BJP-led coalition falls

Congress party launches bid to form India's new government

Keith Jones
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India has been plunged into a new round of political intrigue and horse-trading following Saturday's resignation of the 13-month-old Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government.

With the support of the two Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India [CPI] and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], the Congress, India's traditional governing party, is now trying to form an alternative government. It is far from certain, however, that a new government will emerge without recourse to mid-term elections.

Even if the Congress succeeds in cobbling together a majority in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India's parliament), the new government, like its predecessor, will be dependent on the votes of a myriad of caste-based and regional parties. Most political analysts consider new elections inevitable within the year.

The right-wing BJP-led coalition was forced from office when it lost a confidence motion in the Lok Sabha Saturday by one vote, 270 to 269. Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee had been ordered by the Indian President to prove his government retained the Lok Sabha's support, after the BJP's largest ally, the Tamilnadu-based AIADMK, quit the coalition.

Although the AIADMK's defection left the governing coalition with only minority support, the outcome of Saturday's vote was in doubt right up until the division on the Lok Sabha floor, as various parties and individuals switched sides. Commented one observer, "The battle for political survival turned out to be a celebration of political fragmentation, minuscule political parties and political entrepreneurs."

Prior to Saturday's vote, spokesmen for the Congress and several other opposition parties claimed a new government would be quickly constituted. This is proving to be an idle boast. The BJP's parliamentary opponents are now pleading for time, conceding the formation of an alternative government will be a "difficult" and "long-drawn" process.

The parliamentary arithmetic is such that forming a viable coalition is akin to solving a Rubik's cube. The defeated BJP-led coalition was comprised of 18 parties, and a Congress-led government will need the support of a comparable number. Congress officials have said they hope to secure the defection of several parties now allied with the BJP. But any new support will invariably effect the dynamics of the incipient alternative coalition.

Take the case of the AIADMK. Its defection proved to be fatal for the Vajpayee government. But it has led the AIADMK's arch-rival, the DMK, which presently forms the state government in Tamilnadu, to sever its political alliance with the Left Front and rally behind the BJP. And a second Tamilnadu party, which until last week was allied with the DMK in opposition to the BJP, the Tamil Maanila Congress (TMC), has said it will oppose any government of which the AIADMK is a member. "Corrupt elements," said TMC chief G.K. Moopanar, "cannot be allowed to go out of one door and re-enter the government through another door".

The Congress wants to form a minority Congress government, the better to preserve its image as India's "natural" governing party. To suppress a potentially ruinous power struggle within its own ranks, the Congress Working Committee also appears bent on making Sonia Gandhi India's next prime minister. The Italian-born Gandhi is a political novice whose only claim to power is dynastic--she is the widow of one

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assassinated Indian prime minister (Rajiv Gandhi) and the daughter-in-law of another (Indira Gandhi.) But within the corrupt, faction-ridden Congress political machine, Sonia Gandhi has been raised to the position of supreme arbiter.

The BJP's principal opponents in India's two most populous states, the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, have indicated they want and will demand cabinet seats in any new government. Neither is anxious to see Gandhi become Prime Minister, for they fear her political ascendancy could boost Congress's efforts to reconstruct its shattered political base in north India.

The CPI and CPI (M) have repeatedly indicated their readiness to back a Congress bid to replace the BJP, irrespective of whether the Congress forms a minority government or is leading a coalition. But the Stalinists' two smaller allies in the Left Front, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), have said they will not support a Congress-led government. Both the Forward Bloc and the RSP derive the bulk of their support from West Bengal, where the Congress is the principal parliamentary opponent of the Left Front state government.

The Stalinists claim the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's oldest political party, must be supported because it is alone capable of forming a "secular" government in opposition to one headed by the Hindu chauvinist BJP. The truth is the BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, were long a marginal force in Indian politics. In the mid- and late-1980s, the BJP came to prominence by battening off the Congress's invocation of Hindu chauvinism in opposing various secessionist agitations and by mounting a right-wing crusade against the National Front's attempt to pose as an advocate of the oppressed through the extension of reservations (or affirmative action) in government employment.

At a more fundamental level, the BJP has been able to exploit frustrations among disparate social layers over the failure of India's strategy of indigenous capitalist development. For decades the Stalinists subordinated the working class to the Congress and its bourgeois political opponents, claiming that the Congress's "national project" was anti-imperialist. Now that the Congress and India's ruling elite as whole have repudiated Congress "socialism" and insist India must be made a haven for foreign investment through the dismantling of India's meager social welfare system and all restraints on capital, the Stalinists urge the workers and oppressed to support the Congress in the name of upholding secularism.

The BJP did try to use its position in government to advance its Hindu chauvinist agenda, particularly in education. Its supporters, moreover, interpreted the presence of a BJP-led government in New Delhi as a license to mount attacks on religious minorities and lower caste groups, especially the Christians.

The most significant political initiative taken by the BJP-led government in its 13-months in office--and one fraught with communal implications given the 1947 partition of the subcontinent and India's historic antagonism with Pakistan--was the nuclearization of India's military. With the exception of the Left Front, all of India's political elite, the Congress included, joined the BJP in hailing last May's nuclear tests, although they were clearly aimed at whipping up Indian nationalism so as to boost popular support for the BJP against its coalition partners. Last week, when the government was on the ropes, it again sought to stoke nationalism and militarism by ordering testing of a new long-range ballistic missile.

Following Saturday's vote to oust the BJP government, prices on India's principal stock market, the Bombay Stock Exchange, fell 6.8 percent. To allay business fears, the Congress has announced that should it form the government it will pass the BJP's pro-business budget unchanged.

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