

A DEMOCRACY AT WAR

by

M. R. Masani

222

There are two concepts of national unity in wartime. One is the democratic concept, the other the totalitarian one. The example of Britain during the last World War is an example of unity in freedom. The example of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia is an example of enforced totalitarian unity. We in India live under a democratic Constitution, and it is worth while for us to consider the two concepts of unity. To start with the good one, let us consider how Britain, America and other Democracies behave during a war. The Constitution is kept intact. Parliament functions. The press is not muzzled. It is believed that freedom of discussion is part of the war effort because, unless there is a free discussion, how can sound policies be arrived at ?

The limits of this freedom are sometimes startling. It will be recalled that Sir Oswald Mosley was a supporter of Hitler. He was detained for a while under the Defence of the Realm Act, but Mr. Herbert Morrison, Home Minister in the National Government, decided to release him right in the middle of the war. This is what Winston Churchill, no meanly mouthed liberal, as Prime Minister said in support of Mr. Herbert Morrison's decision which was carried out : "The power of the Executive to cast a man into prison without formulating any charge known to the law and particularly to deny him judgement by his peers for an indefinite period is in the highest degree odious and is the foundation of all totalitarian governments whether Nazi or Communist. It is only when extreme danger to the State can be pleaded that this power may be temporarily assumed by the Executive. And even so its working must be interpreted with the utmost vigilance by a free Parliament."

In contrast to that, we have the Hitlerite or Stalinist concept of unity.

I was very sorry to see in the press a report of a circular alleged to have been issued by the AICC office which said that Opposition parties must be prevented from criticising the Government and in particular the Prime Minister and that those who criticised him were traitors. Many of us consider it our duty in a free country at war to criticise actions and policies of Government if in our opinion they are injurious to the national interest. This circular was an example of the totalitarian mind.

What is the role of an Opposition Party in wartime? It is of a dual nature. It is that of a loyal opposition, a faithful opposition, faithful to the Constitution and the way of life of the country, its integrity and solidarity. So, first of all, it is a hundred per cent behind the war effort. In the fight for victory over the enemy, there is unqualified support. But the support is not to the government of the day which is a party government and deserves support only to the extent that it advances the cause of victory. It deserves and should have criticism to the extent that its policies deviate from what individual citizens or the press or parties consider to be mistaken policies in the pursuit of that objective. So there is a dual role: all out support to the defence effort, but critical, qualified support to the Government of the day — judging each policy, if I may quote our Prime Minister's words in the international sphere, on its own merits, supporting those that are advantageous to the cause of victory, opposing those that are harmful to the country's security and its interests.

Labour and Chamberlain

In Britain in 1939, Mr. Neville Chamberlain, the architect of Munich and the apostle of appeasement, was the Prime Minister of the Conservative Government. The Conservative Party repeatedly invited the Labour Party, the Opposition, to join the Government in a coalition and the Labour Party refused. On what grounds did they refuse? I shall quote a passage from Fifty Years' March — The Rise of the

Labour Party by Mr. Francis Williams who says : "Nor is there need to restate the reasons why so long as Neville Chamberlain remained head of the Government, Labour, while putting the whole force of its massive strength behind the war effort, rejected the invitation to participate in the Government. It would have been impossible for any Labour man to have worked with confidence under a Prime Minister Labour so much distrusted and whose blindness and folly had contributed so greatly to world disaster. So long as he was in charge, Labour felt that it could work best for victory outside the Government."

Chamberlain, however, refused to retire. He clung to office. One military disaster followed another. Then, on May 7 and 8, 1940, a great debate took place in Parliament, where the Labour and Liberal parties, the Opposition parties, moved a vote of no confidence in the Chamberlain Government. It was a historic debate. It found the Conservative Party divided between supporters of Chamberlain and those who wanted him to quit.

Mr. Attlee, the Leader of the Opposition, said : "In this life and death struggle we cannot afford to have our destinies in the hands of failures and men who need a rest." Mr. Herbert Morrison said : "The issues are too great for us to risk losing the war by keeping in office men who had not shown themselves too well-fitted for the task." Mr. Duff Cooper, a Conservative rebel, said : "It was not right to taunt the Opposition with its unwillingness to take responsibility, because the Opposition was unwilling to accept a certain leadership." The climax came when Mr. Amery, quoting the words of Oliver Cromwell, said to Chamberlain : "You have sat too long here for any good you are doing. Depart, I say, let us have done with you. In the name of God, go." And Mr. Chamberlain went.

