
Crisis threatens India's independence

An exclusive interview with Executive Intelligence Review

Former Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi gave the following joint interview to New Solidarity correspondent Paul Zykofsky and the Indian weekly New Wave on July 10, the very day the Indian Parliament began a stormy session on a no-confidence motion against the Janata party government of Prime Minister Morarji Desai. India may go to the polls by the end of this year, and widespread popular discontent will be crucial in deciding the outcome. The voter will judge the Janata party by the caste and communal wars that have left over 180 dead in the last year. Power shutdowns have brought industrial production to a halt; the army has fired on striking police in the last month. By July 31, the national railwaymen threaten a strike which could paralyze the country. The feeling is that India has had no government for months.

Mrs. Gandhi is deeply aware of the crisis and has spent a large part of this year campaigning for electoral candidates from her party, Congress-I. She is rarely in the capital of New Delhi where other politicians stay, and is perhaps most attuned to the problems facing India. Mrs. Gandhi still views the country as she did when Prime Minister: as *one* nation, not a sum of many personal constituencies. To any problem, she responds with a national solution, an approach the Janata government has rarely taken.

As we print this interview, the likelihood of national elections has produced a golden opportunity for Mrs. Gandhi to play a role as a leader for national unity. While she stands head and shoulders above other politicians in and out of power, much will depend on her ability to bring other Congress tendencies into a united campaign program.

India must be unified

Q: *The feeling in India today is that the country has entered a period of deep crisis on the political front, as evidenced by the recent police unrest, and on the economic front. What has brought about this crisis and what is required to get out of it?*

A: There is first a lack of cohesion and direction of the government, which is linked with their wrong policies. Unfortunately, there is not one person in the government who has thought of India as a whole or what is needed to keep the country together, or to stabilize the economy. Each problem is dealt with on an ad hoc basis and not from the point of view of solving the problem, but only whether it helps them to regain their position. That is why the economy has been going from bad to worse. They're not worried about rising prices because the main people who support them are not suffering, that is, the very rich and the economically powerful people. The textile people say that they could never imagine that they could make such profits. Even the so-called socialists—their commitment is not at all to the country. If they're talking socialism at this late

stage after two and a half years of being with the reactionaries, it is because they think that in the eyes of the public they have suffered. It is not at all because they think that the policies were wrong or they could have stood up for them much earlier.

The police unrest is only part of the general unrest. Except for the very rich, the industrialists, and some portion of the middle class, like the shopkeepers, there is no section which is feeling secure. This is the first time that shopkeepers, who are traditionally very timid people and who don't like to have a confrontation with the government, *did* have a confrontation, and they were fired on in Lucknow.

The police also have grievances such as their pay, housing, leave, and all those things, but when the Punjab police went on strike, they told us that this was not the major grievance. The major grievance was that they were being used for political purposes; they were used to support criminal activities. ... They feel they can't act as police anymore; the public has absolutely no confidence in them.

So the crisis is on many levels. It's really a crisis of confidence. Nobody has confidence in the ability of the government, or even the will of the government.

Q: *How does India get out of this situation? There seems to be disintegration, regionalization, dismemberment of the country.*

A: There is, yes. And many problems which we thought had been solved have now opened up, as we see in the papers about Mizoram [northeastern tribal state plagued by secessionist activity—PZ]. In some of these border areas, we had people who were against us, against us as a country, because earlier missionaries and others had given them an impression that “you are not really Indian.” For instance, in Nagaland they had an impression that they were the only Christians, and that we had no Christians in other parts of India. When we brought out a series of stamps, they could see only Hindu institutions in these collections. When somebody showed them a picture of Taj Mahal, they had no idea that there were Muslims; that it was a different religion.

When I became Prime Minister, for instance, we had been having what was a mini-war with the Naga people. The army was there; people were being killed on both sides. I had talks, and we solved it. We didn't solve it 100 percent, but we solved it 98 percent, and the two percent was being solved over a period of time because we kept pressing how essential it was to have peace for any economic development.

The majority of the people there were convinced; there were just a few who remained hostile. But, little by little, they were coming over, and we were trusting them and giving them responsibility. Now, by its attitude, this government has just wiped that out. They've done the wrong thing. ... They haven't followed a consistent policy. While in Nagaland, Mr. Desai went out of his

Phizo, who has very close contact with the U.S. administration—I know that Phizo had been invited to the United States where he met people, and that he was supported by various elements in England. I had been refusing to meet him. Morarji Desai met him. The person who was advising us to meet him, a person very close to Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan [spiritual leader of the Janata Party—PZ] and who had been sent by him, was pressing me to meet Mr. Phizo. As soon as the Janata party government came in, Phizo went to Morarji, and Morarji met him.

