

## India's New Government

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Mr. Morarji Desai once complained of having been dismissed by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi as a peon. When he took the oath as India's oldest prime minister on March 24, 1977, it marked the end of monopoly rule of the Indian Congress party extending over a period of thirty years. Earlier, the people of India, by their active participation in a silent revolution of the ballot box, had thrown away the authoritarian and dictatorial rule of Mrs. Gandhi, replacing her party by the Janata party, an organization that brought together men with different ideological affiliations.

After thirty years of independence a new era began in India, an era that raised expectations for people who had long felt neglected by the Gandhi administration. The elected members of the Janata party in their exuberance pledged at the Samadhi of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, that they would strive for a clean and incorruptible administration, austerity in living and efficiency in administration, and above all for sincere service to uplift the nation's economically weaker section of the people.

In March, 1977, when the Janata party took over the nation's administration, it drew to it the wondering attention of the whole world, which is now anxiously watching this vast, heavily populated country, a majority of whose people are illiterate and live in abject poverty. The party in power has completed more than a year in office, but here I assess its performance during its first year of work.

At the very outset one must note that the Janata party had never expected to assume power after the elections in '77. Its most optimistic expectation was to become the responsible and respectable opposition in the Indian Parliament. But Providence had something else in store, and the newly formed party came to power with an absolute majority, much to the surprise of the party and the entire world.

What are some of the most important achievements of

the Janata party once in power? They include the following: The lifting of the nineteen-month Emergency; the restoration of the people's freedom and of an independent judiciary; the restoration of the rule of law; the repeal of the amendments of the Representation of Peoples Act (which had redefined corrupt practices and placed electoral offenses by individuals like the prime minister, president, and the speaker outside the purview of the courts); the restoration of freedom of the press, radio, and TV; break-up of the state-controlled news agency, Samachar; the repeal of MISA, a black law that entitles the government to detain any person without assigning reason.

The internal emergency was, of course, withdrawn by Mrs. Gandhi as a face-saving device before her resignation from the seat of power, but the external emergency had been hanging like a Damocles sword all these years.

People once again came to enjoy the fundamental rights that had been suspended during the dark days of the Emergency. People are free today, breathing fresh air, air no longer spiced with emergency flavor. The very fact that Mrs. Gandhi was released unconditionally by the judicial magistrate the day after her arrest is the richest tribute to the independence of the judiciary. The special immunity enjoyed by the prime minister and others has been withdrawn and all have been declared equal in the eyes of the law. For the first time in Indian history the leaders of opposition parties were allowed use of radio and TV before the Assembly elections of June, 1977, thereby ending the ruling party's monopoly of these mass media.

The Janata party, before the elections, had made a promise to repeal MISA, the Maintenance of Internal Security Act, but it was reluctant to do so once it came to power. The government had, at one stage, decided to replace it by a Preventive Detention Act that incorporated virtually all the salient features of MISA. Prime Minister Desai had strongly recommended the measure by virtue of his long experience in national administration. But the government had to give up the idea in the face of opposition from all sections of leadership and the

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national press, heralding once again the victory of the people's wishes in a democracy.

Before the elections the Janata party promised decentralization of power and greater autonomy to the states, but so far this has not been done, much to the agony of several non-Janata state governments. Mr. Desai has been reluctant to discuss the issue with the chief ministers of states, since he now believes that if greater power were accorded to the states the center would be weakened. The prime minister is willing to have a dialogue on the problem, but only within the purview of the Constitution. This has been objected to by several state governments that demand an amendment to the Constitution. The Constitution, they say, was framed at a time when both the center and the states were ruled by the Congress party and its framers lacked foresight. Today, eleven out of India's twenty-two states are administered by political parties other than the Janata party. Thus they have a point. When the Congress party was in power an arrogant chief minister of a state was summarily dismissed if he failed to show his allegiance to the all-powerful center.

With the change of circumstances a new look at the center-state relationship is being pressed by a few state governments. The refusal of a number of state chief ministers to sign a draft plan during a National Development Council meeting was an unprecedented step by chief ministers. Many of them do not regard the Janata leaders as their leaders; they consider themselves equals. Unless the leaders of the Janata party make a wise, bold, and correct decision here, a confrontation between the center and the states ruled by non-Janata parties is in the offing. Failure to arrive at an amicable settlement will have disastrous repercussions. Mr. Jaya Prakash Narayan, the man behind the Janata party's coming to power, is a strong advocate of the decentralization of power and greater autonomy to the states. But Mr. Narayan, like Mahatma Gandhi immediately after independence, is now a forgotten person. Mr. Narayan, imprisoned during the Emergency and since then a sick man, has been advocating reform of Indian prisons, which only symbolize torture. Adoption of third-degree measures by the police is a regular feature in Indian prisons. Many Janata leaders, in spite of painful experiences in the prisons of independent India, are conspicuously silent on this particular issue.

**T**he first year of Janata administration was marked by growing unrest in both the industrial and academic fields across the country. Industrial workers once again came to enjoy their trade union rights, including the right to strike. In spite of the restoration of the minimum bonus of 8.33 per cent to all industrial workers, there is no peace in industrial units, and alarming reports of strikes and lockouts figure in the daily newspapers. There is no sign of higher industrial output or fresh investments from business houses, a fact clearly admitted by the Indian finance minister in his economic survey for the year 1977-78. He said that despite certain concessions granted to industry, investment had been sluggish and, if the trend continued, it

would not be possible to control inflation even if the crop next year were a bumper crop.

