

(Speech delivered at Chatham House on 11th July).
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I should like to take as my theme ~~to~~ the nature of political opposition in India and to try and relate the recent challenge to Mrs. Gandhi's leadership to the future opposition she is likely to face. With arrests running into several thousands and the Indian press banned from quoting even Gandhi, Tagore, Nehru and, ironically, Mrs. Gandhi herself on the virtues of democracy, open dissent seems to have been stifled across the entire political spectrum. Learning from the mistakes of the British, Mrs. Gandhi has done what the Raj omitted to do in August 1942. She has arrested at one stroke, not only her leading opponents, but large numbers of potential substitutes from the national down to the district level. All the same, I would argue that she has won a pyrrhic victory which cannot hope to achieve long-term stability.

Mrs. Gandhi must know from her long experience of India's pluralistic society, with its innumerable divisions of class, caste, religion, race, language and region, that political opposition is a hydra-headed being whose existence ~~is~~ does not depend on the survival of particular Opposition parties. Opposition, in this wider sense of pluralistic resistance to centralised government is an ancient and all-pervasive factor which has long been present in Mrs. Gandhi's own party and in political institutions generally.

How then does one explain the long one-party dominance of the Congress? For almost three decades, the Congress, like the broad-bottom Whig Oligarchy of Walpole's England, managed to block the emergence of a national rival. Its monopoly rested partly on its nationalist laurels and partly on its capacity for buying off potential opponents by a timely distribution of loaves and fishes. It was a recipe which made for an essentially static and conservative political order, with the ruling party consisting of an omnibus coalition of competing factions, while the official Opposition remained a motley and factious assortment of ephemeral splinter groups.

The fatal flaw in this balance of power was that it pre-empted the rise of official opposition at the cost of internalising it within the Congress. While this gave the illusion of strong and stable government in normal times, which called for radical and dynamic action a serious crisis/was bound to shake the balance. The economic aftermath of the Bangladesh war provided ~~just the kind of crisis~~ exactly this kind of crisis. Galloping inflation and massive black-market speculation in food and other essential consumer goods created a tremendous groundswell of economic discontent. Despite Mrs. Gandhi's lavish promises to remove poverty, the Cong-

ress party, which was dominated by rich farmers, traders and blackmarket speculators, proved quite incapable of breaking the inflationary cycle. Instead of closing Congress ranks, the economic crisis stimulated corruption and factionalism in the party, resulting in virtual administrative paralysis.

The fact that the equally divided and discredited Opposition parties managed to capitalise on this situation was largely due to the moral authority of Jayaprakash Narayan or J.P., who returned from political retirement to lead a Gandhian crusade against Congress misrule. J.P.'s status as the last of the Titans who led the nationalist movement gave the Opposition what it had lacked since Independence - legitimacy and credibility, and also won the sympathy of large sections of the Congress itself. This convergence of opposition within the Congress and opposition outside under J.P.'s charismatic leadership marked an unprecedented threat to Mrs. Gandhi's leadership and to the Congress monopoly of power at the Centre.

Unable to contain this threat by the usual Congress methods of political management, Mrs. Gandhi has had to resort to repression on a scale which even the British Raj in its most vulnerable moments did not find necessary. Implicit in the so-called emergency is a confession of weakness which no amount of authoritarian window-dressing can disguise. Mrs. Gandhi has succeeded in driving opposition underground, But can she hope to suppress it for any length of time? *X*

J.P., her leading opponent, has been on a hunger strike which may well prove fatal. But in a highly sentimental country, J.P.'s death in captivity would be far less damaging to the Opposition than to Mrs. Gandhi, whose moral authority it would seriously undermine. Despite the sweeping arrests, many Opposition activists are believed to have escaped underground, and it is only a matter of time before they regroup and reorganise. The States of Gujerat and Tamilnad, which have anti-Congress governments, and Bihar, J.P.'s home state, will ^{give} them ~~with~~ a fertile base for their operations. The Left Communists, whose leadership has escaped arrest so far, remain implacably hostile to Mrs. Gandhi, while the Moscow Communists, who have been her staunch allies, are beginning to have second thoughts. Even if the Opposition parties are too fragile to survive the present crack-down, the interests they represent are equally present, though diluted, in Mrs. Gandhi's own faction-ridden Congress and in the military-bureaucratic complex on which she must increasingly rely.

Mrs. Gandhi is not the leader of a revolution or even of a coup d'etat. After nine years as Prime Minister and four years of unchallenged supremacy, she can hardly claim to be a new broom sweeping clean. To show that she aims at more than personal survival, she has announced an attractive economic package which promises something to everyone. Where this bagful of gifts is to come from, she doesn't say. The more radical of these proposals are a familiar re-hash of the promises she made during the Congress split. And in the absence of committed mass cadres and new political instruments to implement them, they will be regarded as a ^{stale} repetition of the same old conjuring trick.

It is almost a 'Catch 22' situation. In order to retain the obedience of the Congress Party, the bureaucracy and the security forces, Mrs. Gandhi must retrieve her mass charisma and show quick results. But any genuine attempt at popular reform will be resisted/ from within by the same middle class groups who have stalled reform in the past and who continue to dominate the Congress, the military and the bureaucracy. Short of a miracle, Mrs. Gandhi ^{must} ~~will~~ remain a prisoner of this dilemma.

As a seasoned politician, she must know that Indians have a particular genius for passive resistance. It is a national characteristic, when faced with an unpleasant demand, to say yes and quietly non-co-operate. The amoeba of opposition is too deeply rooted in Indian society to be purged from above. Driven underground, it may change shape, alternating between slow erosion and sudden eruption. But it will continue to proliferate and to sap Mrs. Gandhi's leadership of such vitality as it retains.
