigs who dominated and determined the policies of the Party and the fate of Party functionaries. Morarji Desai was one of the elder statesmen in that group.

When Shastri died of a heart attack in Tashkent while parleying with Pakistan's Ayub Khan on the Indo-Pakistan dispute, Indira was elevated to the Premiership because she was thought to be most acceptable to the "syndicate". They thought that Indira could be a

captive Prime Minister and at the same time the living symbol of the late Nehru's memory. Morarji Desai, the able administrator and an astute politician, was installed as number two man as the Deputy Prime Minister. He was to run the government machinery and to serve as Indira's mentor and guide.

The assumption of the "syndicate" that Indira could be easily manipulated was understandable, because she practically grew up in their laps. Most of these leaders in their late sixties and seventies were contemporaries of her father and often looked after her when Nehru was in jail, which was a frequent happening. They little realized that the lady had grown and had a mind of her own. She knew enough of Indian politics and specially congress Party politics to see through the "syndicate's" motivation. She, however, led them to believe that they could control and manipulate her as a figurehead Prime Minister.

Indira Gandhi meticulously but gradually built her own faction within the Congress Party and in a short span of five years, declared her independence from the "syndicate". When the "syndicate" tried to expel her from the Congress Party for her acts of defiance, she let the party split into two factions in 1969. She ousted Desai from his number two position in the Cabinet. She now had the machinery of the Congress Party, the leadership of the Parliament and the support of most of the state leadership.

Indira's victory against the "syndicate" then was a victory of factionalism raised to the high point of national politics. Old alignments were gradually modified and new elements were introduced. The Congress Party's traditional structure was radically reshaped.

### **The Allahabad High Court Decision and the Declaration of Emergency**

The Allahabad High Court nullified Mrs. Gandhi's election on rather flimsy technical grounds. Nonetheless, it was a dramatic turn of political events in India. The stunning impact of that otherwise simple court case, literally threw the entire machinery of the national government into disarray. Gandhi could no longer hold the office of Prime Minister, because she had lost the legal and political authority to lead the country. Moreover, the moral and psychological impact of the decision was incalculable. The opposition, led by aging Sarvodaya leader Jayaprakash Narayan, with characteristic Gandhian foresight, seized upon the court decision as the main issue against

Indira Gandhi. She was thus placed in an embarrassingly defensive position.

She was faced with two immediate problems. First, to seek the Congress Party's confidence vote, and second, to diffuse the issue by raising the case to the higher court to reverse the adverse decision of the Allahabad High Court.

The Congress Party, as expected, was quick to pledge its loyalty and support. However, it was suggested by many in the Party that she step down from the Prime Ministership for as long as the Supreme Court had not made a final decision on the appeal she had filed. The names of several Cabinet members who could take over the Prime Ministership for an interim period were suggested. Mr. Jagjiwan Ram, the Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation, was one of the possible candidates. Apparently, this proposal was not to the liking of Mrs. Gandhi. She feared that once she stepped down, there would be a long fight to return to power even if she won the case in court. The implications of being out of power were too apparent. Consequently, the Prime Minister declared an Emergency in view of the mounting agitation for her resignation.

Narayan issued a call for a nationwide disobedience movement. The immediate consequences of the declaration of Emergency were press censorship, the arrest of opposition leaders who had threatened mass agitation, and a curb on political activities.

It was obvious that Indira Gandhi imposed emergency rule in sheer panic. She was doubtful of party support if the mass agitation called by Jayprakash Narayan were allowed to prosper. The factionalism within the parliamentary party at the center would infect the Center as well as the state party organizations. Under such circumstances, she would have had very little chance to survive as the leader of the Party. In a sense, the Emergency was imposed as much to suppress popular anti-government agitation, as it was to whip party leadership into line in support of the Prime Minister. It was the first time that state power was being applied to suppress factionalism in the Party.

Her gamble paid off temporarily. The wavering loyalty of the party was checked. The arrest of opposition leaders eliminated the possibility of mass agitation. The bureaucracy was coopted into the Emergency by giving it more authority and initiative in executing long-delayed social and economic development projects.

Factionalism reached an acute level with the imposition of Emergency rule. The Prime Minister was no longer hesitant to apply

the coercive power of the state even against her own Congress Party to settle factional disputes. Those who disagreed or opposed her were either expelled, arrested or coerced into silence. Worse, factionalism was injected even into bureaucracy, thus causing a breakdown of morale in various essential services. The extent of the political vendetta that Sanjay and his associates perpetrated assumed the aura of legality and political legitimacy because of the willing cooperation of the police, the civil servants and some courts. Thus, civil servants trained and required by law to be above politics became active partisans under the Emergency. The arbitrariness of the Emergency rule was aptly symbolized by the extraordinary authority and power exercised by Sangay Gandhi over senior officials and political leaders. His only claim to power was his being the son of Mrs. Gandhi. Many began to treat him as an heir apparent; this gave him even more power and influence.