The industrial policy announced by the Janata government, though it lays greater emphasis on cottage and small-scale industries, will bring little gain to the nation because the rural areas lack infrastructure. Its policy toward big business is still clouded in mystery. Two foreign companies, IBM and Coca-Cola, had to wind up their operations in India, the first because of its reluctance to dilute its shareholdings in compliance with the Foreign Exchange Regulations Act, which demands 60 per cent of the shares be held by Indian investors, and the latter for political reasons. A few more foreign companies have decided to stop their work in India, for they too do not propose to dilute their shareholdings.

Student unrest during the first year compelled several institutions to close. Instances of physical assault on university and college administrators figured prominently in the national press. Several reputable educational institutions are still enjoying forced holidays. The academic atmosphere during the year was far from healthy, and there has not been any marked improvement.

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Law and order undoubtedly deteriorated, crime increased across the country, with New Delhi, the capital, stigmatized as the crime capital of the nation. Atrocities aimed at lower classes—the Harijans (dear to the Lord), as Mahatma Gandhi used to call them—increased, if reports in the leading dailies are any indication. The home minister was criticized by all sectors, not excluding his own party, for the deterioration of the law-and-order situation. He was also severely criticized by the press, as well as by his party colleagues, for his bungling with the arrest of the former prime minister. Considered to be a tough guy, the home minister lost much of his credibility during the first year.

Agriculture and irrigation were properly emphasized, but satisfactory progress can be expected only if there is a shake-up in the administration. There are not enough facilities for irrigation water during the lean months and in the remotest villages not enough fertilizers or seeds at reasonable prices. Rural electrification was again unduly emphasized. Power in urban areas and industrial enterprises has become a major problem. Ninety per cent of the rural dwellers cannot provide even for kerosene oil, and rural electrification for the benefit of a few affluent landlords, at the expense of state coffers, is not sensible

or reasonable. Here the government became a victim of wrong priority.

Some ministries rightly deserve credit for their work. The Railway Ministry introduced classless trains with cushioned seats for the benefit of long-distance travelers. Janata meals costing one rupee (twelve cents) are now served on the trains. Several concessions, though minor, were announced for the commuters. Railway passengers now enjoy several amenities that were long conspicuous by their absence.

India's relations with foreign countries considerably improved during the year. India now intends to be a real nonaligned nation. For a long while, the country was nonaligned on paper, but in practice showed a marked attachment to the Communist bloc. India's relations with the Western nations and particularly the USA, at the lowest ebb during recent past years, are now cordial. The relationship was strongly affected, however, by the decision of the United States concerning the supply of nuclear fuel and particularly the uranium India needs for its Tarapur Nuclear Project. India's relations with its neighbors, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, have been fraternal, and chances of normalization of relations with China cannot be ruled out.

**M**r. Morarji Desai, the prime minister, was able to hold his team together, though members of the different constituent groups forming the ruling party hurled criticisms at one another on public platforms. The infighting continues and may lead to a breaking point unless better sense prevails. The consolation, however, is the fact that "power is the great cementing factor." The emergence of Mrs. Gandhi as a force to be reckoned with helps unite the groups within the ruling party. Mr. Desai was accused of ignoring important problems and giving undue importance to wrong causes. There was no concrete move to solve essential problems like poverty, unemployment, and inflation.

During the year the number of unemployed in the live register of the Employment Exchanges went up 1.2 million, and the number of placements fell 7.1 per cent. The figure for unemployed persons registered with the Employment Exchanges exceeds the 10 million mark for the first time. Mr. Desai of course made several pious promises, like complete eradication of unemployment in ten years and of poverty in a decade, prohibition in four years, removal of untouchability in five years, and provision for potable water in all villages during the next five

years. He carefully avoided, however, any assurance that illiteracy would be eradicated. If the first year's performance in any of the above fields is any indication, the time limits fixed by the prime minister for achieving success will have to undergo several revisions.

The prime minister lost some of his credibility when he repeated throughout the year his announcements that prices of essential commodities would fall before long. Unfortunately the prices continued to increase throughout the year. The budget of the government helped the prices to rise further as higher excise duties were imposed on all commodities. Failure to bring economic relief to the people dampened people's hopes, and the Janata party's hold on the masses weakened considerably.

Corruption is still rampant and people occupying responsible positions in the ruling party have so admitted. No change in the life-style of ministers was noticeable; they lived in the same ostentatious way as their predecessors. Sycophants and privilege-seekers crowd around them, as they did around Mrs. Gandhi. The people feel as neglected today as they did before. The gap between promise and performance is widening, and those who had great expectations of the government are now candidly critical about the performance of the party. Jaya Prakash Narayan has on more than one occasion expressed his dissatisfaction with the poor performance of the Janata party, and so have many other responsible members of the ruling party.

Family planning is an important field where the work of the government was negligible. Population growth has to be checked by persuasion and not by compulsion. Unfortunately the work of persuasion was not taken up with right earnest. The minister for health always speaks of Ramayana and Mahabharata and advises the people to follow their teachings in all respects. He is simply unaware that the days of Ramayana and Mahabharata are gone and that his exhortations fall on unhearing ears.

The Janata party's overall performance during the year was mixed. In the political field it met with surprising success in restoring all lost freedoms, but its performance in the economic front is one of frustrating failures. The burning problems of poverty, unemployment, price rises, and illiteracy should have received greater attention from the government. Of course a year is too brief a period for the proper assessment of a new government's performance, but long enough for at least a modest beginning of its economic program. And that beginning is yet to begin.