

Congress Party power bid fails

India to hold mid-term elections

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Indian President K. Narayanan dissolved India's parliament last week, setting the stage for a mid-term election. Dissolution of the 12th Lok Sabha came just one day after the Congress party announced it could not muster sufficient parliamentary support to form an alternative government to the defeated Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition.

In the run-up to the April 17 Lok Sabha vote that resulted in the downfall of the 13-month-old BJP-led coalition, the opposition parties claimed that an alternative government would be quickly constituted. But the opposition was plunged into disarray when the Congress insisted on forming a minority government, excluding the other anti-BJP parties from power, although it holds only 140 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

The Hindu-chauvinist BJP is pressing for new elections to be held in mid-June, while much of the opposition is urging they be postponed until the second half of September, after a revision of the election rolls has been completed and India's blistering summer and monsoon season have passed. The smaller parties apparently need time to raise election funds.

The prospect of five months of caretaker government is causing consternation on the part of big business, which has become increasingly strident in its demands for the pace of privatization, deregulation and budget-cutting to be stepped up.

Three times in the last two years the Congress has staged a parliamentary power bid only to find itself unable to form an alternative government. Two years ago, the Congress forced Deve Gowda to relinquish the Prime Ministership of a United Front (UF) coalition government, only to end up supporting a reconstituted UF government under I. K. Gujral. Then in November 1997, the Congress withdrew its backing for the Gujral ministry, a maneuver which, to the Congress's surprise,

resulted in new elections. In the recent governmental crisis, the Congress once again overplayed its hand. It clearly counted on the fear of new elections forcing the opposition parties to support a Congress minority government. But the other opposition parties balked at placing Congress in sole control of the central government's vast patronage network and in a powerful position to determine the timing and running of new elections.

The non-Congress opposition parties expressed surprise at Congress's refusal to join with them in a coalition, but for months the Congress leadership had been signaling that it did not want to be placed in a position like that of the BJP, which found itself at the head of a fractious coalition of 18 parties.

Congress strategists calculated that participation in such a coalition would damage the Congress's image as India's natural governing party. (The Congress held power for 38 of the first 40 years of Indian independence.) The Congress party bosses also were anxious to demonstrate their political independence from the Stalinist-led Left Front, the third largest parliamentary bloc in the Lok Sabha.

The failure of Congress power-bid has upset the political calculations not only of the Congress leadership, but also of the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the larger Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M). Unlike some of the other opposition parties, the CPI and CPI (M) were prepared to back a Congress minority government under Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born housewife who now heads the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty.

The Stalinists chastized the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party when it insisted on cabinet posts in return for supporting a Congress-led government. But two of the

Stalinists' allies in the Left Front, the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Forward Bloc (FB), also balked. Indeed, they opposed not just supporting a Congress minority government, but any coalition ministry including the Congress. The RSP and FB are both based in West Bengal, where the Congress is the main opposition to the ruling Left Front state government.

The CPI and CPI (M) leaders were reduced to pleading with Congress leaders to give cabinet seats to the Samajwadi Party and the AIADMK, the Tamilnadu-based party whose defection from the BJP-led coalition precipitated the downfall of the government of Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee.

With the Congress adamant that it would not join any coalition, the AIADMK and Samajwadi parties began floating the idea that Jyoti Basu, the octogenarian CPI (M) leader and West Bengal Chief Minister, should head a coalition government comprised of the Left Front and the regional opposition parties and supported by the Congress from the outside. At first the Stalinists were reluctant to embrace such a proposal, but as the non-Congress opposition parties began to fall in line, their tune changed. The West Bengal State Secretariat of the CPI (M) approved Basu becoming prime minister, then the CPI (M) Politbureau gave its support.

In 1996 Basu had been considered the front-runner to lead the first United Front government, but the CPI (M), unlike the CPI, ultimately did not join the cabinet, a decision Basu later described as "a Himalayan blunder."

The Congress was, to say the least, displeased by the movement to draft Basu as Prime Minister, and Congress leaders were soon resorting to stock anti-leftist phrases. "There is no question of supporting the third front or fourth front," declared Sonia Gandhi. "Whatever it is, we will not budge."

Significantly, the attempt to make Basu India's Prime Minister was the subject of little unfavorable comment from either the press or big business. On the contrary, Basu, who has presided over a state government that has embraced economic "liberalization," is widely viewed as India's elder statesman.

Following the defeat of the BJP-led government, the CPI and CPI (M) joined all the other parties in the Lok Sabha, in government and in opposition, in speedily passing the BJP's budget, so as to reassure big business

and a quaking stock market. Last December the Stalinist parties and their affiliated trade union federations mounted a two-day general strike to protest the BJP's economic policies and in recent weeks they have denounced the BJP budget as a big business program. But, as their support for the budget has once again demonstrated, in a crisis they can be counted on by the Indian ruling class to ensure economic and political "stability."



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