On the trip back, this gentleman, Dr. Aram, came to me and said, “I'm afraid you were right; it was very wrong because it has had a negative effect!” On the other hand, Mr. Laldenga [head of the Mizo secessionist tribal group—PZ], had a very positive approach, and we had promised him safe conduct. To him, the government had a very hostile attitude, and now the trouble there has erupted.

So, it's just that nobody seems very concerned about going into problems in depth.

Q: *What about Chinese input in the Mizoram rebellion?*

I hear some arms were discovered which were of Chinese origin.

A: The Mizoram people were constantly crossing the border through Burma, and they were coming back with arms as well as with Mao's little red book. Whether that is continuing—it's an old connection—we don't know because Foreign Minister Vajpayee announced that now there is no Chinese input. But the Mizoram rebels were getting training in China also, not just arms.

Destabilizing foreign influences

Q: *During my visit I've found people saying that India, because of its size and diversity, has become “ungovernable” without trying to understand how a situation of instability has been created. In the 1974-75 period you warned that foreign agencies were trying to destabilize India. It's a fact that the “think tanks” in the United States and Britain which greatly influence policy-making have constantly singled out the diversities—regional, linguistic, religious, communal—to destabilize India. The British made considerable use of this “divide and conquer” approach to maintain their rule over India. Do you see this type of process being used today to weaken India and destroy its sovereignty and territorial integrity and to destabilize other countries in this region?*

A: I think that this policy is continuing, but in a much more subtle way. Earlier it was obvious. Now it is behind the scenes and more indirect....

This division is there, as you have rightly put it in the second part of your question, not only in India, but it has taken place in all the countries of the subcontinent, in fact, beyond the subcontinent. I have no doubt that they have a hand in what's happening in Afghanistan; what's happening in Iran. This is all part of it because they [the U.S. and British—PZ] think that if this area is solid, it will not serve their global strategy, which I personally think is very shortsighted even for them.

As for the Janata party, they seem to want confrontation with everybody. They started off with a confrontation between the industrial worker and the agriculturalists, then between one caste and another caste. All these things exist in every society, but I think a government's task is to try and minimize these differences. Especially in India where we face the major challenge of poverty and economic backwardness, the task is how to harness this force toward that end—to the removal of poverty—rather than to fight among ourselves. But the government was not serious about that, partly, I think, to divert attention—because if you're fighting among yourselves, you can't fight the major thing—which is also what the British did during pre-Independence days. Now caste war has become much more acute; religious and communal harmony is at its worst.

The Poornia incident [recent caste riot—PZ] is also very serious.

The government is also trying to disenfranchise many Muslims, saying that some of our Muslim past presidents were responsible for bringing in Muslims from Bangladesh and therefore increasing the Muslim population. In West Bengal and in Assam, they're actually cutting their names off the voters list, and some of the people who are being struck off are people whose fathers and grandfathers were in the Independence movement from 1919. Their attitude is also very communal....

Even now various people are being supported for the prime ministership by these outside elements. For instance, Mr. George Fernandes [Industries Minister] is a member of the Socialist International; he has very strong support from West Germany, Austria....

Q: Willy Brandt?

A: Yes, members of the Socialist International.... And, on the other hand, certain American elements are supporting Mr. Chandrashekhar [Janata Party President]. Earlier it was Mr. Vajpayee, but I think now it has shifted.... Chandrashekhar, who up till now was solidly with Morarji Desai, now seems to have shifted away from him.

Q: Who are the British backing?

A: It's difficult to say; I don't know. I think they're backing everybody a little bit.

Toward a scientific rational worldview

Q: *In reading your father's, Jawaharlal Nehru's, as well as your speeches, I've found repeated stress on the need for a country like India to modernize by applying new technologies and science to develop both industry and agriculture. However, the Janata constantly calls for a World Bank-style "rural bias," and it has adopted an anti-industry, antigrowth approach. How have these policies undermined India's economic development and contributed to the current economic crisis?*

A: Although they are talking about a rural bias, they have not done anything to strengthen the rural economy. On the contrary, the peasants have been very hard hit; the farmers have not gotten the declared price they should get. What has happened in our part of the world—that is western Uttar Pradesh and Haryana—is that when the majority of the peasants, that is, the small peasants, the small farmer, and middle-sized farmers, sold off their crop, then the government announced higher prices. That benefits either the rich farmer, who had kept his grain, or the middleman who bought it from these people. The poor people are absolutely ruined.

Although we were for modern technology, it meant

taking modern technology to the rural areas as well and modernizing agriculture, which the government doesn't believe in. These are just words that don't have much meaning. The fact is that in a country like India, without industry, you cannot have agriculture. And without industry, you cannot face the competition in the world or really remain truly independent; you are not economically independent, so you can't be politically independent.

