

Who's Who in India's ruling NDA coalition

A correspondent
13 October 1999

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) head Atal Vajpayee is to be sworn in as prime minister of India's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government today. Unlike the coalition the BJP led in the last parliament, which ruled India for 13 months, the NDA and allied parties have a comfortable majority of the 543 seats in India's lower house of parliament.

Claims that India has entered a new period of political stability are belied, however, by the very nature of the NDA. It is an electoral bloc, uniting two dozen parties with widely disparate histories and ideologies. Apart from the spoils of office, the chief binary force underlying the coalition is opposition to the Congress (I), India's traditional governing party. To no one's surprise, cabinet formation is already proving difficult, as the NDA's constituents stake their rival claims for power and influence.

The core of the NDA is the Hindu chauvinist BJP. With 182 of the NDA's 298 seats and six times more MPs than the NDA's second largest component, the BJP's commanding position in the coalition is unassailable. Yet the BJP is itself a political formation fraught with explosive contradictions.

As a party identified with extreme anticommunism, support for the United States and opposition to price controls, the BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have always enjoyed the support of some sections of business. But for most of India's first four decades, big business was allied with Congress, which was the architect of the program of national capitalist development, and could serve, because of its association with the popular struggle against British rule, far better than the Hindu right as a weapon against the left.

The principal leaders and activists of the BJP have always been drawn from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu fascist organization that has repeatedly been implicated in communal violence. On Saturday, Vajpayee, who is himself a life-long RSS member, met RSS joint Secretary KS Sudarshan to discuss the formation of his cabinet.

The elements that today comprise the BJP leadership first got a share of national office as part of the Janata Party coalition that was swept to power in 1977 because of popular opposition to Indira Gandhi's suppression of democratic rights under the 1975-77 "Emergency." The refusal of Vajpayee and other ex-leaders of the Jana Sangh, which had been dissolved into the Janata Party, to disassociate themselves from the RSS was a major factor in the collapse of the Janata Party government. In

1984, the BJP, the new political vehicle sponsored by the RSS, won just two seats.

The BJP's rise to power has been bound up with the Indian bourgeoisie's shift in economic orientation and the interrelated collapse of the Congress party. In the late 1980s the BJP secured widespread middle-class support by projecting itself as the party of economic liberalization. At the same time, it exploited caste and communal divisions, first championing opposition to the attempts of the National Front government to give itself a progressive image by extending the policy of caste reservations (affirmative action) in public sector employment, then leading agitation for the erection of a Hindu temple on the site of a mosque in Ayodhya.

The latter agitation, which was led by the current Home Minister L.K. Advani, ended in the destruction of the mosque by Hindu chauvinists, in defiance of the express orders of the Supreme Court, and the worst outburst of anti-Muslim violence in India since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

As part of the agreement that led to the creation of the NDA, the BJP has committed itself to a moratorium on so-called contentious issues such as Ayodhya. But this agreement in no way binds the RSS. Although the previous BJP-led government extended an invitation to the Pope to visit India, the RSS has announced that it intends to lead a campaign against his visit to India unless he orders an end to Catholic missionary work in the country.

The Mahashhtran-based Shiv Sena [literally Shiva's Army, a reference to a Maharashtran warrior king] is the only one of the BJP's allies that shares its Hindu nationalist ideology.

It has been the senior partner in the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition that has ruled India's third largest state, Maharashtra, for much of the 1990s. But the government's future is now in doubt, because the state election held concurrently with the national poll resulted in a hung parliament.

Led by Bal Thackeray, a former newspaper cartoonist who is an admirer of Hitler and advocates a dictatorial form of government, the Shiv Sena first came to prominence in the 1960s by protesting against the marginalization of the Marathi-speaking middle class in Bombay's economy. In the early 1980s it won big business backing by organizing scabs to break a major textile strike.

The Shiv Sena played only a minor role in the last BJP-led coalition. But in the recent election it increased its Lok Sabha

representation from 6 to 15.

The Telegu Desam Party is, next to the BJP, the largest parliamentary party aligned with the NDA. A regional party based in the Telegu-speaking province of Andhra Pradesh, it holds 29 seats in the new parliament and forms Andhra Pradesh's state government.

Previously, the TDP was an important component of the United Front Government, which ruled India between 1996 and 1998. TDP leader and Andhra Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu, who served as United Front convenor, has frequently been applauded by foreign investors as among those most supportive of the speedy dismantling of India's nationally regulated economy.

Despite the entreaties of Vajpayee, the TDP has refused to officially join the NDA or the new government. It has promised instead to give the NDA regime "issue-based" support. There are several reasons for this: the TDP does not want to alienate its Muslim supporters; Naidu calculates he can best influence the government by keeping his distance and making the BJP solicit his support.

The Tamilnadu-based DMK is another regional party that participated in the United Front, one of whose ostensible principles was to uphold India's "secularist" character by keeping the BJP from power. Last April, when the AIADMK, its principal rival in Tamilnadu, broke with the BJP-led government and aligned with the Congress, the DMK, which forms Tamilnadu's state government, crossed over to the BJP.

Two smaller Tamilnadu-based parties, the PMK and MDMK, which in the 1998 elections fought alongside the AIADMK, did not join the AIADMK in bolting from the BJP and were partners in the DMK-led NDA bloc in Tamilnadu in the 1999 election. The three Tamilnadu-based parties hold 21 seats.

The Biju Janata Dal is a regional party based in the east Indian state of Orissa. It emerged in 1998 out of a split-off from the Janata Dal following the fall of the United Front government.

The Trinamool [or Grassroots] Congress is the BJP's West Bengal ally. A breakaway from the Congress in West Bengal, it has eight seats in the Lok Sabbha. But its importance to the BJP is greater than its seat total would suggest, because it is the principal opponent of West Bengal's Left Front government.

The Shiromani Akali Dal is a Sikh fundamentalist party that has been aligned with the BJP for several elections. Although it won only two Lok Sabha seats, it is the ruling party in the Punjab.

The Jammu and Kashmir National Conference is another former United Front participant that has subsequently aligned itself with the BJP. Although it holds just four Lok Sabha seats, the National Conference is politically important because it is the largest pro-India party in the contested state of Kashmir. Traditionally, the National Conference and the BJP have been bitter enemies, for the BJP's Hindu chauvinism is inimical to the National Conference's mainly Muslim membership and

because the BJP has long called for the abolition of Jammu and Kashmir's special autonomous status under India's constitution.

The National Conference's four MPs constitute two-thirds of all Muslim NDA parliamentarians. About 125 million Indians, or 12.5 percent of India's total population, is Muslim.

The other important constituent of the BJP-led NDA is the Janata Dal (United). It holds 20 seats, most of them in Bihar. The JD (U) is the largest surviving fragment of the ostensibly socialist Janata Dal. The Janata Dal was the largest party in the 1989-91 National Front and the 1996-98 United Front governments, although by the time of the United Front government a faction led by former railway union leader George Fernandes had broken away and allied with the BJP.

In the maneuvering prior to the current election, the majority of what remained of the Janata Dal reunited with Fernandes and his Samata Party and a Janata Dal split-off in Karnataka, the Lok Shatki, to form the JD (U). Despite its coalition with the Hindu chauvinist BJP, the JD (U) is expected to retain the recognition of the international social-democratic organization, the (misnamed) Socialist International, as a sister party.

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