

The 1977 Parliamentary Elections in India

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IN ONE STROKE the Indian electorate brought to an end thirty years of Congress party rule, eleven years of government under the Prime Ministership of Indira Gandhi, and twenty months of an emergency that had set India on a course of authoritarian government. Mrs. Gandhi, in a surprise announcement in mid-January 1977, declared that a national election to parliament would be held in mid-March. It was widely expected at the time, not only by outside observers but apparently by Mrs. Gandhi as well, that the elections would legitimize her declaration of an emergency, demonstrate that the country supported her moves to institutionalize many features of the emergency, and would provide her son, Sanjay, with an opportunity to establish his power within the Congress parliamentary delegation and thereby ensure his own eventual succession to the Prime Ministership.

Gandhi had a variety of reasons to expect the elections to produce such results. The country had experienced a comparatively good harvest; prices, though rising, were increasing at a substantially lower rate than in the period prior to the emergency; the government claimed some successes in its program to allocate housing sites to Harijans (ex-Untouchables), redistribute land to the landless, abolish bonded labour, end or at least reduce rural indebtedness, and provide alternative housing for urban squatters. While each of these “successes” of the emergency had its detractors, the government, at least, seemed to view these measures as both successful and popular. Sanjay had been acclaimed by the chief ministers of states he had visited, large crowds appeared at his public meetings, press coverage of his Five Point Program was enthusiastic, and his Youth Congress was apparently attracting, at least according to reports in the press, tens and even hundreds of thousands of followers. Sanjay’s promise, and Mrs. Gandhi’s hope, that the Youth Congress would emerge as an alternative Congress, built upon a popular base of energetic young people, seemed within grasp.

All of this, we know now, was fantasy. Like many authoritarian regimes, this one too was unaware of how unpopular many of its policies and programs were, or indeed how little popular support there was for the regime and for the emergency. The lack of effective feedback in itself might not have jeopardized the regime had it not made the extraordinary, indeed unique, decision to test its popularity by holding an election. Other authoritarian regimes have held elections; none have held a genuinely honest election.

Within a few days after Mrs. Gandhi’s announcement, two events took place which were to have a decisive effect on the outcome. The first was the announcement by four of the opposition parties—the Socialists, the Jana Sangh (a right of center pro-Hindu party), Bharatiya

Lok Dal (the B.L.D., a regional party in northern India that had split from Congress), and the Congress O (which had separated from Mrs. Gandhi's Congress in 1969) - that they had created a unified Janata Party which would contest nearly all of the seats against Congress. This new party was led by Morarji Desai, one-time senior minister in the government, and contained on its governing committee the country's leading opposition figures, most of whom had only recently been released from jail. Given the long history of aborted efforts to unify the opposition, the creation of the Janata party came as a considerable surprise. The short time - six weeks - given by Mrs. Gandhi for the election campaign proved to be an important element in pressing the opposition to come together quickly; the belief by opposition politicians that an electoral defeat would probably ensure the institutionalization of the authoritarian measures adopted by Mrs. Gandhi proved to be another incentive for unification; still another was a statement by Jayaprakash Narayan, the elderly and much revered Gandhian socialist who had initiated the pre-emergency campaign against the Prime Minister, that he would not take part in the election campaign unless the opposition unified itself.

The second unexpected event was the resignation from the government and from Congress of Jagjivan Ram, long-time Congress leader and minister, a prominent figure in the politics of the state of Bihar and a leader of India's Harijan community. Ram, in his resignation statement, denounced Mrs. Gandhi not only for her declaration of a national emergency that suspended civil liberties, but for destroying intra-party democracy within the Congress. Ram noted that party officers were now appointed, not elected, and that the chief ministers of India's states were appointed by the Prime Minister rather than chosen by the state legislative assemblies, Ram was joined by a number of prominent Congress leaders in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, and from the eastern states of Orissa and Bihar in his newly formed Congress for Democracy (EFD).

