

Defection from India's ruling coalition threatens BJP-led government

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10 April 1999

The Tamilnad-based AIADMK, the second largest party in India's ruling coalition, has withdrawn its support for the government of Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee. With India's parliament set to resume sitting April 15, India's Bharatiya Janata Party led-coalition is now at risk of being voted out of office before the end of next week.

AIADMK supremo Ms. Jayalalitha ordered the two AIADMK ministers in the Vajpayee government--M. Thambi Durai, the minister of Law, Justice and Company Affairs, and M. R. Janarthanam, minister of State for Personnel--to resign, after an emergency cabinet meeting April 5 rejected her demands in the Bhagwat Affair.

In circumstances that remain obscure, India's naval chief Admiral Vishnu Bhagwat was sacked by Defence Minister George Fernandes in late December. The Vajpayee government has claimed that Bhagwat imperilled "national security" and flouted his constitutional duty to adhere to instructions from India's civilian government. The opposition parties, including the two major Stalinist parties (the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)), have come to Bhagwat's defence, accusing the government of firing him because he raised allegations of corruption and other misconduct.

Jayalalitha has sided with the opposition as part of her own manoeuvres, which are aimed at having the DMK, the principal rival of her AIADMK, unseated as Tamilnad's state government. Jayalalitha demanded that, as the price for her continued support, the BJP-led government strip Fernandes of his Defence portfolio, reinstate Bhagwat as India's naval chief, and strike a Joint Parliamentary Committee to probe charges of corruption and irregularities in the Defence Ministry.

These demands were almost certain to be refused. By staging her party's exit from the BJP-led coalition over the Bhagwat affair, Jayalalitha hopes to obscure her real motives. Her determination to see the DMK unseated is

fuelled in large part by her anxiety over the outcome of a series of corruption cases that the current state government has initiated against her for actions during the AIADMK regime that ruled Tamilnad earlier this decade.

Irrespective of the issue involved in the Bhagwat Affair, the BJP was clearly not prepared to sacrifice Fernandes, a long-time ally, to pacify Jayalalitha, who has repeatedly been a thorn in the government's side. A former railway union official and Socialist Party leader, Fernandes has been used by the BJP to counter claims that it is a front for the Hindu chauvinist Rashtriya Sewak Sangh (RSS).

The same AIADMK leaders' meeting that endorsed Jayalalitha's decision to withdraw support for the BJP-led government also authorised her to form new political alliances. She subsequently announced she will be in the Indian capital, Delhi, from April 12 on, "to have discussions with leading political personalities on the creation of structures that will protect the national interests and ensure that all Indians feel safe and able to make progress in all spheres of endeavour." Long before withdrawing her support for the Vajpayee government, Jayalalitha had signalled that she wants to propel India's traditional ruling party, the Congress Party, back to national office.

The BJP was clearly surprised that the AIADMK finally made good on its threats to withdraw support. It took Prime Minister Vajpayee 48 hours to formally accept the AIADMK ministers' resignations.

Pointing to the result of the last trial of strength in India's parliament, which the BJP won with a majority of 29 votes, the prime minister has claimed that even with the defection of the 18 AIADMK members his government is secure. But for the government to prevail it must line up the support of almost 20 different parties, some formal members of the coalition, others outside it. The AIADMK's defection is widely viewed as the opening gambit in a complex game of political

manoeuvring. According to Home Minister L.K. Advani, the arithmetic of India's parliament is such that the outcome will be "tight."

Commenting on the political crisis a leading bourgeois journalist declared: "The tragedy is that no political party has given any thought to the scenario after the possible downfall of the BJP Government. The opposition parties may be united on voting out Vajpayee but their unity will end there.... Given the present composition of the Lok Sabha [the lower house of India's parliament] stability will remain a far cry whatever the permutations and combinations the BJP and the Congress may work out. There is also no guarantee that an election will end in a decisive victory for either of the parties" (*The New Indian Express* April 6, 1999).

Fearing disaster in the 1998 general election, the Congress turned to Sonia Gandhi, a political neophyte, but a crowd-drawer because of her ties to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty. (Sonia Gandhi is the widow of assassinated Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and was daughter-in-law to Indira Gandhi.) Under Sonia Gandhi, who last spring became Congress president, the Congress has denounced communal atrocities perpetrated by the BJP's followers and promoted itself as the "secular" alternative government to the current coalition. But on fundamental socio-economic questions, Congress has lined up with the Vajpayee government.

In the name of offering "constructive support" to the BJP-led coalition, the Congress has supported privatisation, price subsidy cuts, and the passing of crucial pieces of legislation demanded by foreign capital such as the Patents (Amendment) and the Insurance Regulatory Authority Bills.

Of the main opposition parties, the Congress was the only one not to endorse a two-day general strike last December against the BJP-led coalition's economic policies.

Still, the Congress has been the political beneficiary of much of the popular opposition to the Vajpayee government. This is both because of its history as India's governing party and because the BJP's parliamentary opponents, including the Communist Parties, all share the same basic orientation, i.e., all are united in seeking to make India a lucrative haven for international capital.

In state assembly elections in four states last November 25, the Congress was able to make significant gains at the expense of the BJP. Nevertheless the Congress leadership ruled out any bid to unseat the BJP-led coalition, even after key opposition parties signalled their readiness to

support a Congress-led one.

In the current crisis, the Congress has also, at least to date, exhibited no public desire to assume office. As one press report put it, the Congress wants power to be "thrust" upon it by its parliamentary rivals. By assuming such a stance, the Congress clearly hopes to place itself in the best position to dictate terms to the regional, caste-based and leftist parties on whose votes it will be dependent for remaining in power. The Congress is especially anxious to make a show of its independence from the Stalinist-led Left Front.

The Stalinists, meanwhile, are playing a pivotal role in the horse-trading that may ultimately catapult Congress and the current heir to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty into power. On Thursday, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI(M) Politbureau member Jyoti Basu met with Subramaniam Swamy, a well-known intermediary for AIADMK supremo Jayalalitha. Just days before the AIADMK withdrew its support for the Vajpayee government, Swamy held a "tea-party" during which, according to press reports, Jayalalitha and Sonia Gandhi found themselves seated next to one another.

In recent months Basu has repeatedly pledged the Stalinists' support for a coalition led by the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party, claiming that there is no other alternative to the "communist" BJP. The Stalinists' previous "anti-communist" front, the United Front, collapsed following the last election when several of its components threw in their lot with the BJP.



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