The censorship of the press and the partisan use of the government information machinery both at the national and the state levels isolated the government from the mainstream of national life. Sanjay and her close associates apparently misinformed and misled Mrs. Gandhi into believing that all was well and that everyone was behind her and the masses were happy. The contrary was true.

The use of the bureaucracy for partisan ends was one of the serious errors of Mrs. Gandhi and her advisors. Some of the civil servants, in order to advance their career or out of sheer fear of losing their positions, went out of bounds in the exercise of their power and authority. Forced sterilization was the most glaring example. It is said that in some localities, overenthusiastic civil servants would encircle moviehouses and other places of entertainment, particularly late at night, then herd the unsuspecting and unwary amusement-seekers into buses and sterilize them without exception in mobile clinics. Similarly, acting under Sanjay's orders, police and civil officials would demolish the shanties and slum dwellings of poor people without regard for their welfare and resettlement. In many cases violent riots broke up, resulting in death and injuries to many.

Defense Minister Bansai Lal is said to have used his power and authority like a medieval feudal baron by appropriating the properties and lands he fancied. The owners were jailed and their houses demolished if they complained. It was factional politics run wild.

While the authoritarian character of the Emergency rule led to many administrative excesses, injustices and abuse of authority, it also served as an efficient and effective weapon in dealing with law-

less elements. For instance, smuggling, the hoarding of prime commodities, the black market in foreign currency and underhanded financial transactions were effectively curtailed. They were a severe strain on the economy. The Government kept the lid tightly closed on industrial unrest, student agitation, communal riots and crime in general.

The country also made significant advances in various economic sectors. India has a massive population of nearly 625 million. The great majority live a marginal existence. Mrs. Gandhi's famous slogan, GARIBI HATAO—banish poverty—was the guiding principle of various policies introduced during Emergency. Some of the economic gains inherited by the Janata government were (1) the large stocks of food grains, (2) nearly \$4 billion in foreign exchange reserves, and (3) a fast growing export market specially in heavy industries and engineering goods.

India's international prestige was boosted with her explosion of a nuclear device in 1974, and earlier, by her victory over the Pakistan army during the Bangladesh conflict in 1971. Mrs. Gandhi pushed further in carving a position of influence for India in the Third World countries, more specifically in the concert of non-aligned nations.

All these gains were encouraging. They were perceived as enough indications to take a calculated risk in seeking a popular mandate for the policies and gains of the Emergency rule. Mrs. Gandhi's decision to hold elections was both a response to political pressure as well as to test the validity of her decision to impose Emergency government.

### **General Election 1977**

The old Lok Sabha (House of the People), the lower house of the Indian Parliament, was dissolved on January 18, 1977 and fresh elections were ordered to take place between March 16 to 20. It was a crucial decision and the Prime Minister seemed confident and self-assured.

Even the partial lifting of Emergency restrictions gave the press enough incentive to assume its critical posture and to expose wrongdoings during the Emergency. The Congress Party, seemingly united behind the Prime Minister during the emergency, began to show signs of internal rumblings and the proverbial factionalism began to surface everywhere. The power dealers during the Emergency were beginning to feel the resentment against them within the party and the public in general.

## Ram's Defection

Jaggiwan Ram's resignation from the Cabinet and the Congress Party was a serious political set-back for Mrs. Gandhi. It was well-known that Ram was no longer in the good graces of the Prime Minister, and there was talk that Sanjay had decided to drop him and other so-called older people from the list of candidates for nomination. The plan was ostensibly meant to give preference to younger candidates from his Youth Congress. Jagjiwan Ram was well aware of Sanjay's plan and obviously took the offensive first. He timed his resignation well and made it public without much delay. It had the desired effect. The rank and file of the Congress Party and in the Government were shaken by this unexpected development.

Mrs. Gandhi tried to diffuse the psychological impact of the resignation by saying that Ram had always backed her government policies, and, being one of the senior Cabinet members, he was always consulted on all important matters, implying that he was a party to the abuses of Emergency if there were any. Later the Congress Working Committee—the highest policy-making body of the Party—deplored the resignation as an act of bad faith. The Committee even imputed that Ram was not a successful Minister after all these years! It was a poor attempt to belittle him and it came too late. Ram had made his point. The unity of the Congress Party was destabilized; defections and doubts began to permeate the organization. Ram immediately announced the formation of a new political party, the Congress for Democracy (CFD), which became the rallying point for many dissidents from the Congress, particularly the politicians representing the powerful untouchable votes.