Ram's resignation evidently led Mrs. Gandhi to apprehend a more widespread defection from the Congress party. In an effort to minimize defections she and her close supporters concluded that most of the sitting members of parliament should be given tickets again. The result was that the Congress Election Committee, which allocates tickets, had to deprive Sanjay Gandhi and his Youth Congress followers of the large share of tickets they expected. While it was initially anticipated that the youth Congress might be given 150 to 200 tickets out of 542, the party leadership decided to give them only about 20, including one "safe" constituency in Uttar Pradesh to Sanjay himself. Jagjivan Ram's resignation thus deprived Mrs. Gandhi of the opportunity to restructure the distribution of power within the Congress parliamentary party in favor of her son; in fact the resignation tended to strengthen the hands of state leaders who were now given considerable influence in the allocation of tickets to their own Congress supporters. Moreover, by eliminating the Youth Congress as a significant force in the elections, the state police - with which many of the Youth Congress leaders were closely allied - were also neutralized as a political force.

The election campaign itself provided a remarkable demonstration of a country that had become highly politicized. The turnout at political rallies, often described by newspapers as “mammoth,” were often in the hundreds of thousands. Huge crowds attended Janata Party meetings at the Ram Lila Ground in Delhi, the Marina Beach in Madras, the Maidan in Calcutta, and in numerous public ground in cities, towns, and villages throughout the country. Crowds often stayed up to two or three in the morning to hear addresses by Janata leaders. In northern India especially, college and university students canvassed urban and rural constituencies in support of Janata candidates. Members of the bar associations, whose network extends into small towns in rural India as well as in the larger metropolises, supported Janata candidates and it was not uncommon to see public demonstrations of lawyers in some of the larger cities. With the announcement by Mrs. Gandhi that she was “relaxing” the emergency - an ominous word that suggested that the emergency might be restored after the elections - the press, cautiously at first and then more boldly, described the Janata party campaign and the popular support it was receiving. A number of prominent Muslims, most notably the Imam of the Jama Masjid in Delhi, India’s largest mosque, also campaigned against Mrs. Gandhi’s government, speaking before large Muslim audiences.

Janata party candidates campaigned on a single issue: ending the emergency and restoring democracy to India. Economic issues were secondary, except insofar as they illustrated the problems that arose when individuals were deprived of their rights to protest. In northern India a primary target of the opposition was the sterilization program that had been vigorously and in many areas forcibly pursued by state government chief ministers under the influence of Sanjay Gandhi. Word spread throughout India (including areas without a sterilization program) of some of the excesses committed by state governments aggressively carrying out the sterilization campaign: quotas assigned to local school teachers and other government officials; villagers who could not obtain loans or licenses unless they agreed to sterilization; government officials who, desperately seeking to meet their quotas (or paying the penalty of not receiving their dearness allowances) forcibly dragging villagers, young and old, to nearby sterilization camps; hastily constructed sterilization camps where some patients became infected or died; police firings at Turkman Gate in Delhi and in parts of Uttar Pradesh when there were clashes between local people and government officials; slum dwellers who were told that their houses would be removed by government bulldozers unless they agreed to being sterilized.

Mrs. Gandhi and her closest supporters such as Bansi Lal (the Defence Minister), V.C. Shukla (Minister of Information), D.K. Barooah (President of the Congress party), and Sanjay himself alternated between denying these reports, asserting that there were a few “excesses” but the reports were exaggerated, or casting blame for these “excesses” upon “zealous” state and local officials. This latter charge proved to be a political liability. Government officials reacted vehemently to them, insisting that responsibility for these “excesses” rested with the government leaders who had given the orders to the bureaucracy. The President of the India Government

Employees Federation issued a statement denying that officials were responsible and many local officials were reportedly bitter at what they perceived as the government's effort to use them as scapegoats.

