

An Open Letter To Congress (I) Members Of Parliament

WE have been feeling a growing sense of disappointment with the way you have allowed yourselves to become willing tools in the process of undermining democratic procedures. The ordinance which permits government to withhold from parliament the report of any Commission of Enquiry is the most recent example of this process. The way it was passed, in deliberate disregard of parliament, shows the contempt in which you, as people's representatives, are held.

What is alarming is that even as you disregard the rights and interests of the people, the ordinance amending section 3 of the Commission of Enquiry Act (1952) is indifferent to your rights as representatives of the people. It almost ordains you to become mindless zombies compelled to follow any course of action determined by the high command.

You as members of parliament will no longer be entitled to study and debate reports prepared by Commissions of Enquiry into issues of utmost importance to the people you represent.

The ordinance states that "in the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States or public interest" the government can withhold from parliament any report. Reports on various communal riots can be withheld on the ground that it is not in the public interest to release them despite the fact that the public and their representatives have a right to know who are behind such riots.

The ordinance is so vaguely worded that the government will not even be called upon to give reasons for withholding reports. They do not even pretend to have any adequate justification for keeping the facts from you. This is the final affront directed at you who are supposed to represent the people of this country.

The Anti Defection Bill was supposed to make you more responsible to the people. In fact, it only enslaved you further to the ruling clique. Instead of being accountable to the people, you hold

yourselves accountable only to your party leaders.

This was best demonstrated in the way many of you, who vehemently disagreed with the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce Bill) succumbed to the aptly termed "whip" and voted it into the lawbook. In the case of the recent ordinance, the ruling clique did not think it necessary even to go through this ritual. This shows that they are beginning to disregard you even as a rubber stamp.

The ordinance is a symptom of a serious malady afflicting the Indian polity. Over the last two decades, institutional safeguards, checks and controls on those in power, have gradually been eroded. This process became visible during the Emergency in the passing of such arbitrary laws as the MISA and subsequently in the enactment of the NSA, ESMA, Anti Terrorist Act. As a result repression is unleashed in some parts of the country and undemocratic laws passed to facilitate it, while people in other parts are kept in ignorance of the murders, jailings and tortures of innocent people, the government controlled media being used to spread lies.

Inner party democracy is even more of a farce than the version that prevails in the country at large. Regrettably, behind your relinquishment of dignity and self respect is the fear of losing the little power you still cling to so precariously. In preindependence days, the Congress cap and *khadi* attire were symbols of sincerity, simplicity and dedication to people's freedom and rights. A person wearing these symbols was viewed with spontaneous respect and affection. Today, these have, in the popular imagination, become symbols of hypocrisy, corruption and self seeking. You cannot absolve yourselves of a part of the responsibility for this change in people's perceptions.

The Congress had, at one time, the unique good fortune of having as its leader Mahatma Gandhi, who commanded greater influence over the people of India than any other leader, although he never

occupied any seat of governmental power.

Today, you have little trust in and are little trusted by the people; We may fail in persuading you to respect the people's rights, but at least take your own rights as elected representatives seriously. Do not let yourselves be bypassed in this contemptuously arbitrary manner. We want you to consider the following courses of action in your own interest:

1. Do not allow major rulings like the recent ordinance to be implemented without expressing your disapproval, without at least making some attempt to resist it;

2. Take your role in parliament seriously, seek advice from your constituency, get informed about the issues, reorganise the Lok Sabha into real committees to participate intelligently in considering bills, instead of blindly obeying orders from above, thus making a mockery of your role;

3. Take the people, whose representatives you are, into your confidence. Give them information on matters that concern them. You can only do this if you insist on being informed yourselves. The recent ordinance is designed to withhold vital information not only from the people but also from you;

4. Build institutional safeguards for the democratic process. Dismantle the structure which was laid during the Emergency and is now being reinforced. Revoke the MISA, NSA, Disturbed Areas Act, the law enabling government employees to be dismissed without enquiry, and other such repressive legislation;

5. Consider your own rights inextricably bound up with the rights of the people. You need to safeguard yourselves not from the people but from your leaders who are trampling on your rights. Your response should be to organise yourselves in a group for political and human rights, to resist such ..treatment. If you participate in the repression of the people and the snatching away of their rights, you will be signing your own sentence of life imprisonment.

—Madhu Kishwar, Ruth Vanita, Inder Mohan, Gautam Navlakha, Ashish Nandy, Smitu Kothari, Anand Patwardhan.