

DANGER TO DEMOCRACY IN INDIA

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A LEGALLY constituted, constitutionally valid and elected on a majority basis government has been thrown out of office in an authoritarian manner by a fiat from the Governor of the state (called province under the old British raj) of West Bengal, for the simple crime that this government, called the United Front (UF) government, dared bring about a certain measure of relief and radical measures to ameliorate, at least partially, the almost intolerable conditions under sky-rocketing prices of foodstuff and other essential commodities, consequent on widespread blackmarketing and corruption.

But there is a method by which the ruling Congress party at the Centre is trying to oust not only the Left government in West Bengal but also other non-Congress governments in other states. A government run by the Indian monopolists in collaboration with foreign imperialist interests is resorting to the good old method of purchasing votes of weak and vacillating members of the State Assembly (i.e. the provincial legislature responsible for the governance of the state in general, except of course foreign, defence and such other Central matters) and other Tammany Hall tactics of nepotism, jobbery and corruption. The broadest democratic opinion and all the parties of the Left, inside and outside the Assembly, are fighting back to assert the basic tenets and rules of parliamentary democracy and on its outcome depends the future of democracy and democratic institutions in India.

Three state governments have been toppled—Manipur, Haryana and West Bengal—and the difference in approach demonstrates the very quandary of the ruling Congress party at the Centre (i.e. the all-Union government at New Delhi).

In Manipur between the two sections of the bourgeoisie in the Assembly, when one section decided to include the socialists and a communist in the proposed Cabinet and found itself in a majority, the Assembly, though already summoned, was kept in suspense till some of the wavering votes could be purchased to topple the coming somewhat progressive Ministry. This is, of course, unconstitutional as the Assembly had already been summoned.

In Haryana, purchase and counter-purchase of Assembly voters reached a stage when both the sides were evenly matched. To resolve the tangle, a mid-term poll has been ordered—no doubt the only correct democratic procedure under the circumstances. But the point to note is that in Haryana both the warring parties belong to the bourgeois (i.e. Congress or right-wing) camp with no progressive representation so that the ruling Congress party at the Centre stands to lose nothing either way by a mid-term election.

Punjab had a non-Congress progressive Ministry with Satpal Dang of the Communist Party of India as the Food Minister. Punjab is a surplus food-producing province (or state) and the good traders have so long minted money out of people's food. The new Ministry and its food department stopped this trading in people's food by the government of Punjab resorting to wholesale buying of food grains and building up a considerable reserve. This surplus food reserve was offered to the Centre for supply to the deficit provinces. This was no doubt very much opposed by the vested interests. The Ministry was readily dismissed by the Governor.

In West Bengal there is a constitutional deadlock which we shall presently relate. The only democratic solution should have been a mid-term poll, a demand now voiced by all sections of democratic opinion; but this the Congress party will surely resist to the last because *a mid-term election without doubt will lead to a considerable majority for the parties of the outgoing United Front government and West Bengal will be like another Kerala.*

In the 1967 general election in West Bengal, all the Left parties could not agree on a single list of candidates to oppose the then ruling Congress party in a straight contest. Instead there were two Left fronts, one led by the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Bangla Congress (the leader of which, Ajoy Mukherjee, later became the Chief Minister of the UF government), and the other led by the CPI (Marxist) along with the Revolutionary Socialist party and others. This inevitably led to a considerable splitting of Left votes and confusion in other democratic circles. Even then the official Congress party could secure only 127 seats and the two other Left Fronts 151 seats in a house of 280. With four nominated seats for special reserve Anglo-Indian interests who pledged support to the Left fronts, the two Left fronts immediately combined to form the United Front government with Ajoy Mukherjee from the Bangla Congress as the chief Minister, Jyoti Basu of the CPI (Marxist) as the Deputy Chief Minister, Somnath Lahiri of the CPI

as Minister of Information, and Biswanath Mukherjee of the CPI and Harekrishna Konar of the CPI (Marxist) respectively, as Ministers of Irrigation and Land Revenue; the Labour Ministry was manned by Subodh Banerjee of the Socialist Unity Centre, while Sushil Dhara of the Bangla Congress, also its secretary, became the Minister for Industries.

