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DEMOCRACY and DEFENSE in INDIA

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DESPITE the passage of time, the definition of democracy, "a form of government of the people, by the people, and for the people," is still the best. It is certainly the most suitable definition of Indian democracy which is distinguishable from at least two other forms of government prevalent today. One is the government of the class, as in Communist countries, which is also sometimes described as "democratic." The other is dictatorship in which an individual or a caucus dominates.

There are many features which distinguish the liberal democracy of India from the latter two, but, pre-eminently, one is inspired by consent and the others are inspired by force. Therefore, if India is to retain one of her principal impulses of governance, the control of military power, which represents the most organized form of force, is of crucial importance.

The Constitution of the Republic of India provides the mainsprings of policy and the framework and guide-



lines of government. Unlike the US Constitution, the Indian Constitution is a massive document of about 100,000 words dealing with diverse subjects in great detail. Four of its provisions are pertinent.

● It provides for a Parliament at the center and an Assembly for each of the 17 states of India. The Parliament consists of a President and two Houses of the Legislature. Of the two, the House of the People is the most powerful and is directly elected on a country-wide basis by the vote of the adult population. The House of Assembly is similarly elected. The Parliament and the Assemblies then elect the President who becomes the chief executive of the state. The President calls upon the leader of the largest party in Parliament to form a Council of Ministers with the leader as the Prime Minister. Thus, a Cabinet form of government comes into being, and is responsible to the Parliament, and, ultimately, to the people. A similar arrangement also comes into being in the states.

● The Constitution provides that all citizens of India, irrespective of religion, caste, or color, but subject to the prescribed age limits, are entitled to vote. Elections to the Parliament and the Assemblies are, therefore, by all the people. In order that these elections be scrupulously fair, the Constitution also lays down the machinery for elections which oper-

ates throughout the country under a Chief Election Commissioner. The position and status of this officer are carefully guaranteed and guarded in the Constitution itself.

● Each citizen of India has been granted the right of freedom which is one of the seven fundamental rights guaranteed in the Constitution. By this right, which even the Parliament cannot abrogate, he has the freedom of speech, expression, and association which are at the heart of the process of choosing representatives.

● The Constitution provides for the establishment of a judiciary with detailed safeguards for its independent, impartial functioning. One of its duties is to safeguard the citizen's fundamental rights.

Thrust of Democracy

According to the Constitution, India must hold elections every five years. These have, in fact, been held regularly since the Constitution was inaugurated in 1950. The latest election, which was the fourth of its kind, was held in February 1967. There were 20 main parties, a few miscellaneous organizations, and a large number of independents who took the field. The Congress Party won absolute majority in the national Parliament but with numbers greatly reduced. Only seven of the 17 states returned the Congress Party to power. One state returned Communists, another a purely regional party, a third a rightist party, and seven states were forced into coalition governments, with the Congress Party having the largest number elected in each case but lacking an absolute majority.

While this fourth election has underlined the prevalence and thrust of liberal democracy, it has also

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brought into relief the role of military power in India. There can now be two lines of future development. Even though there are governments of varying political complexions at the national level and in the states, they could function together smoothly as in the United States. In that event, military power performs its normal

democracy are the reservoir of power—are important factors in determining political trends.

In present-day India, the soldier is a popular figure. He symbolizes order and efficiency, in contrast to the riots and the rough and tumble of political life. He also evokes sympathy for a variety of reasons. He has spent most



United Nations

The Indian soldier symbolizes order and efficiency and has contributed much to United Nations peace-keeping forces

main function of security against external dangers. But they may be at loggerheads, in which case military power will be involved in internal threats as well as external dangers, and will become a key factor in the stability and integrity of the state.

One may ask how the armed forces have figured in the present election, remembering that the attitudes and responses of the people—who in a

of his life since independence in difficult border areas, defending the country against China or Pakistan. If he met reverses at the hands of the Chinese, the fault, it is considered, was the politician's, not his.

Most families have sent their sons to the armed forces which have expanded rapidly during the last five years. Expansion coupled with conflicts with the two neighbors have

engendered countrywide military consciousness and, therefore, have accentuated appreciation of the role of military power in national life.

