

EXCURSUS I

Ralph Buultjens on India, Indira, and Human Rights: The Other Side of the Balance Sheet

Human Rights, as both rhetoric and policy, is now in fashion with those who are concerned with public issues. While applauding these sentiments, we should be sensitive to ways in which this high-sounding phrase can also be used to support political vilification and sustain abuses of the very power it seeks to restrain. I believe such a process is now taking place in India.

Since her defeat at the Indian General Elections in March, 1977, it has been near impossible to find any positive or objective references in the media to the political activities and policies of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Human rights slogans have been the cutting-edge of derogatory invective denouncing her regime. They have also provided the cover under which the present government pursues a political vendetta against Mrs. Gandhi. Unfortunately, well-intentioned international support has served to reinforce this effort.

Forgotten in the rush to judgment are important facts. These should be stated along with the three principal accusations made against Mrs. Gandhi: first, that she destroyed democracy; second, that she permitted excesses during the eighteen-month emergency period of her government; third, that not many gains were achieved in India in this period.

Each allegation deserves careful examination. On the issue of democracy, we should recall that Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India for eleven years, during which three general elections and many state elections were held. Even her opponents concede that these were open and fair polls. In March last year, well before she needed to do so, Mrs. Gandhi called national elections. Political opponents, who had been detained (and, on the whole, reasonably well treated) were released in January and campaigned without restriction. Curbs on the press were also removed. This is the only instance in modern political history in which a government with such extensive executive powers has sought a public mandate, willingly subjecting itself to democratic judgment in a freely conducted contest.

On June 25, 1975, Mrs. Gandhi's government proclaimed a state of national emergency. This existed for approximately eighteen months. Allegations of excesses in this period take two major forms—the abuse of power by government officials, including many close to Mrs. Gandhi, and the actions of and the prominence accorded to her son Sanjay. Mrs. Gandhi has admitted significant excesses at various levels of government and claimed that, wherever possible, she tried to correct them. To what extent she can be held personally responsible for each act of excess committed in a nation of

650 million depends largely on the philosophy and motives of those who seek to evaluate these actions. Despite more than twelve months of often intimidating investigations initiated by the present government (during which time she was deprived of full legal rights, including the opportunity to question those making charges against her), Mrs. Gandhi has yet to be indicted for any malfeasance while in office.

The third area is more subjective, since it relates to perceptions of progress. There is enough objective data to suggest that substantial improvements did take place in the material conditions of India. Escalating public disorder was controlled, economic performance improved, more food was available, prices were stabilized, intercommunal riots practically ceased. The controversial birth control program, although maladroitly handled, also produced dramatic results that were unobtainable earlier and for which Mrs. Gandhi paid a heavy electoral price. However, these gains offset a reduction in personal freedom and in the permissive liberation that had characterized India since its independence in 1947. In breaking with traditional approaches to India's apparently intractable social and economic problems, Mrs. Gandhi raised fundamental questions about the type of political system necessary to meet the needs of an impoverished nation—India contains 15 per cent of the world's population and produces below 2 per cent of the annual global economic output.

I believe these observations indicate that issues of human rights in India must not be evaluated by instant rhetoric nor presented in simplistic ways. The complexities are intricate and have been compounded by two recent events. Against formidable obstacles, Mrs. Gandhi has staged a remarkable political comeback and has scored major successes in several recent regional elections. And then, the Gandhi record is enhanced by the inept performance of the present Janata government. This results partly from their subordination of accumulating national problems to the prosecution of a ferocious witch hunt against Mrs. Gandhi. To the extent that international advocates of human rights have endorsed this effort, or, at least, have not spoken against it, they are partially responsible for its larger consequences. These affect the fragile prospects for democracy and human rights in India and other Third World countries. The essence of democracy is the peaceful transfer of governmental power without vengeance toward those who yield it. The possibility of politically motivated, retroactive investigations will result, at best, in inhibiting effec-

tive leadership or, at worst, in discouraging leaders' transferring power for fear of vindictive reprisals.

In considering the cause of civil liberties in India, there is a basic principle to remember—the concept of human rights is invalid if its application is selective and is not extended to all people, including those with whom one disagrees.

