

India's Fernandes-former rebel, now with a cause.

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NEW DELHI, May 27 (Reuters) - In June 1976, after a year in hiding, George Fernandes was arrested on charges of waging war against the state and paraded in manacles before the cameras.

The firebrand chairman of India's Socialist Party was accused of being a major conspirator in the Baroda Dynamite Case, which centred around a plot to blow up railway tracks and sabotage economic installations.

The 1975-77 state of emergency imposed by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was marked by widespread arrests of political opponents and press censorship. When she eased her grip and called elections in March 1977, Fernandes stood as a candidate from prison - and won.

"I waged war against the state when the state had abandoned a democratic constitution and values. Today, as minister of defence I am concerned with defending the interests of a very democratic state," Fernandes told Reuters in an interview on Wednesday.

India's defence minister, who turns 68 next week, has been a lifelong rebel. He lists "trade unionist and political activist" as his professions and edits "the OtherSide", a monthly magazine.

Fernandes had the gates to his government bungalow in New Delhi removed so crowds of his admirers can walk in. His aides complain that he never turns a visitor away. Early-morning callers find the minister hand-washing his own clothes.

A Roman Catholic from the western coastal city of Mangalore, he first won election to parliament in 1967 from India's commercial capital Bombay but then switched base across the subcontinent to the northern state of Bihar.

Being on either side of the fence is not new to Fernandes.

In 1974 he led a huge nationwide railway strike, one of the acts of defiance that pushed Gandhi into striking back with the emergency measures. Fifteen years later he was federal railway minister.

Soon after he took over as defence minister on March 19 in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's coalition government, Fernandes began to ring warning bells on China's growing military clout in the region.

He says he was surprised by world reaction to his remarks.

"It didn't strike me that what you say as minister of defence was what going to be taken in the same manner as what you said when you were not minister of defence. Therefore I had not anticipated the kind of reaction that emerged," he said.

A week after a particularly hawkish speech in which he accused China of building an electronic surveillance base in Myanmar's Coco Islands south of India, and of beefing up airfields in Tibet, India conducted the first three of a stunning series of five underground nuclear tests.

Indian magazines have said Fernandes himself was kept in the dark about the nuclear plan until the last moment.

"I was speaking in terms of our security perceptions, and that it configured in a way that people thought that I was acting as a curtain-raiser for (the tests) is very unfortunate," Fernandes told Reuters.

Fernandes said he had been misquoted as saying China was India's "enemy number one" and added: "I was asked in a television interview if China is enemy number one and I said in our overall threat perception, China is potential threat number one."

Fernandes's Samata Party is a key partner in the federal coalition government. How did he find being a socialist in an alliance dominated by Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party?



Fernandes said he was upset that the Western press kept referring to Vajpayee as a "Hindu prime minister".

"I don't know how the coalition is a Hindu government. By that token every government in Europe ought to be a Christian government," he said.

"Being a socialist I am concerned with a whole lot of issues, and I pursue those issues. But as a minister of this government I pursue the policies and programmes in our national agenda."

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"Believe that India has remained a very soft state, soft in every sense of the term," Fernandes told in an interview, his first since the series of five tests on May 11 and 13 which caused a global uproar.

"The Indian people have to recognise the fact that a Pokhran II does not make India a major power or a super power," he said, referring to Pokhran, the desert site where India also conducted its first underground test in May 1974.

"It is the economic development of this country, a much faster and a much bigger growth rate... these are the things that ultimately matter."

Asked if India would press ahead with its missile programme, particularly the development of the Agni ballistic missile, Fernandes said: "I think these two programmes (nuclear and missile) are complementary to each other."

"When we say that India will now be a nuclear weapons state, implied in it was that India will have to respond," he added.

He did not deny when asked if this meant India would move to build a nuclear arsenal and said: "Otherwise this test will have gone in vain. After all we had a test in 1974 and it went in vain. Nobody should believe that what we did this time will also be allowed to go in vain."

But he repeated Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's pledge that India would now observe a moratorium on further testing.

"I can assure you that the tests have given us whatever India we needed and there is no reason why we should go in for more tests. When the prime minister says it is a moratorium, it is so. Amen," he said.

During the interview Fernandes expressed India's position on the 1978 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), both of which it has refused to sign on the grounds that they are discriminatory.

The CTBT is very discriminatory, and the CTBT discrimination is rooted in the NPT, because the NPT says that those who produced nuclear weapons will those who committed to test nuclear weapons before a particular date, they will be termed as the nuclear weapons states, and there are five states.

Fernandes said the CTBT labelled India a "nuclear threshold state" along with Pakistan and Israel.

"We can't sign a treaty which says we are a threshold state because we say that we are a nuclear weapons state, which means instead of five, it will be six states. How to do it is the question on which one has to talk. In a manner of speaking... back to the drawing board."

Fernandes, a lifelong socialist who lists his professions as "trade unionist, agriculturalist, political activist and journalist", sounded a conciliatory note on China in contrast with earlier hawkish remarks that painted a picture of encirclement by hostile neighbours.

"China constantly has said whatever disputes it has it wants to solve them through peaceful means. That is our position also."

"So far as existing problem on which talks have been going on now for a very long time, on these issues there seems to be an understanding that we need to pursue confidence-building measures and come to some conclusion. I believe this process will continue."