Consequently, all national parties sought to project their military programs to the public in their manifestos. True to form, these programs made a variety of approaches to the defense problems. The Congress Party stayed with its policy of nonalignment and cautious arms buildup. The rightists were in favor of a military alliance with Western Powers. The more extreme among the rightists also advocated such an alliance, but, in addition, wanted massive militarization of the people and the production of nuclear weapons.

Adequate Military Strength

There was a universal consensus on one matter: There should be adequate military strength to ward off aggression and to counter threats. Any government of tomorrow which is incapable of this will have trouble with the people.

Although wanting strength, the people were not worried about how this was to be achieved, but left the matter to those who were at the helm of government. Military power, as such, was, therefore, not an election issue. More intimate and immediate problems swayed the minds of the voters. These problems included rising prices, unemployment, religious safeguards, municipal facilities, education, standards of morality in public life, and general performance of the ruling parties. Besides, neither the parties nor the people at any time supported any method other than the constitutional democratic process for good government.

The Indian Constitution lists two separate sets of responsibilities, one

for the Union and the other for the states, with the proviso that, in an emergency, the Union can also take over the subjects of the states. Defense falls in the Union list, and the armed forces, militia, and their infrastructure are built, controlled, and administered by the Central Government. The states have nothing to do with them, although they can always ask for their assistance. A recalcitrant state must, therefore, face the fact that it has no military power of its own, and that the troops stationed within its territory owe their allegiance to the Central authority.

Article 53

The crucial provision of the Constitution in this connection lies in Article 53 which says that, "The supreme command of the Defense Forces of the Union shall be vested in the President and the exercise thereof shall be regulated by law." The President is the chief executive of the state. Since he holds the supreme command, this signifies that military authority is subservient to civil authority. But the command cannot be exercised by the President on his own in an autocratic manner; it has to be exercised in accordance with the law framed by the Parliament.

Insofar as military power is vested in civil authority and the civil authority has been forbidden its untrammelled use, this provision forms the cornerstone of government under liberal democracy.

Preoccupied with a host of issues and being a large body, the Parliament is concerned with defense only at the highest level. Of three principal facets of power—control, strategy, and command—Parliament is interested mainly with control, seldom with strategy, and never with command.

Three forms of parliamentary control are prevalent at present. By passing the Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force Acts, the Parliament has constituted the three arms of service and given a three-pronged structure to the defense services. Only Parliament can alter this structure. The defense budget has to be presented yearly to the Parliament which thus exercises financial control over defense. The Parliament has also established "Estimates Committees" which review periodically the functioning of the defense machinery in its various aspects.

Chain of Command

The President holds the levers of command and operations. His role is nominal; the real power lies in the hands of the Council of Ministers which is the Cabinet under the Prime Minister. From the Cabinet, authority is further channeled to the Defense Minister who is equivalent to the US Secretary of Defense, his various committees and assisting councils, and the headquarters of the three services. The Defense Minister is normally a senior member of the Cabinet and has a number of committees. The most powerful is one which he heads himself and includes two Deputy Defense Ministers, the Defense Secretary, the three Chiefs of Staff, the Scientific Advisor, and the Financial Advisor. All major decisions of interministerial and interservice character are made here.

The Chiefs of Staff have a dual position. As a committee, they are the expert military advisors to the Defense Minister. As individuals, they are the heads of their respective services, and are responsible for the recruiting, training, equipping, and administration of each of their serv-

ices. Along with their headquarters, they provide a demarcation line between high defense policy on one side and administration and operation of the service on the other.

The fulcrum of this system lies in the Ministry of Defense headed by the Defense Secretary. This Ministry plays three roles. It is the Secretariat



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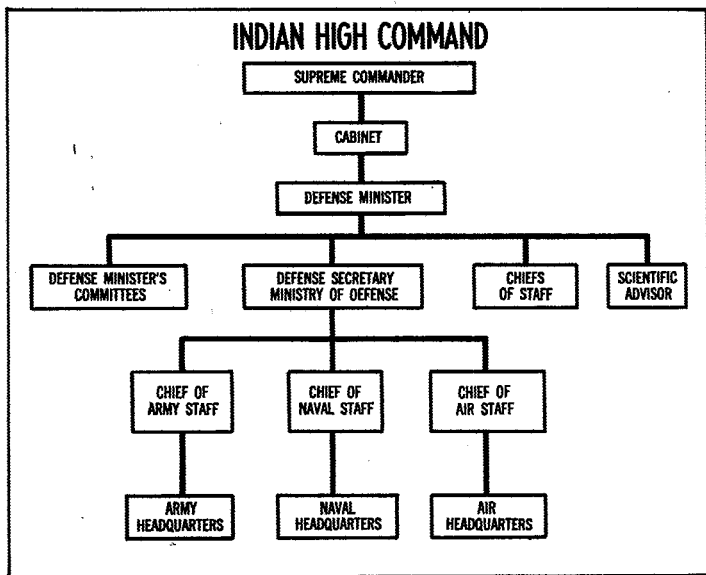
Shri Swaran Singh, Defense Minister of India

