

# 1975

## The Emergency

# “Democracy had been hijacked to serve personal interests”

■ By M.J. Akbar

The Emergency of 1975, imposed by Indira Gandhi, was like mumps or chicken pox on the body politic of India: you had to suffer from it once in order to become immune. If it had come later, it might have proved fatal.

It was not the first proclamation of the Emergency by the Union Government. Indira Gandhi's father, Jawaharlal Nehru, also imposed an Emergency when the bravado he had encouraged during the early stages of the war with China evaporated after humiliation in the Himalayas by the armies of Chairman Mao Zedong. But in 1962 Indians responded to the Emergency with a passionate display of unity and sacrifice, particularly after they learnt the bitter truth of defeat. The 1975 Emergency was imposed not because India was in danger but because Indira was in danger. The nation's reaction was stunned anger. Democracy had been hijacked to serve personal interests. It was the ultimate betrayal.

Everything that can be said has been written about when and why this Emergency was declared, and how it was manipulated through a craven Congress, an imprisoned Opposition and an obedient judiciary. Less is known about why it was lifted. According to a source very close to Mrs Gandhi, and one important enough in the political pecking order to be mentioned in the succession stakes after her assassination, she took the decision in December 1976 to call for the overdue general

election. Word was put out to intelligence agencies and confidants to check the national mood. Her son Sanjay Gandhi, young, arrogant, dictatorial and completely insensitive to democracy and its values, was furious when he heard that his mother had gone “soft”.

In Sanjay's scheme of things, they could have continued with the

In the meantime, astrologers, the usual musicians of India's political symphonies, came into play and proclaimed that any announcement could be made only in the more auspicious second half of January. The decision remained in doubt, said my source, till the first few days of January, when Mrs Gandhi decided that she needed the legitimacy of a popular victory to remain in power. Her words were significant as she took her decision: “If we do not go to the people now, we will never go to them again.”

Cynics might take a less flattering view, and heaven knows that Mrs Gandhi gave sufficient reason for cynicism. But, with the perspective of three decades, I do believe that she was more a child of Nehru than the mother of Sanjay. Power was important to her, but, in the final analysis, not more important than nationalism. We were lucky that the Emergency was a weapon that she chose to use, because by reversing it, Mrs Gandhi also made this Constitutional provision impotent forever.

Indian unity has shown the tensile strength to withstand rebellions in the north-west and north-east and murmurs in the south. But it is only as strong as Indian democracy, for it is democracy that gives every Indian a practical stake in his country's present and future. The Emergency of 1975 was a turning point precisely because time stood still during those 19 months.

(The writer is editor, The Asian Age.)



**IN CHAINS: George Fernandes being produced in court during the Emergency**

Emergency for another 20 years and, as he argued, “put this country right”. Like Mussolini, he wanted the trains to run on time. That this would have turned India into another tinpot dictatorship of the kind prevalent all across the Third World was of little consequence to him. He put enormous pressure on his mother to reverse gear.