Two days after the debate, on May 10, Mr. Chamberlain resigned. On the same day, the National Executive of the Labour Party unanimously decided "to take their share of responsibility as a full partner in a new Government under a new Prime Minister, which would command the confidence of the nation."

This shows how a mature democracy is not put off by that timorous slogan : "Don't change horses in midstream." There are occasions when, if you do not change horses in midstream, you sink. This was one of them, and the mature British democracy showed how democratically, with a sense of high purpose, members of different patriotic parties came together to make the necessary political dispositions which would clear the way to victory over the enemy.

Root Cause

Now what is our situation in India today ? We are today faced with this great disaster that is overtaking our armies at the front as a result of ten years of misguided policies of neutralism and of appeasement of Chinese Communist expansionism. The root cause has been the failure to understand the nature of international communism.

In 1949, because of this, our Government rushed forward to embrace the bandit regime of Mao Tse-tung which is today attacking our country and to recognise it as the Government of China, turning its back on a loyal friend and ally, Marshal Chiang Kai-shek of the Chinese National Government, who was the only War leader to have advocated the independence of India repeatedly and publicly during the war when we were engaged in the Quit India struggle.

The second act of the drama came with the betrayal of Tibet in 1950, when the Chinese, in breach of faith with our Government, advanced their armies into Tibet. To our shame, our representative in the U.N. was instructed to tell the Security Council which was considering the appeal of the Dalai Lama for help, the kind of appeal we have been making in the last few days, that the Indian Government saw no cause for United Nations' intervention in Tibet ! The British Government readily agreed and, led by these two appeasers, the Security Council suspended discussion of the item which still remains on the order paper. The guilt of having handed over the Tibetan people to be dominated and brutally oppressed by the Chinese belongs

to us and our Government.

We Were Warned

It was not as if there were no warnings. In Parliament on 5th and 6th December, 1950, there was a big debate in Parliament and some ten speakers warned our Prime Minister and Government that, if they persisted in allowing Tibet to be overrun by the Chinese, our turn would come next; that the Chinese were in fact attacking Tibet as a first step to the attack on India. We were brushed aside as alarmists. In all seriousness, we were told that the Chinese occupation of Tibet had no relevance to the security of India !

But it was not our warnings alone that were ignored. It was also Mao Tse-tung, who had given warnings much more significant than ours. In my own speech in Parliament on that occasion, I had quoted the New China News Agency, who, a few weeks earlier, had said that the day would come when "the Chinese People's Liberation Army will hoist the Red Flag over the Himalayas." They are very frank, these gentlemen — Hitler, Stalin, Khrushchev and Mao Tse-tung. They tell us what they are going to do, but we are so naive that we will not believe them ! Mao Tse-tung had made certain very interesting remarks : "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." "There are only two camps — the camp of socialism and the camp of imperialism. He who talks of neutrality is a fraud." Mr. Ranadive as Secretary of the Indian Communist Party had written a letter to Mao Tse-tung on 12th October, 1949, and Mao Tse-tung had cabled to him in reply assuring the Indian Communist Party of the full support of the Chinese people to the Indian Communists in their struggle and expressing the hope that the day was not far off when India too would be liberated by the Communist Party from the oppression of Anglo-American imperialism and its Indian lackeys. This is the promise that Mao Tse-tung made. He is a man of his word. He has tried to carry it out in the last few weeks.

We were told that if we kept talking about this kind of thing we would only

bring the cold war to India and invite attack. There were, however, other countries led by people with a different mentality who believed in getting involved in the cold war, fighting the cold war and winning the cold war — Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Thailand, the Philippines and Japan. They were all aligned. They all invited the cold war and fought it and won it. Not a hair of their heads has been touched by either Khrushchev or Mao Tse-tung. It has now been proved that refusal to fight the cold war invites a hot war on one's own soil.