A certain moral aura surrounded many of the Janata parliamentary candidates, a majority of whom had spent much of the previous eighteen months in jail. George Fernandes, a socialist leader and president of India's largest railway union, remained in jail even as he stood for parliament. Many of the arrested leaders had previously held public office and were widely regarded as respectable public figures with popular followings - trade union leaders, urban social workers or, in the case of Jayaprakash Narayan, as Gandhian constructive workers. The arrest of Jayaprakash Narayan, a man who had never held and did not seek public office and who was widely regarded as a moral leader, was evidently a disreputable act in the eyes of many rural Indians. His arrest threw a kind of moral blanket over all of the political leaders arrested by the government during the emergency. Janata candidates pointed out that arrests were made by the government without a charge sheet and they often referred to the statement made by the solicitor general that during the emergency government officials had the right to arrest an individual in error, imprison, and even shoot him without recourse to the courts.

While compulsory sterilization and political arrests were the two issues most frequently discussed by the opposition, other issues had a particular relevance for specific audiences. Among industrial workers much was made of the government's policy to suspend the system of annual bonuses, which had come to be regarded by industrial workers as a deferred wage; it was also noted that during the emergency workers were not permitted to hold public protest meetings, organize demonstrations against employers, or strike. Employees were reminded that the government had created a compulsory deposit scheme under which a substantial portion of an employee's annual wage increase had to be placed in government bonds, a policy that neutralized the government's policy of indexing wages to inflation through the provision of annual dearness allowances. Slum dwellers throughout the country were told of the government's program of forcibly clearing tens of thousands of slum dwellings in Delhi, and the transfer of slum dwellers to sites outside the city miles away from where people worked. Muslims were told that many of the "excesses" of the emergency—forced sterilization and the bulldozing of squatter settlements—particularly hit them, that in several Muslim areas there had been police firings, and that one of the leading Muslim organizations (the Jamaat-e-Islami) had been banned by the government and its membership summarily arrested without charges or trial.

During the last few weeks of the campaign the Congress party was clearly on the defensive. Prominent Congress leaders ceased to tour the country but devoted their attention to their own constituency; Sanjay evidently hearing reports about the mood within his own constituency and finding unsympathetic and even hostile audiences greeting him when he traveled, devoted the last few weeks virtually exclusively to his own constituency. Only Mrs.

Gandhi of the Congress leaders toured widely. In contrast, the opposition had an impressive array of nationally known leaders on tour, including Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit - Mrs. Gandhi's aunt and Nehru's sister.

Janata party leaders sniffed victory in the air on the eve of the elections, although some feared a last minute action by Mrs. Gandhi to rig the elections as they apparently had been in Pakistan only a few weeks earlier. But the magnitude of the Janata victory came as something of a surprise. Janata and its allies, the Congress for Democracy, the Akali Dal (a regional party in the Punjab), and the Communist Party Marxist won 328 out of the 542 seats in parliament, as against 153 for Congress. The margin of the victory in seats won by Janata party candidates was often enormous. Mrs. Gandhi lost her seat by some 50,000 votes. George Fernandes, in jail throughout the campaign, won by a margin of 330,000. In many constituencies in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Congress candidates, who had won with 40% or more of the vote in 1971, dropped to 20% and even 15% of the vote. It was clear that the Janata victory was not simply the consequence of a consolidation of the opposition vote, but a substantial *shift* away from the Congress party. The Congress lost in constituencies reserved for Harijan candidates and in constituencies with substantial Muslim voters were at least as large and in some instances even larger than in other constituencies. Similarly, one of the largest margins of victory for a Janata candidate was in the Delhi constituency that contained the resettled slum dwellers who were evidently resentful of the manner in which they were forcibly removed from their homes. Mrs. Gandhi, her rhetoric notwithstanding, had failed to win the support of India's poorest classes.

Another striking feature of the election was the absence of a schism between rural and urban India. Contrary to the belief of many - including one suspects Mrs. Gandhi herself— - and urban dwellers responded in much the same way to the emergency. In those parts of the country where Janata won, they won equally in both urban and rural constituencies. All seven seats in Delhi went to Janata candidates, but so did all the surrounding rural constituencies in the Punjab, Haryana and nearby Uttar Pradesh. And in states where Congress did well in the rural areas, they did nearly as well in the urban areas. In Tamil Nadu, for example, Congress and its allies won two out of the three Madras seats and virtually all of the other urban seats in the state but they also carried rural Tamil Nadu. Similarly, Congress won both the rural and urban seats in Andhra.