The 18-point programme, which the UF government adopted, tried to tackle, among other things, two vital problems in relation to industry and agriculture. The trade union movement had long suffered from police interference. The new UF government immediately stopped police intervention in any dispute between the trade unions and the management or the owners, and thereby helped to restore some of the basic trade union rights of the working class, rights which are long since recognised as taken for granted in the British trade union and working-class movement.

In the field of agriculture and land relations, the basic rights of the sharecroppers (poor peasants who work on the land of the rich peasants and are entitled to get a share of the produce) not to be evicted from the land they till, was ensured.

It is obvious that both these moves by the UF government affected the vested interests behind the ruling Congress party at the Centre and a great hue and cry was raised that law and order had broken down in West Bengal.

One of the main points of the 18-point programme in relation to food was the banning of private wholesale trade in food grains. This was not easy as the main winter crop of 1966-67 was already in the hands of private wholesalers (themselves rich peasants or kulaks, called jotedars), when the new UF Ministry assumed power in March, 1967. The jotedars now started creating every difficulty to make the rationing system unworkable in the towns and hoarded the stock of rice to make its price go rocketing upwards. The Congress government at the Centre also added to the difficulty by withholding part of the promised supply of rice from the Centre to the state of West Bengal.

It must be noted in passing that even when the price of rice shot up to as high as almost five rupees per kilogram and certainly on an average nowhere below three rupees a kilogram, people girded up their loins and did not create any 'trouble' for the UF government. Be it noted that the 48-hour continuous general strike and complete stoppage (with the exception of the essential services, like ambulance, fire brigade, milk supply and medical services),

called hartal or bandh, on November 22-23 and again on November 30 *are not on any economic issue, but a sharp expression of clear-cut political battle against the undemocratic way* in which the Congress party is trying to stage a come-back in this province through Dr. P. C. Ghosh,* the ex-Food Minister of the now dismissed UF Ministry.

Ever since the installation of the UF government many nefarious attempts were made to discredit and dislodge it. The traditional game of the old British imperialist administration was to foster communal troubles and riots, i.e. strife between Hindus and Muslims or between one community and another, to disrupt the democratic and particularly the working-class movement. The same was tried on two occasions this summer, but in both the cases the swift action of the UF Ministers, displaying a good deal of courage in seeking popular support and co-operation, helped to nip it in the bud.

Then last September when the UF Cabinet, ignoring and overruling the Food Minister P. C. Ghosh's pro-jotedar food policy, was taking rather drastic measures to get at the people's food, the Congress party at the Centre along with the Governor Dharam Vira (a retired member of the old Indian Civil Service, the main prop of the British imperialist administration in India and taken over by the Congress after transfer of power) tried to wean away the Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee with scare stories about Chinese infiltration with the 'help' of the Left CPI (i.e. the CPI Marxist) members.

This first attempt to topple the UF government on October 2 could be foiled by the united strength of the traditional left-orientated mass movement in West Bengal led by the two Communist parties.

Then by mid-November, P. C. Ghosh resigned from the Cabinet as Food Minister and claimed that he had the support of 17 other members of the state Assembly, who were not supporting the UF government. This gave Governor Dharam Vira the plea to declare that the UF Cabinet had lost its majority support in the Assembly. Whether such a majority support has been lost by the UF Cabinet

* Dr. P. C. Ghosh is an ex-member of the old Working Committee of the Conservative Gandhian Congress when the then Bengal Provincial Congress Committee under Subhas Bose's presidentship was under joint left and communist leadership. In 1947 he was made the chief Minister of West Bengal but shortly after dismissed to make room for the late Dr. B. C. Roy, another member of the Congress Working Committee, in whom the foreign monopolists, particularly the British and other Marwari interests, had greater faith. Dr. P. C. Ghosh had then retired from active political life and only came back in the 1967 general election to get elected as an 'independent' with Left support. His constituency since his defection from the UF has challenged him in several large meetings to seek re-election.

could only be tested in a full session of the Assembly which the Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee wanted to convene by December 18. (It must be noted that according to the rules of procedure of the Assembly, the Chief Minister need not have convened the Assembly till February 1968, i.e. till the expiry of six months after the date of the last session of the Assembly which was in August.)

