POLITICAL PRISONERS

Over the last two months a spate of arrests on the far left have given evidence of a hardening in the response of the administration. When these are evaluated in conjunction with the retrogressive Legal Framework Order considerable scepticism is engendered in the public mind. The administration's commitment to a transitory role where it hands over power tot he elected representatives of the people is taking some hard knocks. It is therefore important for the administration to evaluate its recent crack-down in the light of its long term commitments.

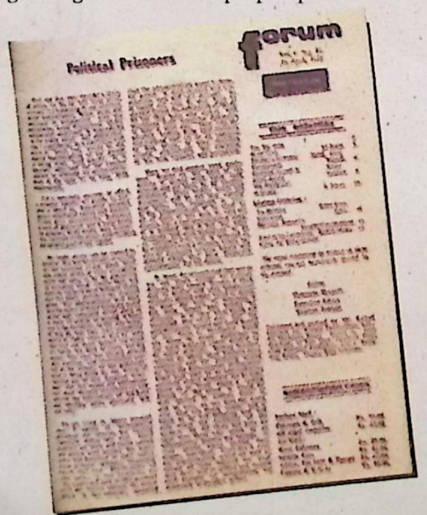
If it is genuinely anxious to effect a peaceful transfer of power no purpose is served by draconian measure against established parties and leaders. It only gives provocations, generates a sense of grievance and a focal point for agitation, all of which may jeopardise the peace of the polity and threaten the declared goal of the regime.

No single arrest can be viewed in isolation. If a low level cadre is arrested, the hierarchy of the party must take notice of this if their credibility within the party is to be preserved. In protesting these arrests they are likely to say even more militant things than that which provoked kthe original arrest. The administration will then face the choice of either cracking down on the high command of the party in a chain of arrests or turning a blind eye tot he statements of the top brass. If they do this their own credibility will be at stake, since it will be seen that thay can move against the small fry but do not dare to touch the big names. This view has already gained wide currency, and considerable capital at the expense of the administration in being made by the forces of reaction out of this apparent weakness. For this reason the administration must seriously re-evaluate its role towards the enforcement of MLR-60 and ancillary edicts enforcing law and order.

We are living in highly unusual times. A decade of accumulated grievances and tensions are finding expression within one year. Party machines are rusty and thinly spread and cannot even control the statements and behaviour of their cadres whose political militancy frequently exceeds their own. The * tendency of some parties to cast aspersions on the loyalty and faith of their political rivals has further charged the atmosphere. In this situation, assuming that the administration wants to transfer power, it must proceed with considerable tact and self restraint. As it stands not only do they have to operate within the constraints of MLR-60 but they must also reckon with incitement from ostensible democra--t's to take a hard line. Their own impatience, coming from their tradition and training also act as an incentive to firm action. It must therefore require considerable self discipline to act with restraint and perspective.

Here we may suggest some guidelines. Arrests on the basis of the written or spoken word serve little purpose and are likely to be counter-productive. Many violent words and documents will be put into circulation before the campaign is over. It the administration is to react to all of them it will have to turn the country into a vast concentration camp. It is unlikely that it has the time, resources and even inclination to do so. Certainly if its role is intended to be transitory such a measure would ensure an extension of both tenure and turmoil which may have disastrous consequences for our future.

It must be remembered that words are the small change of politics. Anyone who cannot develop a thick skin to hostile and even tendentious comment should either retire or decide to bear the cost of becoming a full scale tyrant who brooks no criticism. It is only when words are translated into overt acts that the administration should feel itself bound to act. Calls to revolution which are made in public gatherings on the main highway rarely deserve to be taken seriously. Serious revolutionaries go about their business more cautiously and are perfectly willing to face the consequences of discovery. Until such time as an administration uncovers armed attempts for its over-throw or to bring about a violent breach of the peace it would be well advised to contain itself. It will be seen, as has been the world over, that too much violent talk is likely to be self defeating and will only strain the credibility of the speaker. So far there has been no signs that those who speak in an inflammatory manner are capable or even serious about putting their slogans into effect. Until this is done the administration would do well to release all those indicated for what they have said or written and reserve their energies for safeguarding the transition to people's power.



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The views expressed by writers in these columns are not necessarily shared by the Journal.

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