It must be noted, however, that throughout Congress rule, since 1946—and even during the Emergency rule—the untouchables and the Muslim were given special attention by the Congress governments both at the Center and the states. Forced sterilization and the demolition of shanties in slum areas perhaps hit these communities harder than the rest. Only a year or so before, the Jan Sangh had publicly accused Indira that the Congress was partial to minorities even at the cost of the legitimate rights of the majority Hindu Community. Despite this, the Muslims in many areas made common cause with the Jan Sangh in order to defeat Congress.

The Congress for Democracy put out an "eight-point demand". These demands included an immediate lifting of Emergency, the repeal of the dreaded MISA, the release of all political prisoners, the withdrawal of all acts that abridged or curtailed freedom of the press



and informatoin, an assurance that police and para-military forces shall not be used in the conduct of the elections, that the Government machinery would not be used for partisan purposes, and finally, that the Government mass media, particularly radio and television shall observe norms followed before the Emergency.

With this the stage was set to launch a nationwide anti-Indira campaign that was to culminate in her personal defeat and the complete rout of the Congress in northern India.

### **The Janata as a Union of Factions**

Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan, the aging Sarvodaya leader, played an important role in forging the four-party coalition composed of the Congress of Mr. Desai, the Socialist Party of George Fernandez, the Jan Sangh—a rightist Hindu group—and the Bharatiya Lok Dal (BLD) of Charan Singh. None of them alone could have had a chance to make a dent in the Congress machine. However, the fast deterioration of Congress defenses gave them the hope and incentive to work out a temporary alliance. The differences among them were sharp; thus, an attempt at a merger was abandoned and instead; they agreed to form a United Front and called themselves the Janata Party—the People's Party. The Congress for Democracy of Ram retained its separate identity but agreed to work in alliance with the Janata Party.

Other state parties entered into poll agreements with the Janata Party, i.e., the Akali Party in Punjab, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Communist Party of India. Thus, for the first time, the Congress Party faced a formidable opposition all over India.

### **Significance of Congress Defeat**

For the first time since India won independence, the Congress Party was forced to hand over the reins of the national government to another political party. This development was doubly significant not only because the party that assumed power was a newly organized coalition but also because its leadership, both within and outside the government, was mostly in the hands of such former leaders of the Congress Party as Morarji Desai, Jagjiwan Ram, Charan Singh and others. Of course, there are Jan Sangh and Socialist Party leaders who did not pass through Congress tutelage, yet most are committed to the policies and ideals advocated by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. In fact, they have adopted most of

the basic philosophy of government that guided Congress policies before the imposition of Emergency rule.

During the election campaign, the opposition primarily attacked the performance and methods rather than the substantive aspects of the socio-economic programs and foreign policy pursued by Congress. Significantly, however, planned national economic development and the non-aligned foreign policy have been accepted by the new government without any fundamental change, except in emphasis and style.

Upon their oath-taking, Morarji Desai and his entire cabinet paid homage to Mahatma Gandhi at his memorial. There they pledged to strive for the promotion of his ideals through state policies. The significance of the visit to Raj Ghat must be seen in terms of the search for the continuity of the basic aspirations of Indian nationalism, notwithstanding the changing of the guard. It also underscored the point that Indira Gandhi's regime, particularly the Emergency, was a betrayal of Gandhian ideals and of the aspirations of Indian nationalism.

The defeat of Congress must be viewed in the context of Indian politics. Personality, caste, religion, language and ethnic origin all play important roles in the electoral process. In the 1977 election, the anti-Congress votes could not be attributed entirely to an anti-Emergency wave. A considerable portion of the votes may be attributed to shifts in local alliances and the defections of those who were denied nominations by Congress.

Anti-Emergency feelings, however deep, are of a temporary duration. They cannot be kept alive for too long. The massive defeat of Congress has already taken much of the sting out of the public resentment against the Emergency. The crucial point is: if the victory of the Janata coalition was anchored on transitory feelings of resentment and not on fundamental and substantive political issues, then the popular support to the Janata government is most likely to last only as long as the anti-Emergency feelings are kept alive. Once these are eroded, the new government will face the acid test of proving its relevance and political purpose through concrete achievements rather than the negative philosophy of opposition to Emergency or to Indira Gandhi.

If factionalism is another name for politics in India, then the Janata Party is a classic example of factional unity anchored on a common interest. Resentment against Indira served as a cohesive factor in the forging of the united front against Congress. If this

resentment diminishes then factional unity will be weakened. Now that Indira is out of the way, the only other cohesive factor is the perceived goals of the coalition.

In this, the Janata coalition has yet to arrive at a meaningful consensus. As of now, a tacit agreement on the basis minimum goals has provided the much-needed harmony and unity at the national level. However, the differences among the coalition partners are deep. Sooner or later these are bound to result in opposing stands on fundamental political and economic issues.

For Janata to survive, it requires an integrated organization and well-defined goals that will answer the needs of the Indian masses.

