

Indian cabinet decision to bifurcate Andhra Pradesh sparks mass protests

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The decision taken last Thursday by India's Congress Party-led central government to proceed with the bifurcation of the southern state of Andhra Pradesh and create a new state of Telangana has provoked huge protests in the non-Telangana areas of the predominantly Telugu-speaking state.

The anti-Telangana agitation has paralyzed large parts of Seemandhra, the name to be given to the state formed from the remainder of Andhra Pradesh, posing a severe political crisis for the national Congress-led government, as well as for the Congress government that currently rules the undivided state.

There have been protests led by various rightwing political forces, including the Telugu Desam Party and the YSR Congress, a regional split-off from the Congress party, across the two regions that comprise Seemandhra—coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema.

The biggest challenge to the Congress-led national government, however, is a strike by over 30,000 electricity employees at the power plant in Vijayawada, which supplies more than a third of the state's electricity needs. The strike, which has been called by the AP Non-Gazetted Officers' Association, has led to a major power crisis in the state, with much of Seemandhra in total darkness and the state capital, Hyderabad, which lies in Telangana, facing power cuts.

Cell-phone service has been disrupted and many trains through and within the state have been cancelled.

District authorities declared a curfew and shoot-on-sight order Sunday in an attempt to suppress protests in Vizianagaram, a city in coastal Andhra, but protests have continued in defiance of those orders.

The decision of the Congress, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, to proceed with the creation of a separate Telangana state is a crass electoral maneuver aimed at cementing the Congress' support in Telangana in the run-up to the

national elections, which are to be held in April-May 2014.

The UPA government first announced that a 29th Indian state would be formed out of the Telangana region in December 2009. But that decision polarized the state's political elite, leading to mass "United Andhra" protests in Rayalaseema and coastal Andhra. The Congress then backtracked, appointing a commission to study the issue and even after the commission issued its report, which proposed a variety of alternatives to statehood for Telangana, it temporized.

Then in early August, the Congress revived the statehood issue, with the Congress Working Committee giving its approval for statehood and indicating that a Telangana state should be created prior to the 2014 national election. Predictably, this immediately sparked mass protests against bifurcation and counter-protests in favour of Telangana statehood and Hyderabad's full and immediate integration in the new state.

While driven by narrow electoral calculations, the Congress decision to push for Telangana statehood was also a transparent attempt to demonstrate the government's readiness to tackle divisive issues. With India's economy buffeted by the world economic crisis—the annual growth rate has fallen dramatically to just 5 percent per year and the rupee has lost 15 percent of its value since May—big business has become increasingly critical of the government for failing to push through unpopular and socially regressive pro-market "reforms," including subsidy cuts and the gutting of restrictions on the layoff of workers in large-scale manufacturing enterprises.

While significant sections of the population, especially students and government workers, have been mobilized in the rival pro- and anti-Telangana agitations, the respective camps represent rival factions of the regional Andhra bourgeoisie.

The Telangana elite calculates that they will rule the roost in a separate Telangana and be able to cut their own deals with New Delhi and foreign capital, especially if they gain unbridled control over Hyderabad, a metropolis of 8 million people that has become a major hub for India's lucrative IT industry and home to the Indian operations of such global players as Google, Amazon, IBM, Dell and Microsoft.

The rival "United Andhra" faction fears that bifurcation will reduce their bargaining power vis a vis the central government and are adamantly opposed to losing Hyderabad's tax revenues and business opportunities.

The pro-Telangana forces have demanded full control over Hyderabad from day one of a separate Telanagna. Their opponents are determined to prevent the state's bifurcation, but should that be forced through over their objections, they are demanding Hyderabad serve as a joint capital of both Telangana and Seemandhra or be made a Union Territory.

The Congress-led UPA government has announced that for the next ten years Hyderabad will serve as the joint capital of both states, during which time the central government will build a new capital for Seemandhra. This decision has not only failed to satisfy either of the rival groups, it leaves a whole series of contentious questions concerning the division of tax revenues and hiring practices—Telangana politicians have long promised that an independent Telangana will only hire "Telangana-born" workers—undecided.

The sharing of water resources, which are vital for power generation and irrigation, and access to ports are also issues of bitter dispute between the Telangana and Seemandhra elites.

In pressing for the creation of a separate Telangana, the Telangana elite have cynically exploited popular discontent, especially within middle class layers, over economic deprivation and channeled it along regionalist and chauvinist lines. Unemployed educated young people have been regaled with promises of the job opportunities that will exist in state administration and services in a separate Telangana. In reality, statehood will provide new opportunities for enrichment for a tiny bourgeois elite and a narrow strata of the middle class, while the vast majority of working people and rural toilers will continue to be condemned to poverty and economic insecurity.

India's Maoists, of which the Communist Party of India (Maoist) constitute the most significant faction, and the Communist Party of India, one of the two Stalinist parliamentary parties, have played an important role in

lending legitimacy to the politically retrograde Telangana statehood movement.

Its electoral calculations notwithstanding, the Congress now faces a huge crisis in Andhra Pradesh. While the agitation against Telangana has reached a new intensity in the wake of last Thursday's cabinet decision, the state has been convulsed with pro- and anti-Telangana protests since the Congress Working Committee announced in favour of the government proceeding with bifurcation in early August. Congress Ministers from the Seemandhra region have resigned from both the national and state governments and even the Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Kiran Kumar Reddy, who is from Seemandhra, has publicly opposed bifurcation in defiance of the party high command.

Pointing to the growing protests from Congress leaders in Seemandhra, a *Times of India* article advised, "[U]nless the center takes the lead in resolving the issues arising out of the division of Andhra Pradesh, the situation there may spiral out of control."

Broad sections of the Indian elite are also concerned that the creation of a Telangana state will fuel regional demands for statehood in other existing states, including West Bengal, Assam and Rajasthan, thereby weakening the India bourgeoisie's federal state.

The Indian Stalinists are divided over the Telangana issue, but their differences have nothing to do with principled politics. Rather they are a product of the different regionalist interests with which they are aligned. While the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM has opposed Andhra Pradesh's bi-furcation, its Left Front ally the Communist Party of India (CPI) is an enthusiastic supporter of Telangana statehood. The CPM, which ruled West Bengal for 34 consecutive years till 2011, fears that the creation of Telangana will energize the campaign for a separate Gorkhaland state carved out of West Bengal's northern districts.



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