Ralph Buultjens teaches at the New School for Social Research and the Maryknoll Graduate School and is Chairman of the International Development Forum. His most recent publication is The Decline of Democracy (Orbis Books, 1978).

EXCURSUS II

Thomas J. Spinner, Jr., on Belize: "Go 'Way Guats"

It was Aldous Huxley who remarked that "If the world had any ends, British Honduras would certainly be one of them. It is not on the way from anywhere to anywhere else." Known as Belize since 1973, this tiny remnant of empire has been much in the London newspapers these past few months. The Belizeans want independence; the British would be delighted to unload them. What could interfere with a happy ending? The Guats! For Guatemala insists that Belize is a province of Guatemala and threatens to seize the entire region when the British army departs.

The controversy between Guatemala and Great Britain over Belize is a classic case for the international lawyers. More important, it affects 140,000 Belizeans who inhabit a flat, hot, humid country about the size of Massachusetts. They are a kindly, multiracial, often quarrelsome people who agree passionately on one thing: They want the military regime that has repressed the Guatemalan people since the U.S.-engineered coup of 1954 to leave them alone. Unfortunately, there are close to six million Guatemalans; not very good odds.

It was in the seventeenth century that English-speaking pirates began to use the Mosquito Coast. They were followed by rugged adventurers interested in logwood and mahogany. There was already a small Mayan population. To this were added black slaves, Caribs, Spanish-speaking mestizos who drifted in from Mexico and Guatemala, and, since the 1950's, some three thousand Mennonites searching for a remote area in which to protect their ancient ways against the march of civilization.

While trying to protect the rights of the English-speaking inhabitants, the British had acknowledged Spanish sovereignty over the area but argued that Guatemala never exercised control over Belize. In 1859 Guatemala accepted the present frontiers of Belize in return for a British promise to participate in the construction of a road from the Caribbean coast

to Guatemala City. The road was never built; Guatemala asserts that this abrogated the treaty; Belize should be returned. Britain retorted that the treaty dealt with frontiers and not with the cession of land. Most international lawyers regard Guatemala's case as weak in both law and equity.

Guatemala was comparatively silent until it reopened the issue in the early 1930's. As the winds of change roared through the colonial world after World War II, the Belizeans began to think of independence. George Price and the People's United party have dominated the political life of Belize since 1950. A fussy, organ-playing ascetic who once studied for the Roman Catholic priesthood, Price brings together the black, white, Mayan, and Spanish elements in Belize's history.

At first Price believed that Belize must find its future in Central America rather than the Caribbean, and he tried for good relations with Guatemala. But he soon found that British imperialism was not the enemy; the problem was Guatemala. Political opponents have always tried to portray Price as excessively soft on Guatemala despite a firm statement in 1962 that he would "not surrender even one square centimeter of our national territory." By 1964 Belize had full internal self-government; Price won sweeping victories over a divided opposition that year and again in 1969 when his party garnered seventeen of eighteen seats.

Price had also to assess the dominant position of the United States in the Caribbean region. Frightened that Castroism might spread, the U.S. felt obligated to the Guatemalan military regime, which had provided a staging area for the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 and support when the Dominican Republic was assaulted in 1965. Hoping to resolve a potential conflict, the Johnson administration decided to "assist" the British and the Guatemalans in reaching an agreement that would be acceptable to Belize. Bethuel Webster, a U.S. mediator, labored for three years only to come up with proposals in 1968 that were promptly denounced by a united Belizean people as a scheme to turn them over to Guatemala.

Public opinion in Belize now began to swing against George Price. Guatemala was still a menace, independence had not been achieved, and the economy was a mess. Price has always been something of a Christian Democrat with a hazy commitment to economic and social reform; some of his younger allies have been more consciously dedicated to planning and socialism. Something must be done about high emigration due to unemployment and lack of opportunity. Attempts have been made—often with Peace Corps assistance—to build up both a sugar and a citrus fruit industry. There is hope that offshore oil will be found on the southern coast, just the part most coveted by the Guatemalans.

To Price's astonishment, the general election of 1974 drastically reduced his majority. The People's United party was further demolished in the recent Belize City elections. With some fifty thousand