

India: All-Party meeting fails to staunch crisis over Telangana

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An all-party meeting involving representatives of India's Congress Party-led Union government and the eight officially-recognized parties in the southern, Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh has failed to reach a consensus on whether to form a separate state, to be called Telangana, out of the state's north-western districts.

Speaking at the conclusion of yesterday's almost five-hour meeting, Home Minister Palaniappan Chidambaran said, "It is quite clear that the views of the political parties are divided. I summed up their views and will take them to the Prime Minister and formulate a course of action."

Chidambaran, who less than one month ago announced that the central government was resolved to give Telangana statehood, dodged a reporter's question as to whether Telangana will in fact become India's twenty-ninth state, "We are trying," said Chidambaran, "to help the political parties of Andhra Pradesh find the answer to the issues of the state. We are here to help."

Chidambaran denied that the decision to create Telangana had been taken in haste. But Chidambaran's declamations cannot obscure the fact that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government is reeling from widespread criticism from India's elite of its handling of the Telangana issue. Not only has India's most populous southern state been thrust into a major political crisis that has disrupted economic activity, especially in Hyderabad, a vital Information Technology hub. The central government's readiness to bifurcate Andhra Pradesh is seen as potentially opening a Pandora's Box of demands for the redrawing of the internal borders of India, a country peopled by a myriad of ethno-linguistic groups and marked by profound social, and ever-increasing regional, inequalities.

In his post-meeting remarks, India's Home Minister demanded an end to the pro-and anti- Telangana agitations that have convulsed Andhra Pradesh for the past month.

"Children," declared Chidambaran, "must go to schools and colleges. People must be allowed to carry on their normal day-to-day activities. The government must be able to focus on development and the welfare of the people."

Chidambaran warned that if the political elite could not evolve a consensus solution to the Telangana issue it could feed "anti-democratic" forces—an apparent reference to Maoist insurgents.

Last week, the Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, K. Rosaiah, told reporters that the political unrest had caused major companies, including the French automaker Peugeot Citroën, to defer or relocate projects. "The image of Hyderabad as an investment destination and a hub of information technology, pharmaceuticals and other industries has taken a beating because of the unrest."

Rosaiah, whose cabinet is hopelessly split over the Telangana question, took no stand at yesterday's meeting. He simply said that he would endorse whatever decision the Congress Party-dominated central government takes.

Apart from Hyderabad and its immediate environs, the 10 districts that comprise the Telangana region are known for their economic backwardness and higher incidence of poverty, illiteracy and general social deprivation.

Sections of the local elite and petty bourgeoisie have long advocated separate statehood, claiming that this will provide jobs and facilitate development.

They are being bitterly opposed by more powerful sections of Andhra's Telugu bourgeoisie. The latter calculate that a "united Andhra" is the best platform to assert their interests on the national stage and are determined to maintain political control over Hyderabad, the current state capital and one of India's most dynamic metropolitan areas.

To general surprise, Chidambaran announced late on the evening of December 9 that the central government was initiating the process of creating Telangana. In the preceding days, Hyderabad had been paralyzed by demonstrations in support of a fast to the death mounted by K. Chandrasekhar Rao, the head of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS), to press for Telangana statehood.

Chidambaran's announcement only served to enflame the political crisis it had been intended to douse. Within days, well over a hundred state legislators from the official opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Praja Rajyam

Party, and the Congress Party— including many ministers in Andhra Pradesh’s Congress Party state government—had submitted letters of resignations to protest against the bifurcation of the Andhra Pradesh.

Cutting across party lines, politicians from Andhra Pradesh’s two other regions (coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema), organized demonstrations and bandhs (general strikes) for a “united Andhra.”

Chidambaran and the UPA government soon began to backtrack, but this only led the TRS, now joined en masse by Telangana’s Congress and TDP politicians, to relaunch protests in favor of Telangana statehood.

This week has seen rival bandhs in favor of and against Telangana. Members of the Joint Action Committee (JAC) at Osmania University in Hyderabad, the center of the pro-Telangana movement, threatened to demolish offices of all parties opposing a separate Telangana state, declaring “No anti-Telangana activists will be allowed to stay in Hyderabad.”

Neither the movement for Telangana nor the counter-agitation for a “united Andhra” represents the interests of the working class, oppressed peasantry and other toilers.

Led by well-known bourgeois politicians, the rival agitations aim to uphold or alter the existing administrative structure of the Indian capitalist state so as to further the interests of big business and other privileged layers. They are serving to further divide the working class and channel the social anger born of the economic deprivation that confronts all of India’s toilers irrespective of ethnicity, religion or region into a reactionary regional conflict.

Proponents of Telangana have vowed to use violence to thwart any measure that would not give a future Telangana state exclusive control over Hyderabad.

Meanwhile, senior TDP senior leaders, Dhulipalla Narendra Kumar and Bojjala Gopalakrishna have sought to exploit traditional frictions between the Telugu and Tamil elites, by accusing Chidambaran of supporting the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh while opposing the division of his native Tamil Nadu. Chidambaran, they declared, “is against the bifurcation of his native state Tamil Nadu but is ready to divide AP. Why these double standards? It only exposes the vengeful attitude of Chidambaran against the fast-developing Andhra Pradesh.”

The advocates of Telangana are seeking to manipulate the anger over the social crisis that stalks the region, while their “united Andhra” opponents are fomenting ethno-linguistic chauvinism.

Those most active in the Telangana agitation are university students, and to a lesser extent other middle class layers—lawyers, journalists and teachers.

The students believe that the creation of a separate state

administration for Telangana will give them access to jobs, both because the new state will need to be staffed and because it will be in a legal position to provide Telangana “natives” preferential hiring for public, and potentially private, sector jobs. Explains Professor S. Simhadri of Osmania University, a member of the Telangana Intellectuals Forum, “Unemployment is the biggest issue worrying students. Since most of them are first-generation or second-generation students, they genuinely believe they will have dramatically improved opportunities in a separate state.”

Meanwhile, TRS leader Chandrasekhar Rao has been seeking to reassure the IT companies and other big businesses in Hyderabad that a separate Telangana will in no way be detrimental to their interests, promising to give them “red carpet” treatment.

The Stalinist parties, which have long politically dominated and suppressed the working class, trail after the parties of the bourgeoisie in this issue as in all others. The Communist Party of India or CPI spoke at yesterday’s meeting unequivocally in support of the creation of Telangana. Its Left Front ally, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, is, on the other hand, implacably opposed. This has nothing do with any principled considerations. The CPM, whose principal base of support is in West Bengal, fears that the creation of a separate Telangana will serve to legitimize support for the carving out of a Gorkhaland state from West Bengal, thereby weakening its position within India’s bourgeois political establishment.

Commenting on Chidambaran’s announcement concerning the creation of Telangana, CPM Politburo member and West Bengal Chief Minister Bhuddadeb Bhattacharjee, said January 3, “The whole country is disappointed with you (Chidambaran) the way you have dealt with the Telangana issue. We are facing consequences in Darjeeling and Coochbehar districts where demand for separate states have got a new lease of life... I told the Prime Minister how could such an important decision be taken overnight. And for that we have now got a rejuvenated demand for Gorkhaland.”



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