

Towards A New Political Alignment?

Dramatic political developments within India's two major parties have paved the way for a potential regroupment of the entire Indian political scene into two clearly defined opposing blocs. One stands for a continuation of India's Nehruite post-Independence legacy of modern industrial development, science and the battle against rural backwardness. The other proclaims the primacy of a march back to the ancient village and the destruction of India's formidable industrial structure under the World Bank's plan for labor-intensive rural development.

INDIA

What occurred is the exit from the Indian National Congress by former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her followers on New Year's Day, and the resignation from all positions of leadership in the Communist Party of India by S.A. Dange, long-time president of the party and the strongest Gandhi backer in the party leadership.

The Gandhi split and Dange's departure now bring to the fore the essential question for prodevelopment forces in India: can these two powerful parties now organize allies in the ruling Janata Party to join in a united front around a program of nuclear energy-based industrialization to reverse the present drift toward political chaos and economic breakdown.

Up to now, preoccupied with internal business, neither party has stepped forth with a bold call along the required lines.

Gandhi Makes Her Move

The Gandhi group precipitated the long-simmering split by calling a Dec. 31-Jan. 1 rump meeting of the All-India Congress Committee (AICC), the 667-member Congress legislative national body. Long-standing attempts by Mrs. Gandhi's supporters to install her as Congress president failed. Two weeks before the split meeting, Gandhi had resigned from the Congress standing executive body, the Congress Working Committee (CWC), and was followed a week later by seven of her followers on the 20-man board. The Jan. 1 meeting voted a resolution proclaiming itself "the real Congress," despite the reported attendance of only the seven CWC members and less than a third of the AICC, making the entire meeting a mockery of Congress procedures.

In response, the legal Congress leadership under president Bramanandra Reddy voted the expulsion of Indira Gandhi and all who choose to follow her, and appealed to

the government's election board to certify that Gandhi's group has no rights to the Congress Party's electoral symbol and ballot status.

Gandhi's contention, over the previous months of bitter internal party wrangling, has been that she is the only Congress Party leader of national status, and therefore ought to lead it again. Her party opponents, on the other hand, argue that the State of Emergency that she imposed on the nation from summer 1975 through March 1977 destroyed intra-party democracy, and turned the country over to a small clique of World Bank-linked operatives grouped around her son Sanjay, denying basic legal rights to the population. They further insist that the Congress must now acknowledge the major mistakes of that period, for which Gandhi must take the greatest blame.

Gandhi has refused to concede more than minor, unintentional excesses, and instead insists on defending the Emergency as a whole. She claims to have the support of the masses of India's peasants, with or without the Congress leadership, and it is on the basis of this calculation that she has moved to form a separate party.

But attendance at her meeting was clearly well below expectations, and Mrs. Gandhi took personal charge of the meeting in order to hold it together. Immediately following the rump session, battles for control of the Congress state parties, and the mass membership, began throughout the country. First reports show less support from certain key states than Gandhi's own pre-split strength there, indicating widespread reluctance among her followers to split from the Congress. In her home state of Uttar Pradesh, with 80 million people (the most populous state in India), Mrs. Gandhi was reported drawing only a small degree of support from state party leaders. In West Bengal, Ambika Soni, a former close friend of Sanjay's and leader of the Youth Congress during the Emergency, denounced the split. As remarked by the weekly journal *New Wave* (see below), Gandhi will most likely find that outside the Congress her mass appeal is very limited.

Pressure for Janata Split

The pressure is building for a comparable split within the Janata, which came to power in the March 1976 elections on the crest of a backlash against Gandhi's Emergency. The Janata is an unhappy three-way marriage (leaving out two nominally socialist parties with only regional strength) between extreme right-wing and fascist tendencies represented by the Jana Sangh and BLD parties, a current led by the present prime minister Morarji Desai which emulates Mahatma Gandhi, patron saint of India's Independence movement, and elements that left the Congress within the last two and a half years in opposition to Mrs. Gandhi's tightening

grip on the party machinery and tilt toward World Bank, anti-socialist parties. The latter agree in principle with the Congress in Mrs. Gandhi's absence, and would probably swing the Desai forces behind them in event of a Janata split.