Panchashila

Undeterred by all this, in 1954, our Government signed that fatuous Panchashila pact. As someone aptly put it the other day, Panchashila now remains only the name of a road in New Delhi ! Under cover of Panchashila, by which non-intervention and co-existence were to be practised between the Chinese Communists and ourselves, we put our seal of approval on the conquest of Tibet. We know now that the ink was hardly dry on that treaty when the Chinese started infiltrating into Ladakh. We know this from the Prime Minister himself. He knew about it but he did not tell us about it. The Indian Government was guilty of suppressing from Parliament and people for some four years the fact of occupation of Indian territory by foreign troops. Mr. Nehru later explained his motives in a letter to Mr. Chou En Lai : "We did not release to the public the information we had about various Chinese intrusion into our territory by Chinese personnel in 1954, the construction of a road across Indian territory in Ladakh and the arrest of our men in Aksai Chin area in 1958 and their detention. We did not give publicity to this in the hope that peaceful solutions of the disputes could be found by agreement between the two countries without public excitement on both sides." In other words, the Indian people were to be kept in blissful ignorance of what was happening to their country so that this beautiful dream of Panchashila could be perpetuated and the failure of the policy did not have to be admitted at that stage.

In 1960, the Chinese completed their work in Tibet and the Dalai Lama fled to our frontiers; we again did nothing. This continuing appeasement bred continuing aggression until this major invasion took place precisely because we showed no readiness to fight earlier. Because the policies of the future can only be sound if the mistakes of the past are understood, these lessons have to be learnt even today. Perhaps it would not be necessary to go into the past if there was clear evidence that the lesson had in fact been learnt.

Hope Dashed

There was great hope in the country when, on 25th October, the Prime Minister said in Parliament : "We were getting out of touch with reality in the modern world" and "we were living in an artificial atmosphere of our own creation." I was one among the many who hoped, after many years of despair, that at last we would be saved.

On 7th November, however, the Prime Minister said to the Congress Parliamentary Party that he deprecated wild suggestions made by Opposition Parties some of whom advocated the conquest of Tibet. Mark the word "conquest". "Liberation", yes; but conquest ?

On 9th November, the Prime Minister ridiculed, according to the press, widespread opposition demands that there be no talks until the invaders pulled out completely.

On the 10th, the Prime Minister described the thoroughly cynical and hypocritical resolution of the Council of the Communist Party of India as a "resolution which is clear and nationalistic.....as good as could be drafted by a hundred percent nationalist."

On the 10th of November, he told the Rajya Sabha : "It is very difficult for the Chinese to defeat us and it is still more difficult for us to defeat the Chinese."

On the 14th, he said in the Lok Sabha : "That we should undertake the job of liberating Tibet (a suggestion which our retired President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, had among others made) at this moment or at any moment seems to be fantastic and

has no relation to reality."

Then came the final blow. The Prime Minister explained away his admission that he had been out of touch with reality. On 11th December, he said to a mass meeting: "I did not mean that we were pursuing a wrong policy. I had only wanted to point out that we had not been vigilant enough."

Wide Gulf

The result is that there is today, a wide gulf between the Prime Minister on one side and Parliament, Chief Ministers, Opposition Parties and the Army on the other. The Hindustan Times on 16th November said of Mr. Nehru's reply to the Parliamentary debate in an editorial entitled "Off Key": "The whole House was behind Mr. Nehru to a man in pressing forward with the objectives of the official motion, admirable alike in its wording and sentiment. Here was an opportunity for a clarion call to action, a call for which the entire nation was waiting. Mr. Nehru did not respond to the mood. He was content to make a partisan speech, defending what he was not seriously asked to defend and failing to give the one assurance for which there was a universal demand, that a new chapter would begin of firmness in decision and resoluteness in policy."

Mr. Rajeshwar Patel, a Congress member from Bihar, had pointed out the difficulty during the debate. He said: "The mere removal of Mr. Krishna Menon is not going to help the country. The entire machinery which thinks in those terms has to be recast or realigned and overhauled."

