India: BJP-led coalition sacks Bihar state government

A correspondent
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India's ruling coalition, which is dominated by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has seized on mounting landlord violence to sack the government of Bihar, India's second most populous state. Claiming that law and order had broken down in the state, the Atal Vajpayee government dismissed Bihar's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government and placed the state under "presidential rule" February 13, less than 48 hours after a landlord militia had massacred 12 Bihari villagers.

With the RJD's dismissal, control of the state government has been transferred to Bihar's governor, Sunder Singh Bhandari, who was a BJP vice-president until shortly before his appointment to the "non-political" post of governor.

The BJP and the Samata Party, a BJP coalition partner, have long sought to unseat the RJD and get their hands on the Bihar state administration. The RJD's strong performance in India's 1998 general election was one of the principal reasons the BJP and its pre-election allies failed to win a majority in parliament.

The crass political motivation behind the Vajpayee government's invocation of Article 356 of India's constitution--the legal mechanism that allows India's central government to remove state administrations--was underlined when BJP supporters descended into the streets of Patna and other Bihari cities to celebrate the RJD's dismissal.

The BJP's claims to be acting in defence of the Dalit agricultural workers are belied by the Hindu chauvinist party's entire history. Like its predecessor the Jana Sangh, the BJP has always been popularly associated with a pro-big business and pro-landlord agenda and the defence of social hierarchy, including the caste system.

The RJD is the name given the political machine of Laloo Prasad Yadav. A corrupt demagogue, Yadav was forced in 1997 to relinquish the post of Bihar chief minister and expelled from the Janata Dal, the bourgeois party that was at the core of India's United Front government, after he was indicted on corruption charges. He promptly installed his wife, Rabri Devi, as Bihar's chief minister. Yadav has based his political appeal on Bihari regionalism and Yadav-caste consciousness, but he also poses as a spokesman for the poor and India's Muslim minority, making strident denunciations of the BJP's Hindu communalism.

The major Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), have denounced the imposition of presidential rule on Bihar. But for the Stalinists this is not merely a question of exposing the antidemocratic character of Article 356 and opposing the attempts of the BJP to consolidate its reactionary rule. Yadav and his RJD are touted by the Stalinists as key elements in the "secular front" that they hope will topple the BJP-led coalition and replace it with one led by India's traditional bourgeois party, the Congress. Last Saturday the Stalinist leaders welcomed Yadav to a "People's Convention against Communalism" in New Delhi.

The Congress, for its part, deliberated some 10 days before deciding to oppose the ouster of the RJD. In the last general election, the Congress was allied with the RJD against both the BJP-led electoral front and the ruling United Front (of which the Stalinist parties were a key component.) But recently the Congress parliamentary group in the Bihar state legislature withdrew its support for the RJD.

One reason the Congress took so long to arrive at a position on the RJD's ouster was its fear that opposition to the imposition of presidential rule in Bihar will further de-legitimise the use of Article 356--a

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constitutional mechanism Congress governments have long valued as a means of upholding both party and ruling class interests.

The Congress's decision to oppose the RJD's dismissal places parliamentary endorsement of the Vajpayee government's actions in Bihar in considerable doubt and clearly has caught the BJP leadership off guard. After all, in the wake of the Dalit massacre, Congress President Sonia Gandhi had herself said that the RJD no longer had the moral authority to govern.

Even if parliament ultimately does sanction the imposition of "presidential rule" in Bihar, the BJP's use of Article 356 has exacerbated tensions within the ruling coalition. Several of the regional parties that are sustaining the Vajpayee government--including the Sikh communalist Akali Dal, the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam and the Kashmiri National Conference--are opposed to the very existence of Article 356.

On the other hand, another key BJP ally, the Tamilnad-based AIDMK, has stepped up its pressure for the Vajpayee government to use Article 356 against its chief rival, Tamilnad's DMK government. The BJP's West Bengal coalition partner, the Trinamool Congress, has also voiced its support for the DMK's dismissal. AIDMK supremo Ms. J. Jayalitha is determined to unseat the DMK, because it is her best chance to derail a series of corruption cases against her and her former state administration.

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