

India: a question of survival

THE MASS arrests and censorship clampdown in India have been seen by Western commentators as the end of democracy in the sub-continent.

They are asking why the 57-year-old Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, an honorary fellow of Somerville College, Oxford, and honoured by the University only four years ago with the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, should take a step on the road to dictatorship.

Zareer Masani, a post graduate student at St Antony's College, and author of a biography of Mrs Gandhi just published by Hamish Hamilton in London, argues that democracy in India has always been a facade.

Mr Masani's father is a veteran leader of the political opposition to Mrs Gandhi. As an elder statesman now clear of party politics, he has so far escaped arrest. His mother is an ardent supporter of the Prime Minister.

This balanced family background helps him get the right perspective.

"One of the things I have found rather worrying about the Western reaction to what is happening is this rather exaggerated view of the value of the Indian parliamentary system and the civil liberties that went with it," he said.

"This leads people to talk in dramatic terms about the death of Indian democracy."

"But for the last 28 years the Indian parliamentary system has been very much the preserve of a very tiny elite which has the education — and the economic opportunity to use it. The

The prosecution of Mrs Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, and her subsequent moves to suppress her opposition have shocked the West. In an interview with ROY POVEY, Zareer Masani, author of a recently published biography of Mrs Gandhi, put the news in the context of Indian politics.

electoral process has always been controlled by elite groups who have a semi-feudal hold on thousands of voters and can get them to vote quite blindly."

Mr Masani questions the freedom of the courts and the Press in India. The courts, he says, have shown blatant bias in cases of oppression of under privileged groups like the untouchables. The Press is under indirect control of the government through its owners' business interests and the supply of newsprint.

"The Press has been quite brave when it has been a question of giving publicity to opposition leaders who function within the parliamentary system and are therefore considered respectable. But it has had very little to say about the fact that thousands of Maoist and other revolutionary political prisoners have been languishing in Indian prisons for several years without being brought to trial.

Paper rights

"There can be no democracy for people who do not have basic social and economic justice, half of whom don't even have a subsistence level standard of living. For them any democratic rights remain paper rights until there is some redistribution of a wealth in a more egalitarian society."

To the extent that even this limited democracy has been diminished by Mrs

Gandhi's actions, Mr Masani agrees that it should be deplored. But why has she made these arrests?

On June 12 Mrs Gandhi was convicted of election malpractice and barred from office for six years. Her appeal to the Supreme Court is yet to be heard and the opposition has mounted a campaign for her resignation.

"The charges on which she was convicted are undoubtedly trivial — especially in the context of the most pervasive corruption in the whole electoral process. If the same criterion was applied to the rest of the Indian parliament 90 per cent of its members would be unseated — including the opposition. And she has probably still got the cleanest record in public life in India today."

"She sees it as a question of survival. To us it appears a question of personal survival, but I think she is quite genuinely convinced that her personal survival means the country's survival."

"She is a woman with tremendous belief in her own destiny and her own mission. She thinks she is the only person capable of leading the country."

It is true, Mr Masani says, that Mrs Gandhi offers the only viable national leadership at the moment. If she resigned — which events show she has no intention of doing — she would be succeeded by one of her colleagues, none of whom could hold the party or the country together.

The result would either be a coalition

and national government or political fragmentation and disintegration resulting in a state of total chaos.

Central government would collapse altogether and effective power would lie with the state governments unless the army was sucked into the vacuum to provide the national leadership the politicians could not.

Mrs Gandhi's continued rule as parliamentary Prime Minister is therefore desirable, Mr Masani said. But her continuance as dictator is not — for that would retard indefinitely the growth of any alternative democratic leadership.

In 1972 Mrs Gandhi's popularity was probably greater than any Indian leader including her father. But in the last three years this popularity has dwindled as poverty, which she promised to eradicate, corruption and factionalism have increased and the gap between rich and poor has widened.

If there had been a genuine conspiracy against her, however, Mrs Gandhi could have arrested and brought to trial the individuals against whom there was evidence, without muzzling the Press and without rounding up 900 politicians. No evidence has yet been given of a conspiracy.

Snap election?

As for the future of this poor, caste-ridden, feudal society, Mr Masani sees several possibilities. If Mrs Gandhi's appeal to the Supreme Court is upheld, there is a good chance she will revoke the emergency measures.

If her conviction stands, she could hold a snap election with the opposition still in jail. She could contest the election by getting the President and the Chief Election Commissioner, acting together, to remove the disqualification imposed on her by the courts.

This would be legally and constitu-



Mrs Indira Gandhi after her conviction on a charge of electoral malpractice.

tionally correct, but morally and politically impossible and would not give a genuine mandate. The alternative would be to copy Ceylon and postpone elections indefinitely.

"Mrs Gandhi has so far acted within the letter of the constitution. She is not irrevocably committed to a dictatorship. I hope very sincerely that this is only going to be a temporary expedient and that as soon as the verdict of the Supreme Court is given the opposition leaders and the Press will be freed."