We also see the antediluvian attitude of the present government. Now Mr. Desai believes that he is next to god only; I don't know whether Desai even thinks he's next to him. When he met our top scientists, he said, "What are you telling me? I have studied science in school." He is how old? Eighty! What science did he study—and he was not even a science student! So what science did he study that he thinks gives him greater knowledge than our atomic scientists today?

In Darjeeling I heard that he's closing down the mountaineering school, which, of course, is not a people's institute; it's an elitist institute. It was not costing much money. Mr. Desai said, "I have climbed the hills in Gujarat; what training do you need for climbing?" Now what hills are there in Gujarat? They don't even have a hill station! This is his attitude.

Right in this room I had, in the beginning of 1978 or end of 1977, some doctors from the postgraduate institute in Chandigarh. There was an inquiry against a doctor there for not treating Mr. Jayaprakash Narayan [spiritual leader of the Janata—PZ] properly during the emergency. The doctors came in and said to Mr. Desai, "Look, he's one of our top medical people; have the inquiry, but don't humiliate him in doing it. If he's guilty, he will be punished." They couldn't get a word in edgewise. He just said, "You admit that modern medicine knows nothing. You admit your ignorance." The doctors said, "We do admit that we don't know everything. At the same time, there have been quite spectacular advances, and we should not deny those. There are many areas where there are no advances; there are new areas which are being discovered." But Mr. Desai said, "No, no, you are too proud. You should say you know nothing." Finally, they said, "Here is our memorandum, and we are going."

This is the attitude the Prime Minister has in a changing world, with new discoveries, and so many technological and other advances.

Q: *What must be the strategy to develop the country? The path that was pursued by India's first Prime Minister, your father, Jawaharlal Nehru, and then carried on by you was to develop the industrial base, the technological base, the scientific base. Could you speak more specifically on that?*

A: My effort was to consolidate the outline that my father had made. After all, he could only build the

foundations. I tried to build think that I succeeded to a very large extent. There are lots of things which couldn't be done earlier, not for lack of capacity, but because of the situation. You had to have the foundation before you did anything further. I believe very strongly in modernizing the country. I think there are some traditions which have to be kept because they are a unifying factor for one thing, and a certain amount of national pride is essential if you want people to put in their all. This is the more difficult path. If you say we'll sweep away everything and start anew, in a way, it's easier. If you say we won't take anything new, it's easier. But saying we're going to keep some of the old and also some of the new, that is the most difficult. But there is no way out. That is what we need for this country.

Q: Which requires industry, new technologies....

A: What it really needs is for the whole country to have a more scientific and rational outlook, but you can go only as fast as the people are capable of going. You can't go faster than the people. Sometimes, even if you think something has to be done, you have to go slow because you shouldn't get out of touch with the people. Like, in Turkey, when Kemal Ataturk wanted to remove the purdah [the veil worn by orthodox Muslim women—PZ] and purdah came with a vengeance, but it was only years later that it was removed. You have to do a little bit of balancing. We find that even in the United States, which is a very modern country with tremendous technological and scientific advances, and so on, has no fewer superstitions than we have. There are different types of superstitions, but they have just as many. We would like to avoid all superstitions, the modern ones as well as the old ones.

Q: The role of education on a mass level, of political leaders being able to bring up the level of the population, is very important. This is very clear in Nehru's speeches.

A: The great thing was that he saw far ahead, which is what we find is lacking in most political parties—in fact, in all political parties today. Everybody thinks of the next step. You can't take the next step unless you know where you're going. Only when you know this is where I have to arrive do you see what is the first step, the second step, the third step. Especially in today's dangerous situation, I find that nobody is looking far ahead, or is willing to make the sacrifices or to face the difficulties that are inherent in the situation if you want to reach that goal.

Q: Yes, I've found that also in terms of economic planning, there is no clear sense of where India has to be as a developing nation by the turn of the century.

A: You can't be very clear because the situation is changing so much, and what happens in Europe and

America does influence our economy as well as the entire situation. You can only have an outline.

Q: For example, in the planning commission there is no long-term perspective.

A: No, they don't believe in perspective.

Q: While meeting people in the government bureaucracy, I was trying to get at what the goals are for resources, population, and development for the next century.

A: No, they're not concerned about that; they're talking of the past century.

Q: Mrs. Gandhi, in your recent statements you have said that the kind of situation that exists today is as bad as the period before you imposed emergency rule in June 1975.

A: I have not said that. This was a question that was put to me.

Q: My question, though, is that the chaos that has ensued, the "ungovernability" of the country, can lead to creating very unknown forces for the Indian political situation, the way it has in Pakistan. How do you see this developing in India?

A: I am deeply concerned myself, but the situation is too fluid to be able to say anything definite. Some people when asking this question asked if it meant that another emergency should be imposed. My reply was that the situation is only superficially the same as it was. The major difference is that at that time we had real economic difficulties. It was the opposition parties that were trying to make political capital out of this, and they purposefully created that situation. Today there are no real economic difficulties; the economic difficulties are created by the government. The situation is being created by their nonfunctioning or nonunderstanding, or noncapability. The situation cannot be controlled by the same medicine. It has to be an entirely different approach.