Congress, on the other hand, may still undergo further schisms and factional splits. Such a development is inevitable because, the Congress Party has reached a stage in its development where it has to clarify its ideological directions in the context of the demands of modern India.

Many say that Sanjay was the undoing of Mrs. Gandhi. As Prime Minister she should have learnt to distinguish between motherhood and her political obligations. There is hardly any room for a mix-up of roles. She allowed Sanjay to assume the role of a hereditary prince, who because of his inexperience, arrogance, had company and ill-advice, literally ran amok with power. Motherhood triumphed but the result was a political disaster.

The Janata Party has tasted the exhilarating feeling of political victory after bitter agitation. It is likely that the opposition Congress Party may one day assume a similar posture of agitation and civil disobedience. Janata then would be confronted with a political dilemma—either to sustain its Gandhian posturing or to maintain peace and order. It would be ironic if the Desai government would have to declare an Emergency to keep Congress agitation and lawlessness under check.

The Congress Party has lost control of the national government, but it is still a powerful organization, capable of recovering its lost stature and political power. However, the youth and vigor of a new party are the twin key advantages that Janata has over Congress. Last election was the beginning of a new era in Indian politics. If factionalism is rampant, it is because Indian society is still groping towards a cohesive national community. It may take many more such political exercises before India finally emerges as an integrated modern society.

## DISCUSSION 7

DR. GABRIEL U. IGLESIAS: Will you tell us, Prof. Rye, the classification or characteristics of the Indian government before the declaration of Martial Law by Mrs. Indira Gandhi?

PROF. AJIT SINGH RYE: Well, first of all, even though there was an emergency, there was no Martial Law. I think it was more a variation of Emergency Rule. Most of the codes of Civil Service were there; and the military was not in action—nor in power.

Now the government of India is based on what we call a parliamentary system of government. It has a written Constitution—one of the biggest in the world—and it is as thick as a book! The tradition is largely derived from experience under 200-year British rule.

The central government has a parliament composed of two houses. One is the House of the People with about 550 members; the other, the Upper House, is made up of 250 people. The latter is indirectly elected.

The President is the nominal head since India has a cabinet form of government. The Prime Minister is the most powerful person since the political party that has the majority elects the Prime Minister.

Now India is composed of about 60 to 70 states. The country is divided into what we call states—and they are large entities! Some have populations running to 100 million; some have from 50 to 70 million people.

The states are governed by their own local assemblies. Each state has a legislative assembly composed of some 200 to 300 members who are directly elected by the people. Each state has also a chief minister and a cabinet, a collegial executive, similar to that of the center. A governor, who serves as link between the center and the state, is appointed by the President of India.

In effect, India is a Union of States. It is not, however, called a federation because the states are not totally independent. Each enjoys a large autonomy, though, in administration and politics.

So that is the general over-all structure of India.

Elections are held every five years and every person above 21 years of age is allowed to vote. In the latest election list, there were 310 million voters and 60 percent of them voted.

There is no literacy qualification. In India, we use the symbol system. Every political party is given a symbol by the Election Commission, so when a person looks at a symbol, he already knows who is the candidate. If you vote for a carabao, you vote for Dean Nemenzo, if you vote for Prof. Rye, you vote for a cow—you know, that sort of thing.

DR. IGLESIAS: In other words, it may be classified as parliamentary democracy based on illiterate suffrage?

PROF. RYE: Well, India is a country of the illiterate. Out of some 600 million people, only about 35 percent to some 45 percent can be called literates—ones who can read and write. And that means there are more than 50 percent who will not be covered by literacy qualification if you were to base democracy on literacy.

However, in politics, Mrs. Gandhi found out that India cannot simply be ruled without continuous mandate from the people. India cannot be ruled by sheer force alone. It has to be a combination of consent, a little force, compromise, and a little persuasion.

DR. EMERENCIANA ARCELLANA: By way of commenting on the paper of prof. Rye, I think it is very commendable—that is with regards to the Indian experience in democracy.

No I believe that Mrs. Gandhi, despite the mistakes she made which led to her downfall, must still be given credit for being a great lady. She declared Emergency rule and held vast powers but after five months, she restored normal processes and called for regular elections, even if it meant her own defeat. And that is a great deal, to say, for her.

Comparing her to Ali Bhutto of Pakistan, for instance, I think he had to wait for a *coup* before leaving his seat.

PROF. RYE: There are notorious retreats and glorious defeats. Maybe, Mrs. Gandhi's defeat is glorious from the point of view you mentioned; that is, in spite of the fact that she was very powerful and she could have stayed in power longer, she still ended her Emergency rule and called up for elections that defeated her.

On my part, in spite of what our people said about her, she still has a very strong political sense. For one, she grew up in a very strong political family and, I think she realized early that things were slipping from her hands. So perhaps she thought it better and wiser to risk earlier than later.