There is evidence from earlier elections that India's urban constituencies tended to resemble, both in voter turnout and in party preferences, the rural areas in which they were located rather than each other, and this pattern evidently persisted into the 1977 elections. These elections ought to bury the myth of the urban-rural "gap" in India, though many educated urban Indians continue to remain surprised that the rural electorate behaved in much the same way as they did. These and earlier returns suggest that far too much significance is given to the possible political differences resulting from income and educational differences- presumably poor and uneducated rural voters respond differently than do more affluent and educated urban voters-

than to the fact that rural dwellers have extensive contacts with urban areas, that urban migrants frequently return to their rural homes, that many of India's secondary and college students living in the towns and cities come from rural areas and continue to maintain rural links, that school teachers, lawyers, and bureaucrats penetrate the countryside as well as the towns and cities. that the construction of paved roads, the spread of transistor radios, the growth of the regional language press, and the expansion of the bus system have all linked rural and urban India into a single communications and transportation network, and, finally, that the party system has penetrated rural as well as urban India.

It is now quite clear that many features of the emergency were as irritating to rural as to urban Indians. Perhaps the single most important source of popular discontent - one that underlies the sterilization program, and a variety of other unpopular government programs - was the role played by *arbitrary* government officials and by, to use the Indian phrase, *extra-constitutional powers*. Many a rural community as well as urban neighborhood had its little Sanjay's - politicians, government officials, landlords, and local "toughs" who used their connections to push local people around. Rural dwellers, no less than urbanites, recognized that the decline of the elected official made them vulnerable to arbitrary authority, and that even corrupt elected politicians were preferable to the authoritarian regime under which they were now living.

Finally, the election results produced a schism between north and south India. Janata and its allies swept northern India, leaving Congress only two seats in the Hindi region that had been the historic basis of its political power. In contrast, Congress swept all but a handful of seats in the four southern states. It was evident that the "excesses" of the emergency had not reached the region south of the Vindhyas where Congress was able to maintain its traditional strength. In all, 75% of the seats won by the Janata Party and the Congress for Democracy were from the seven northern Hindi-speaking states and the capital city, and of the seats won by the Congress Party 60% were from the four states of south India. Nonetheless, a close examination of the electoral returns shows that the Janata wave did not totally bypass the south. In Andhra, the Janata party vote increased from the 12% won by the constituent parties in 1971 to 32% in 1977, and in Karnataka, Congress declined from 71% to 57% while the Janata share of the vote increased from 24% to 40 %.

Once the returns were in, the Congress government itself ended the emergency, rescinded the ban on political organizations, and released the remaining detainees from jail. The new government formed by Morarji Desai, the Janata leader, announced that its first business would be to bring an end to the remaining restrictions imposed by the Congress party during the emergency by repealing restrictive legislation on the press, the right of the government to suspend habeas corpus, and the amendments to the constitution which had diminished the powers of the courts. The new government also announced that it would seek a more balanced

relationship with the great powers, and that in its domestic policies it would give more attention to rural development and to programs that would maximize employment. Translating these objectives into specific policies and programs is likely to create strains among the diverse groups that make up the Janata party government. Thus, the party scene in India remains a fluid one as the country moves from an authoritarian system dominated by a single party, to a more open political system with, for the moment, two major political parties each faced with their own internal strains.

Whatever the future brings, however, it is clear that India has experienced a remarkable democratic revolution that is no less a revolution because it happened through an extraordinary election rather than through a violent upheaval. The election itself- a unique instance of an authoritarian regime testing its popularity in a wholly free election- destroys the credibility of authoritarian leaders in all third world and communist countries who claim that their government rests on popular support, particularly from the poorest elements of the society.

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