Q: Do you see within that a certain type of unity, even of opposition forces, around, say, a program to pull the country out of the crisis now?

A: No, nobody is bothered at all; they're just looking at the next step and how they personally are going to survive. Which is very unfortunate....

Q: Given the splits in the Congress party, do you think there is still room for a certain cooperation, fighting together on certain issues?

A: We will support any issue or any party or any individual who is against what we consider the wrong policies. Whether they're economic policies, social policies, or this communal tension.

Economics key to political independence

Q: *The recent nonaligned bureau meeting spent a great deal of time and energy discussing who should and who shouldn't be seated. In your statements on nonalignment, particularly your speech at the 1976 Colombo summit, you stressed the need for the nonaligned nations to lead in the fight against neocolonialist economic policies by establishing a New International Economic Order. Has that approach been weakened and what role should the nonaligned be playing today?*

A: Yes, they have gone away from what was the main thrust. The answer today, and I partly mentioned this in the earlier question, is the economics. Unless we reduce poverty in our country, unless we strengthen the people as a whole, we cannot be independent. And if we are dependent for essential goods on outside countries, they can always twist our arm. Our effort was not only to be independent ourselves, but to try and bolster any nonaligned country which was weakening on this issue. This, I think, was our main role in nonaligned conferences. Although the political thing was there—the anticolonialism, the anti-imperialism, the support for freedom struggles—we felt that we could only give this support if we were strong economically.

Q: *The latest oil crisis is once again threatening to deepen the world economic crisis, and particularly the situation in oil-importing developing countries like India. Mexico, which has discovered large oil resources, will present a "global energy development proposal" to the United Nations in September which calls for rational, global decisions on the production, distribution, and consumption of energy resources as well as the need to ensure that all developing countries can have access and financing to obtain new energy sources. This proposal has been endorsed by Cuban President Fidel Castro, French President Giscard d'Estaing, some of the socialist nations, as well as the U.S. Labor Party. What is your view of this proposal?*

A: I don't know enough about this proposal, but obviously if there is a rational, global decision on production, distribution, and consumption of energy resources, then it could be very helpful.

Q: *New forces are emerging in the West, including in the United States, which are committed to establishing a New International Economic Order and implementing policies of cooperation for the development of the Third World, particularly in areas of capital goods and advanced technologies, like nuclear energy. This was clearly the commitment of France and West Germany when they established the European Monetary System to replace the IMF-World Bank structure as the necessary mechanism to finance such development policies. What is your view*

of these changes in the West?

A: I don't know how strong these forces are because the conflict between them and the others who are for power politics or profit politics is tremendous. One just doesn't know who will win out.

Q: *There has emerged a split among the capitalist nations: On the one hand, the United States and Great Britain are continuing the policy of supporting IMF austerity measures, cutbacks in production, and so on for developing nations; on the other hand, there is the type of approach voiced by West Germany and France, in particular, in the last year in collaboration with the socialist countries. There have been extensive meetings between Soviet President Brezhnev and West German Chancellor Schmidt, Brezhnev and French President Giscard. Schmidt stopped in the Soviet Union on his way to the Tokyo summit....*

A: Obviously this is to be encouraged....

Q: *Yes, there is a lot of discussion about the need for détente based on economic cooperation.*

A: You can't have political détente without the other. In today's world economics are the key to politics.

Q: *Mrs. Gandhi, you have often discussed the crucial period between 1974 and 1976 as a period in which many destabiliz*

that there was a certain amount of coordination and a conspiracy at work in this process. How do you see the situation now in terms of what is going on in neighboring countries, in Pakistan, and the evolution of a China policy for India, a sound China policy.

A: It's really a continuation of the old policy, isn't it? I think it dates back to the Bandung conference [of nonaligned nations in 1954]. It was at the Bandung conference that a first effort was made to divide India and China, and it was a visible effort, carried out by the entire Western press and other observers ... That was the time when they poisoned Chou En-lai's mind against India: "Why is India taking the leadership?" Even though we were not. In fact, because many of the countries were very shy of China at that moment, we were the ones who went out of our way to introduce Mr. Chou En-lai to everybody and to bring various conflicting interests together ... In fact, this was a task that was given to me by my father, and we invited people to breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We did a great deal to build up and to smooth all of these feelings of people who were frightened of China, especially the smaller Asian countries. I think this is where it started because they [the West—PZ] felt that if China and India are together, then it would make a very big impact on Asia. And they did not want this unity in Asia.

I have no doubt that they must have played a role also in the conflict between the Soviet Union and China.