The Governor refused to accept this position and arbitrarily dismissed the UF Ministry on November 21 at 8 p.m. even when he was already in possession by 4 p.m. of a communication from the Chief Minister Ajoy Mukherjee that the latter would reconsider the earlier convening of the Assembly in his Cabinet meeting of November 23. P.C. Ghosh, the leader of the 17 members, with whom he formed the grandiose 'Progressive Democratic Front', was immediately sworn in the very moment after the dismissal of the UF Ministry, with Khagen Das Gupta, the leader of the Congress Assembly party, declaring his support to P. C. Ghosh.

Why this unseemly haste? Because Dharam Vira could find out by November 21 that even the 17 defectors from the UF were likely to 'defect' again back to the UF under the tremendous mass pressure that was brought to bear upon them by the mass movement outside the legislature.

The issue involved here in this undemocratic authoritarian procedure adopted by the Governor is nothing other than the simple question—whether the Governor acts on the advice of his Cabinet Ministers or independently. Britain has a constitutional monarchy. Does the British Monarch act independently and irrespective of the wishes of her Cabinet? If the Governor in a state Assembly or the President of India were to act independently of his Cabinet, will it not be a step towards authoritarianism?

This development towards authoritarianism is being and will be resisted by all democrats and communists. As Spain once proved the first broadest mobilisation and battleground for democracy against the fascist onslaught in the 'thirties, so here in West Bengal, round the question whether a mid-term poll takes place in the near future to solve this impasse in the only democratic way possible, will take place the broadest mobilisation of all democrats and democratic movement with the communists taking their full share in such a movement. We are confident that we will win.

APPENDIX

Since the dismissal of the United Front Government on November 21, 1967, a reign of police terror has been let loose in West Bengal. Over 6,000 people have been arrested, twelve people, including young boys, have been shot dead,

thousands of men and women have been mercilessly beaten up in the streets, inside university buildings, in their homes and in police lock-ups.

The facts of police brutality given below are but a fraction of the total horrifying reality, of which barely a word has appeared in the British press. A committee set up to defend democracy in West Bengal reports: 'They have put even the colonial atrocities of the British to shame.'

'At 4.50 p.m. on November 22, 1967, a jeep decorated with flags of various parties came to the Parade Ground near the Victoria Memorial. On it were standing Ex-Minister Biswanath Mukherjee and Amar Chakraborty . . . At 4.55 p.m. ten policemen on horseback attacked the jeep. Hundreds of policemen on foot armed with sticks followed them up with wild shouts. Next moment we could only see the rise and fall of hundreds of sticks . . . After a few minutes most of the leaders were rolling on the ground in pain. Even in that condition they were beaten with sticks and kicks.'

(Eye-witness report in *The Dainik Basumati*, November 23, 1967)

'On November 24 the police savagely attacked the Central Students' Demonstration in front of the Calcutta University. Hundreds of teenagers were severely beaten up and at least five were killed.'

(*The Dainik Basumati*, November 25)

From Goutam Chattopadhyay, Professor and Head of the Department of History, Surendranath College for Women, Calcutta:

'Out of twenty teachers who were present in the Raja Peary Mohan College, Uttarpara on December 16, eighteen were injured severely by the wanton assault of the police, the Vice-Principal was beaten black and blue and over fifty battered students lay groaning on the hard floor of the two hospitals of Uttarpara, largely uncared for . . . A bearer of the college was hurled downstairs from the balcony of the second floor and as I write his life hangs in the balance . . . We were taken to the college, which was in police custody for several hours on 16th. We saw the broken gate and smashed doors and bloody finger-prints everywhere on the walls . . . The office looked like a house after an earthquake—furniture broken, files ransacked. The college canteen was smashed up. The Principal's telephone was battered and broken. There were clots of blood in all these rooms and even in the pages of the telephone-guide.'

From Kiran Gupta, Principal of the Raja Peary Mohan College:

'I was a Congressman and I have seen police terror in the '30s and in '42. But never have I seen such cold-blooded brutality. . . This is what they have done to my boys and my colleagues in this 20th year of freedom.'