

Battle in India's ruling party: Rajiv Gandhi shakes up the barons

by Susan and Ramtanu Maitra from New Delhi

The political pundits in New Delhi polished their crystal balls a few weeks ago to divine what is next in the drama unfolding within the ruling Congress Party. They were prompted by the sudden April 26 move of the Congress (I) high command to expel former Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee from the party for six years, and suspend three other veteran leaders for an unspecified period.

The delinquents were a rallying point for the corrupt and self-seeking Congress "Old Guard" that Rajiv Gandhi had put on notice at the Congress Centenary celebration in Bombay in December.

"The Congress workers are handicapped, for, on their backs ride the brokers of power and influence who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy. They are self-perpetuating cliques who thrive by invoking the slogans of caste and religion and enmeshing the living body of the Congress in their net of avarice," were his harsh words on that occasion.

The April expulsions took most by surprise. Was Rajiv Gandhi finally acting on his promise to clean up the party? Would Pranab fight back? Would the Congress (I) split? And what about the party elections scheduled in July? Having been caught off-guard again by a man whose actions have repeatedly defied conventional political wisdom, the pundits' reactions have been cautious.

Yet, certain things are clear.

First, the move was an exemplar—a warning shot aimed as much at the gallery of grudgebearers waiting in the wings as at the ousted individuals. The move was meant to nip in the bud a vengeful process before it got off the ground. Second, Rajiv Gandhi is serious about his commitment to clean up the party and the government.

Pranab and Co., paper tigers

As a former finance minister (Pranab was considered unofficially the number-two man in the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi's cabinet), Mukherjee's moves have been the focus of intense speculation for more than a year. He was dropped from the Rajiv Gandhi cabinet following the 1984 elections

which brought Congress (I) back to power with an overwhelming majority, and had subsequently been removed from all party committees. An ex-somebody, he has been moving around like a self-proclaimed general in search of troops.

Pranab's suspended cohorts are similarly "ex" officials. Sripat Mishra was a member of parliament and former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, a Congress (I) stronghold; A. P. Sharma was a member of the Upper House of parliament, where members are inducted through party nomination, and was former governor of West Bengal; and Prakash Mehrotra had served as governor of Assam and India's high commissioner to the United Kingdom. The suspended leaders have been asked to "show cause" as to the justification of their anti-party activities.

In spite of efforts to color their discontent politically, the dissidents from the outset had only one thing in common: their resentment of the new leadership. The ostensible issues with which they tried to cover their own ambition were two: a claim that the Rajiv Gandhi leadership was enrolling "bogus" members in the party en masse in order to overpower the old guard in the upcoming party elections, and a claim that the Muslim Women Divorce Bill moved through the parliament by the administration was harmful to Muslim women.

In an interview with *India Today* following the disciplinary action, Rajiv Gandhi characterized the dissidents' dilemma. "Party elections are coming and it is going to expose all paper tigers," he said. "We have not had elections for 13 years, so we have people who have lost their base, who do not have any standing. This will all be exposed." Indeed, earlier a member of a dissident Congress Party, Pranab Mukherjee has never won an election in his home state of West Bengal, where the Communist Party (Marxist) has been entrenched in power for almost a decade.

Pranab, who had given a lengthy interview to the *New York Times* magazine of India, *Illustrated Weekly*, a week before his expulsion, staking his claim to leadership of the dissidents, feigned ignorance as to the cause for his censure.

Meanwhile, the seamy underside of the "net of avarice"

shaken in the disciplinary actions has come out in revelations implicating the former finance minister in bombing his own family's home to keep his name in the limelight. The source of the revelations, the man to whom the explosives used in the blast were traced, is a big-time swindler involved in a myriad of extortion and fraud cases. He has had a very close relationship with the Mukherjees for years.

The 'Indira loyalists' . . .

Rajiv Gandhi's words at the Bombay Centenary were tough, but too true. The revolt of all those who had for one reason or another enjoyed power and prestige during Mrs. Gandhi's time began immediately. Who does he think he is, the indignant buzzing went, this upstart neophyte politician Rajiv, with his computer boys, to question "politics as usual"—sometimes referred to as the "Congress culture"—of the past two decades?

