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ISN'T IT TIME FOR JP TO SPEAK UP?

Warning Against Authoritarian Backlash

by M.R. Masani

There is an old Russian proverb which says: "The yes-man is your enemy, but your friend will argue with you." It is perhaps time for those of us who are friends of the Janata Government to act on that adage.

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There are probably two things on which there is a wide area of agreement among intelligent people. The first is a great sense of satisfaction and relief at the change from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. The other is a growing sense of disappointment and concern at the performance of the new administration. Now that the honeymoon is over after the first hundred days, people are watching with a clear eye what goes on in New Delhi and they don't like what they see.

The two areas on which concern is building up are those of economics and public morality. Prices keep rising, and no amount of threatening businessmen and traders, including - perish the thought - the use of MISA and violence in the streets will bring prices down. On the contrary, the payment in cash of Compulsory Deposits which the Finance Minister described in Parliament as a concession to Labour which he himself admitted, will only stoke the inflationary fires. The Budget, which Professors C.N. Vakil and Brahmananda have rightly categorised as potentially inflationary, is a typical Jawaharlal Nehru budget and the requisite "U-turn" that Mr. N.A. Palkhivala has for years been urging is conspicuous by its absence. The pampering of those who take part in illegal strikes, as in the case of The Indian Express, has resulted in the loss of 4.2 million man-days during the last four months. We seem to be sterile Socialist back again to the clichés of the Jawaharlal Nehru period, and demagogic Leftist "lung-power" seems to be prevailing over Gandhian principles. The Janata Party appears to be developing a split Jekyll-and-Hyde personality.

Even more disturbing is the moral let-down. The people have been treated to a spate of broken promises and pledges such as those against defections and the toppling of State Governments and those for the selection of honest men as candidates for election and the freedom of members of State Assemblies to choose their leaders and Chief Ministers without interference from Delhi.

There is also the spectacle of chronic infighting among the

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the groups who have come together to form the Janata Party. Mr. Jagjivan Ram has confessed to "deep anguish" at this phenomenon and quipped that "only the CFD seems to have merged in the Janata Party". Mr. Prafulla Chander Sen has courageously stood out against the pressure from Delhi to make an unholy alliance with the CP Marxists. Even the Prime Minister on 20th July referred to complaints he had received from the people that the Janata Party was not working in a manner which they had hoped it would.

So far, therefore, there can be little disagreement. Where, however, there is room for honest difference of opinion is in regard to what can be done about all this by the ordinary citizen. There is one school of thought which looks upon these unfortunate developments as "teething troubles". They argue it is too soon to judge and that the new Government must be given more time to see what it can do. The proponents of this view also believe that criticising the new administration at this stage may help its enemies to come back.

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I find it ~~is~~ difficult to go along with these good people. Neither the reversion to the political standards of SVD days from 1967 to 1970 nor the reversion to the Statism and Leftism of the Nehru period appear to me to be passing phases. Mr. Jagjivan Ram, who ought to know, expressed the fear on July 19 that "these groups will think of their narrow interests even after five years."

The origins of the Declaration of Emergency in June 1975 are not to be found in the wickedness of a particular person. They lie in twenty-five years of politicking by those in office and in opposition and a neglect of the basic problems of the people, which offered an opportunity for the establishment of an authoritarian regime. If, in June 1975, the people of India watched silently and sullenly while their freedoms were being destroyed it is because they were in the mood to throw the baby of democracy out with the bath-water of party politicians who had played the fool. We have all learned better during those eighteen months, but public memory is short and if the present drift continues, a backlash is only too likely to develop and men will be heard once again to say: "We want a strong man at the top".

Already, the results of the State Assembly elections show that there has been a marked erosion in Janata support. Since almost the entire Indian press had failed to supply its readers with the figures of how the people voted during the State Assembly elections, I had to obtain them from the Election Commission. They are alarming. From March to June 1977 the Janata vote had fallen sharply in Haryana from 70.35% in the Lok Sabha poll to 46.70% of the votes cast, in Uttar Pradesh from 68.02% to 48.36%, in Delhi from 68.15% to 52.58%, in Bihar from 66.60% to 42.78%, in Rajasthan from 65.21% to 50.42%, in Madhya Pradesh from 59.21% to 47.28%,

in Himachal Pradesh from 57.19% to 49.01% and in Orissa from 52% to 49.24%. Indeed, except in Rajasthan and Delhi, nowhere did the Janata Party get a majority of the votes cast, but, thanks to the distortion caused by the archaic British electoral system, it won 76.62% of the seats. It is obvious that many of those who had voted for the Party in March sat on their hands and stayed at home in June.

Silence in such a context would mean that the Congress Party, still led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, and the CPI, would be the only critics and that all the gains of that discontent would flow into those channels. Would this be in the country's interest?

Such silence would also be unfair to the Prime Minister and his colleagues. When he took office, Mr. Morarji Desai had invited the people to tweak his ears if they felt it was called for. Isn't it time gently to do so?

The conclusion to which one is brought by these considerations is that continued silence would bring about a backlash all the faster while constructive criticism by the friends of the new regime may help to avert it.

If this analysis is correct, may I be forgiven if I exercise the privilege of an old friend to make a public appeal to Jayaprakash, whom I had described in an article in the Reader's Digest as "India's conscience", to speak up? I am only too painfully aware of his difficulties and, in particular, the extreme physical weakness and other limitations imposed on him by his physical condition. Nobody expects him to join in any denunciation of whatever may be happening. What is, however, called for is an expression of dissociation from what he may consider not to be right. The other day he asked the people of India to learn to discriminate between right and wrong. Have the people not a claim on him to ask for guidance?

During the Parliamentary election campaign, JP repeatedly assured the people that the Janata Party would keep its election promises. At a meeting in Patna on January 30 he said: "If you trust me, I can assure you that the Janata Party will fulfil its promises." Has he not then a responsibility to guide the people as to whether or not he believes those promises are being honoured? One would like to think that with his moral prestige a word from him would go much further in putting things right than what many others put together may. Even otherwise, I feel he owes this to himself and his place in history.

Jayaprakash can of course be trusted to do the right thing at what he considers to be the right time. But what about the rest of us?

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In a democracy, public opinion in the long run decides the actions of Government and we now have a democratic and responsive administration. There are many ways open to each of us to do his bit as a citizen. It is high time the middle classes, including professional men, whose interests are being sacrificed for those of the vocal and privileged Trade Union element, organize for their own survival. In Ghana the professional classes recently managed to secure from a military regime the assurance of a return to civilian government. This shows what can be done.

There are certain categorical imperatives dictated by the public interest on which most of us can combine and ask that action, which would be in pursuance of the Janata Party's own Manifesto, be taken without any further delay:-

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1. The repeal in toto of the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution.
 2. The repeal of MISA.
 3. The establishment of autonomous Corporations for radio and Television as recommended by the Chanda Committee, and the breaking up of the Samachar monopoly.
 4. Electoral Reform on the lines recommended in their report published in February 1975 by the Committee on Electoral Reform appointed by Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan.
 5. A high priority for Population Control without coercion.
 6. Last, and by no means least, the implementation of Gandhiji's basic tenet: "That Government is best which governs the least" and a consequent devolution and decentralisation of power from Delhi to the States and from the States down to the citizens' level.

Throughout the Emergency, there were too many examples in India of behaviour which painfully recalled Abraham Lincoln's words: "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men." Today, when there is not even the excuse for silence that then existed, can there be any possible reason why Abraham Lincoln's reproach should be laid at our door?

(Courtesy: Freedom First)