When the Chief Ministers met in Delhi for consultations with the Home Minister, they had a shock. They found that the mind of New Delhi was different from the mind of India. 'Insaf', a well-known commentator writing in the Indian Express of the 9th, says: "The Chief Ministers were generally of the view that the crisis marks a final breach with the communist world and that all plans must be based on this assumption. The national leadership on the other hand is not prepared to go that far yet.....The Chief Ministers do not share New Delhi's

hope but are willing to let the national leadership learn further by experience."

A Correspondent from the NEFA Front writes in the U.S. News & World Report of November 26 : "The impression you get in visiting the war zone is that the Indian Army is far ahead of Nehru's civilian government in its thinking. Nehru apparently clings to the hope that Russia will somehow restrain Red China. Indian military men see no alternative but to win the war.....Said one officer to me : 'Our Prime Minister was fond of standing on his head. Maybe he saw world issues that way. I hope he is on his feet now'."

Role of Opposition

In such a situation, what should be the role of the Opposition ? The present Government is a minority government. It enjoys the support of only 45 per cent of the electorate as evidenced only last February. Allowing for 11 per cent of the vote which went to the Communist fifth column, which must be written off for the moment even though many patriotic people must have voted for them, that leaves another 44 per cent of opposition and independent votes. Thus, 45 per cent for the Congress, 44 per cent for the democratic Opposition parties and groups. The title of the democratic opposition parties to speak for the country is not therefore much weaker than that of the Congress Party. If there had been one Opposition, things would have been different. Never had the need for an alternative government been felt as badly as it is today. The Opposition Parties have to speak for the 44 per cent who, because of their internecine quarrels, have more or less got disfranchised or under-represented in Parliament. Hence the correct thing for the Opposition is to maintain an oppositional role wherever they feel that the Congress Government's policies are not in the country's interests. That is precisely what all of them have been doing.

The Praja Socialist Party is perhaps nearest to the present Government ideologically, but it has certainly not given full support to the Government.

It has opposed very vital policies of the Government. They have just finished observing a week in Bombay and throughout the country called "No Negotiations Week", attacking Mr. Nehru and his Government for suggesting that they would negotiate on the 8th September line. The Praja-Socialist Party also demands, what the Congress Government will not agree to, the banning or outlawing of the Communist Party of India. The position of the Jan Sangh is roughly the same on both these issues. The Socialist Party of Dr. Lohia goes further. It has tried to move a no-confidence motion in Mr. Nehru's Government, and it says this Government must change so that the war may be won. The position of the Samanttra Party is outlined in a Statement issued by the Parliamentary Board of the Party in New Delhi on November 6, the essence of which is the following : Snatch the initiative from the enemy; arm our men with the best available weapons from throughout the world; get planes and even air forces from friendly countries to stop enemy bombing of our troops and cities; bring the issue of Chinese aggression before the U.N., so that the U.N. can send forces to defend our country alongside of ourselves; restore friendship with Pakistan, so that the three or four divisions which are today frozen opposite the Pakistan frontiers can be released to fight the Chinese; and, finally, scrap the outmoded and discredited policy of neutralism masquerading as non-alignment.

In Paragraph 11 of the Statement, the role of Parliament and political parties is described as follows : "The declaration of a state of emergency should not be made into a charter for winding up parliamentary government. The Opposition should carry out its responsibility of free and frank criticism whenever it is necessary. There has been a commendable shift in the attitude and policies of Government. The Prime Minister's admissions in particular have given rise to considerable hope of change. On the other hand, there are disturbing signs that some old illusions still persist and that the dead hand of these illusions and

out-moded policies still lie heavily on the present Government."

Prof. Ranga summed up the matter aptly when he said in Parliament : " We stand here as an Opposition Party. We have been sent here to play the role of a responsible Opposition in a parliamentary democracy. The moment we give up this role, the moment we accept the advice so suddenly tendered by the Communists for their own reasons, we cease to be a parliamentary democracy. We here play our role as an opposition, a responsible opposition, a cooperative link in our total democratic effort. It is possible for the Government to gain from the criticism made from time to time by the Opposition. But that does not mean that we do not line up with all the rest of the country in strengthening and maximising the defence effort, in promoting the national will to resistance against aggression. "

(Based on an Address delivered to the Commerce Graduates' Association, Bombay, on November 22, 1962.)