to the Defense Minister, collecting and feeding him information and providing him with assistance. Aided by this Secretariat, he discharges his responsibilities as the ministerial executive of defense, as advisor to the Cabinet, and as the government's spokesman on defense in the House of the People. It is also the body which controls and supervises the functioning of the army, navy, and air force. Finally, it controls and

administers a large number of ordnance factories, defense undertakings, and military institutions.

There are certain features of this mechanism of defense control which are not obvious but are noteworthy. The higher levels of the high command, where policy is made and principal directives are issued, are pre-

Inserted into this machinery and yet having a highly distinctive individuality is the figure of the Financial Advisor. He is not a defense official, but is the representative of the Ministry of Finance, an entirely separate civilian body headed by another high-ranking Cabinet Minister. He not only has the final say in the alloca-



dominantly civilian. Apart from the Supreme Commander, who is a civilian, the Cabinet is composed of civilian Ministers responsible to the Parliament where military elements are negligible. In the echelon below the Defense Minister, all officers are civilian except the three Chiefs of Staff. The Ministry of Defense, composed of many hundreds of officials, is completely civilian.

tion of defense funds, but also supervises their disbursement at all levels of the military complex from the headquarters to the lowest formation. In theory, as well as in practice, the purse strings of defense are in the hands of officials outside defense.

As far as status goes, the Chief of Staff is high in the Indian hierarchy. He is number 22, if he holds the rank of full general, in the Warrant

of Precedence in which the President is number one. In the body of the high command, however, he is one among many outstanding officials. As a body, the Chiefs of Staff have direct access to the Defense Minister, but as individual heads of their respective service, they must approach him only through the Defense Secretary. They have no direct access either to the Prime Minister or the Cabinet.

Thus, in military matters, the Chiefs of Staff make recommendations with regard to the size, organization, weapons and equipment, and infrastructure of the armed forces. But the ultimate decisions are in the hands of the Cabinet and are implemented by the chiefs only after the Cabinet has issued directives.

Resources for the maintenance of the armed forces are produced by organizations which are controlled and administered by the Ministry of Defense. These resources include weapons and equipment of all types, military installations, cantonment areas, and strategic roads, railways, and airfields. Scientific research into weapons systems and allied matters is also controlled by the Ministry. The armed forces have no authority and no resources of their own to manufacture arms, but they make recommendations, provide specifications and technical advice and sometimes make their own experts available to institutions producing weapons or doing research.

The value of the Indian defense control system, which has been in operation for only 17 years, cannot be fully determined. Certain gaps

in it are, in fact, already being pointed out. It is said that the Parliament as a whole has been rather indifferent, leaving matters too much to its executive wing which has allowed defense to deteriorate. It is also said that the military control is not only under civil authority, which is justifiable, but also too much under the civil servant, which is not justifiable.

The higher echelons are considered topheavy and complicated with far too many committees and procedural tangles to be efficient enough for quick decisions. The Indian system is based upon the old pre-1963 British model which has since been reformed by the creation of a unified inter-service staff for higher defense planning and strategy. Some such reform, which is in conformity with the present-day requirements of war, should also be introduced in India. There are critics who say that the Indian debacle against the Chinese in 1962 was due, at least partially, to deficiencies in the Indian High Command.

But these are matters which relate to a few parts of the system and their functioning, and not to the system as a whole with its characteristic inspiration, character, and mold. This system, conforming to the highest traditions of liberal democracy and rooted in the Constitution and built on the principles of civil-military relationship, has so far enabled India to pass with reasonable success through the stresses and storms of the post-war period. It bodes well for the future.