

Indian cabinet reshuffle: a desperate bid to restore support

K. Ratnayake
23 July 2002

In response to a growing crisis within India's ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee carried out his seventh cabinet reshuffle in early July. But far from resolving the political problems confronting the government, the new ministerial lineup is likely to heighten them.

Vajpayee elevated several Hindu extremists to key posts, most notably appointing Home Minister Lai Krishna Advani as Deputy Prime Minister, and also strengthened the BJP's position within the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). These changes were made to appease Hindu hardliners within the BJP, who have been insisting on more aggressive communal politics as a means of shoring up the party's waning electoral support.

At the same time, the Prime Minister reacted to criticisms from big business by inserting Jaswant Singh, formerly Foreign Minister, as Finance Minister, in a bid to accelerate free market restructuring. But the policies of economic reform—including privatisation, harsher labour laws, cuts to subsidies and government spending—generated the widespread anti-government hostility in the first place.

The reshuffle added 12 new faces to the ministry, eight of them from the BJP. As a result, the BJP, the main constituent of the 23-party NDA, has 56 of the 77 portfolios in the Union Council of Ministers, which includes both cabinet-level ministers and state ministers. The BJP's allies, which are small regionally-based parties appealing to linguistic and ethnic ties, have accepted the changes without a word of protest.

The West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress, which is crucial to the NDA majority in parliament, has no ministry. Its leader Mamata Banerjee refused to accept any post except the Railway Ministry but Vajpayee ignored her request and maintained the current Railway

Minister.

The National Conference—a party based in Jammu and Kashmir—had already been pushed aside. Party leader Farooq Abdullah, who is Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, had been tipped for the post of Indian Deputy President but missed out. His son Omar Abdullah retained the relatively junior post of State Minister for External Affairs. The National Congress is opposed to the BJP plans to hold the upcoming state elections under direct rule from New Delhi rather than under the state administration.

The NDA partners joined the coalition on the understanding that the BJP would put aside key elements of its Hindu chauvinist agenda. Several NDA parties threatened to leave the coalition over the government's handling of the anti-Muslim communal violence in the state of Gujarat earlier this year. It is therefore significant that there has been no opposition to Advani's elevation. He defended the actions of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, a BJP member, whose administration helped fuel the anti-Muslim pogrom.

Not only was Advani promoted to Deputy Prime Minister but Hindu hardliners also strengthened their hand in the BJP apparatus. Advani's choice, Venkaih Naidu, has been appointed to the powerful post of BJP president. Former Law Minister Arun Jaitely has been made party general secretary. Moreover, Advani will now visit the party's headquarters fortnightly to meet with the BJP leadership—a further indication he has growing influence over the party machine.

Other significant changes include the appointment of Manohar Joshi from the fascistic Shiv Sena (SS), a close BJP ally, as Speaker of the Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) in May. Following its loss of the state election in Uttar Pradesh in February, the BJP

appointed Vinay Kathiar, a leader of the Hindu extremist Bajarang Dal, to head the state party branch. Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state and has been regarded as a BJP political stronghold.

The BJP suffered a series of devastating defeats in state elections over the last year. In February, the party lost in Uttaranchal, Punjab and Assam as well as Uttar Pradesh. In the previous round in May 2001, the BJP won only 13 seats out of the 823 seats at stake in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, West Bengal and Assam. In Gujarat, the BJP suffered heavy defeats in the local council elections.

Over the next 12 months, the BJP faces another 12 state elections beginning with the poll in Jammu and Kashmir in September. In 2004, the party will have to campaign in national elections. The promotion of Advani is a clear signal that the government intends to stir up communal and nationalist sentiment to recoup its electoral losses—both by maintaining the military tensions with rival Pakistan and by pushing communal issues at home.

Advani gave notice of his intentions when he declared at a press conference on July 13 that the new party president Venkiah Naidu would restore the BJP's reputation in the 1980s as the party "with a difference". It was precisely in this period that Advani in particular played a prominent role in provoking anti-Muslim communalism. In 1992, he led a *rathyathra* or motorcade, thousands of kilometres across India from Somnath to Ayodhya—two prominent places of Hindu worship. The procession culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid, a 16th century mosque, in Ayodhya in December 1992 by a mob of Hindu fanatics—an act that triggered communal violence across the Indian subcontinent.

Advani's elevation has been greeted by a degree of nervousness in Indian ruling circles. Big business did not back the Vajpayee government because of its Hindu chauvinist agenda but rather as a means of pressing ahead with economic restructuring. By installing Jaswant Singh as Finance Minister, Vajpayee is seeking to reassure corporate leaders that his government will intensify its market reform program.

Former Finance Minister Yaswant Sinha was dubbed "Mr. Rollback" by big business for his failure to implement promised economic reforms. *Business Weekly* commented: "Sinha unveiled a series of

administrative reforms, simplified tax structure and announced radical changes in labour laws in his 2001/02 budget. But his budget dreams turned sour as the government shied away from tough reforms for fear of losing mass support following accusations of an arms scandal, a stock market rigging scam and losses incurred by the country's largest mutual fund manager."

Economic commentators have generally welcomed Singh's appointment. One described him as "a fresh wind that will bring welcome change" and called on him to use the same "coercive manner" in the economic field as in his diplomacy—a reference to Singh's aggressive brinkmanship against Pakistan. In a sign of what is to come, the National Committee on Labour submitted a report two days before the cabinet reshuffle, recommending a "more flexible labour market"—that is, enabling employers to dismiss workers more easily and to cut benefits.

The demands for market reform are being spurred on by economic pressures to attract greater foreign direct investment. The Reserve Bank of India has recently warned of a growing current account deficit and the need for at least \$US20 billion in the short term. Last year foreign direct investment in India rose by just \$4.8 billion. Big business is pressing the government to speed up its program of privatisation, including of the state banks. Already there are moves to sell India's tea plantations and a share of the publishing industry to foreign investors.

Such measures, however, will only lead to rising unemployment and poverty and fuel growing resentment towards the Vajpayee government. As the latest reshuffle indicates, the BJP has only one response—to stir up communal tensions in a desperate bid to deflect attention from its own record.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact