



Internal Security

Tinkering with the Armed Forces

By KANNAN SRINIVASAN

ONE question has not been considered in the public discussion on the Bhagwat affair. That here is a party not remarkably successful at democratic rule, which now seeks to pack the senior military commands with its own men — in the pursuit of a consensus outside the parliamentary system, consistent with its authoritarian ideology.

The Admiral is after all a public servant; and as such would ordinarily merit an hearing, even if not a public one. It is worth noting that a hearing, with independent public testimony to the legislature and its committees, is normally available in other liberal democracies.

Dynamic Leader

We know that such openness has only been for the good. When the American General Douglas MacArthur defied civilian authority in April 1951 by invading North Korea and enlarging the scope of the hostilities with that country and its allies, China and the Soviet Union, he was sacked by President Harry Truman. And rightly so. But the American people had a chance to find out for themselves the justice of the President's action because the General ventilated his point of view at length before a public inquiry by Congress.

When Admiral John Fisher resigned over the conduct of the war in Turkey in May 1915, the cabinet minister in charge of the Navy felt bound in honour to resign; though it was generally accepted that he was by far the most dynamic member of the war cabinet. He was Winston Churchill.

Moreover, the government's general conduct of national security only inspires a lack of confidence. Who remembers Defence Minister George Fernandes' discovery of Chinese bases in the Cocos Islands? Or his discovery of a Chinese helicopter base in Arunachal Pradesh? Or his statement that there had been a Chinese incursion into Indian territory on the basis of private information provided to him, he claimed, by the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh? All these are grave matters. Amazingly, none has been substantiated.

This government has betrayed India's traditional stand on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and its protest against the hegemonic control of the nu-

clear powers. As the result of India's nuclear tests, a near-nuclear Pakistan has embarked on the development of a weapons capability targeting India. And India has complained to the United States that China is its principal adversary. Given this pattern of behaviour, is there sufficient reason to trust it on any matter of national security?

Moreover, if we are concerned with matters in the Naval chief's past, we should also remember that there are many things about those who constitute this government and have access to state secrets which should cause concern. Powerful private firms now exercise extraordinary influence in this government and have access to state secrets which should cause concern. And the defence minister, when he presided over the ministry of industries, initiated comprehensive agreements with foreign firms which undermined the Indian public sector.

Democracy cannot consist in undermining public services in the name of elected authority. Democracy requires that the public services be insulated from private agendas and illegal and unconstitutional acts. Now, senior staff representations against Admiral Bhagwat could indeed indicate his inability to manage men. This is a matter of concern in the head of a service. But there is another possibility, far more alarming: they could indicate the defence ministry's willingness to encourage such representations, and stir up trouble against a man it did not want. Were this true, it would indeed be infinitely reckless behaviour on the part of the Vajpayee government. It seems to be very important for it to have men of its choice — not merely able public servants, but its own men in key positions — especially in the defence and security establishments. For this the BJP is willing to take significant risks.

Public Services

Like others, the BJP has come to power without a majority. No government in recent years has had a natural majority: Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi flirted with Hindu interests in Kashmir and at Ayodhya; and Mr V P Singh tried to build a coalition of backward castes. So too, the BJP, having grown on anti-Muslim propaganda, discovered its limitations. Now

its economic policies are no different from those of the Congress or the United Front.

So the unique weapon in the hands of the government in office remains the call of national security. Pokhran II failed to evoke any countrywide enthusiasm. But it would seem to be part of a larger project. Both the defence minister and Home Minister L K Advani have focused on limiting external and internal threats as they perceive them to national security; and focusing on a limited identifiable agenda. For that reason, the government has supported Mr Chandrababu Naidu's campaign against Naxalites in Andhra; attempted to do deals in the North East and with neighbouring states; and focused on internal repression in Kashmir.

Authoritarian Party

The Bharatiya Janata Party has focused on dominating the consensus on national security. For the last few years, it has assiduously wooed senior army officers, a number of whom have joined it immediately after retirement. This is unique among political parties. No other has treated the armed forces as a votebank. Jawans and officers have been Tamils or Garhwalis; never wooed as men who employ firearms and can exert authority. The fear of the "man on horseback" has been too deeply ingrained in other political parties. But the BJP is different; it is an avowedly authoritarian party.

Now for such a consensus to be forged with the armed forces, it is important to develop a rapport with a sufficient number of senior serving officers. For this, it is also important for such a political party in office to pick and choose among senior officers for promotion, reward its own men and punish those not committed to its ideology. The cry of "the nation in danger" and the consequent pursuit of extraordinary authority to maintain internal and external security — could be the BJP's last hope in office. We may be misled: the threat to democracy may not be Admiral Bhagwat, but the BJP government itself, in alliance with a section of the armed forces.