The shape of the revolt was prefigured months earlier when a motley assortment including the left wing of the Congress, ex-officials, disgruntled power brokers, representatives of some business, and other baronial interests teamed up under the banner of "Indira loyalists" to protest the party economic resolution put forward by the Rajiv Gandhi leadership. The straightforward, essentially pragmatic document outlines the prime minister's known views toward modernization and upgrading the economy.

Gandhi's policies will tend to have the effect of draining the swamp in which "Congress culture" floats and breeds despotism. The resolution was attacked as "deviationist," a repudiation of the Nehru-Indira Gandhi tradition, and so forth. In the end, the word "socialist" was put back into the resolution, and the guardians of the faith piped down for the time being, in anticipation that "the boy" would appreciate the virtue of coming to terms with them.

The Bombay Centenary dispelled such expectations. By March, a gripe session brought some 400 congressmen from West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Karnataka, and Gujarat states to New Delhi to demand changes in the way the party was being run in their respective states. Though there are indications that many proto-dissidents had decided to make their peace with the party leadership, by the middle of April the rumor mills in Delhi were running overtime again with stories that the "Indira loyalists" would soon hold a convention and set up a parallel power block to defy the Rajiv Gandhi leadership.

. . . and the patriots

The campaign has been kept alive by a sector of the press. Girilal Jain, editor of the *Times of India*, has led the charge. Jain, who enjoys a cozy relationship with some powerful figures in the U.S. establishment, has been condemning the prime minister daily for everything from his upbringing to his handling of Punjab, even questioning his personal honesty.

Jain has been joined by newspapers representing the "left faction" within the Congress (I), who have been issuing not-so-veiled warnings to Rajiv Gandhi for many months. In all, thousands of column inches have been devoted to attacks on the administration for "mishandling" Punjab, Assam, South Asian relations, and the economy, and to scenarios portraying the imminent "crack up" of the Congress Party.

A diabolical wrinkle was provided after the disciplinary action by the *Patriot*, a pro-Moscow news daily published in New Delhi. *Patriot* made an effort on its front pages to cover for Pranab Mukherjee by pointing to Indian President Zail Singh as the mastermind of the dissident activity. *Patriot* pursued this tack, even after a public denial of the allegations issued by the highest office in the land. At a time when Punjab troubles are at a sensitive stage, any effort to embroil the President of India, who is a Sikh, in trouble which may lead to the fracturing of the ruling party has far-reaching implications of its own.

Push comes to shove

The last straw in Round One of Rajiv Gandhi vs. the barons was a letter fired off to the prime minister in late April complaining of the "growth of dissension" within the party, this one signed by Kamlapati Tripathy, the party's "working president." Tripathy, an octogenarian in ill health, hails from Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. He was reactivated by Mrs. Gandhi, who brought him into the party leadership in the early 1980s when she came back to power. Tripathy is himself a power broker who fits the model of the "feudal oligarchy" Rajiv castigated at Bombay. Tripathy has criticized the administration's economic policies, now in the hands of a powerful Uttar Pradesh politician, Finance Minister V. P. Singh.

Rajiv Gandhi responded to Tripathy's letter, seeking a meeting with the old Brahmin. Tripathy was meeting simultaneously with the dissidents in a cat-and-mouse game which led at least some of the dissidents to believe that the old Varanasi power broker was going to give them support.

But the action against Pranab and friends has put Tripathy in a fix. As he well realizes, any open breach with the Congress (I) leadership at this time will doom his conniving to secure the reigns of Uttar Pradesh politics for his son.

A day before the expulsion order was issued, the Youth Congress (I) held a meeting which included some 40 members of parliament. The body demanded harsh action against all the disgruntled elements. The same sentiment was reflected after the fact by an old Congress wiseman who spoke to a local press commentator anonymously.

"You ought to go a little into the unknown antecedents of all these Congressmen who are ganging up against Rajiv Gandhi," he said. "You know too well their past, don't you? What credibility do they have? He [Rajiv] has nothing to lose but the deadwood, and forget about what they can do to him. They are a gutless bunch of so-called leaders."