The necessity for rapid action to coalesce a cross-party alliance of forces committed to Nehruite principles is daily emphasized by the increasing terrorism — including the sabotage of an Air India plane last week — and general breakdown of law and order — fomented by Home (Interior) Minister Charan Singh of the Jana Sangh, and the paramilitary fascist front, the RSS. And last month the Janata government began full-scale implementation of its World Bank-authored program for deemphasizing modern industry and making village handicrafts and small-scale industry the basis of the Indian economy.

Reports of contacts between the CPI and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), a member of the Janata with strength in several states, indicate that the process of realignment has begun, and independent forces, such as *New Wave*, are arguing strongly for this course.

—Peter Rush

This analysis is excerpted from New Wave, an influential Indian weekly journal. The cited articles reflect the attempt to define the political realignment around Indira Gandhi's move to regain national political power:

Why Gandhi Defends the Emergency, from *New Wave*, Dec. 18

The growing sense of insecurity in Janata-run states and the attempt to create chaos in Congress-run states by inciting strikes and violence for electoral gains create precisely the situation in which the majority of the population may once again look towards someone who can restore order in the country. This is what Indira Gandhi is counting on to achieve her strategic objective. It is not because of any madness on her part that she continues to defend the emergency and its so-called gains....

The choice is not between Indira Gandhi and Charan Singh. When it comes to the crunch the choice will in effect be reduced to the two faces of the same socioeconomic forces represented by the Sanjay caucus and the RSS. The external agencies which are manipulating both the Indira caucus and the Janata caucus have little to lose whether the country is dominated by one brand of authoritarianism or another because both have a common source of inspiration.

“Will She Split? Let's Hope She Does” — *New Wave* Dec. 25

Indira Gandhi is bent on splitting the Congress. Her maneuvers and manipulations inside the party for the last three months have exposed her claim that she wants to serve the party as a humble member. For her, she is

the party; she is the people; she is India. The myth created by her courtiers, that the people at large are beholden to her is sure to be exploded within a few weeks of her splitting the Congress. She has done many good things to the country during her tenure of office. Yet the people rejected her in March because of the many criminal acts of the gang around her; that these were perpetrated with her connivance and support outweighed her achievements. Even so, the Congress has been so far generous towards her. Instead of charge-sheeting her for her numerous acts of omission and commission, it gave her all out support when Charan Singh's police arrested and detained her. She misconstrued this spontaneous display of sympathy as love of the people, and instead of expressing gratitude to Congressmen, she launched a campaign to capture the Congress and to emerge once again as the party generalissimo. This was not to be.

The people at large who silently suffered at her hands have demonstrated exemplary tolerance so typical of Indians in the belief that she had learnt a lesson from the destruction of her power. Indira Gandhi, instead, has shown herself to be a hot-headed politician for whom the people are mere pawns in her power game. This contempt for the people and the political organization which gave her all the power and trust to redeem the pledges it made to the people cannot but boomerang....

Knowing Indira Gandhi as we do, as the most pampered child of the Indian political system, we cannot expect her to see reason. She is working on the assumption that once she leaves, the ancient organization, the Congress will simply wither away; some will join the Janata, some will retire from politics and those still left with the Congress will at the most have only regional appeal and image. In this situation, she hopes she will be accepted by the people as the only national leader.

What she does not realize is that her exit from the Congress will clear the way for a realignment of political forces. Hundreds of thousands of people who want the Congress to be purged of corrupt and authoritarian elements are bound to receive the news of her exit with a sigh of relief. Given the chance, these people will have an opportunity to join the Congress and help it function in a democratic manner. A party that does not practice democracy in its functioning cannot be expected to ensure democratic rights and liberties to the people. Indira Gandhi's rise as the unquestioned Congress boss not only destroyed inner party democracy but also demolished the democratic structure of the system as a whole.

...A ruthless exposure of the manner in which she usurped not only state power but also the political and organization power inside the Congress is imperative if the Congress has to survive as the nation's premier political organization. It is precisely with a view to evading such a reappraisal and criticism of policies and performance that Indira Gandhi sought to capture the party and once again turn it into her handmaid. Let Congressmen frustrate her designs.