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## India

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# The 'leftist' United Front takes the helm

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

On June 1, India's President Shankar Dayal Sharma administered the oath of office to the Karnataka state chief minister and Janata Dal party leader H.D. Deve Gowda, as the 11th prime minister of India. Prime Minister Deve Gowda will be leading an alliance of 14 centrist and regional parties, brought together under the banner of the United Front, in the aftermath of May general elections which failed to throw up an outright victor. The left parties, with 55 seats in the Lok Sabha (parliament), and the Congress Party, the second largest party with 141 seats, have assured support to the United Front government.

The 13-day sojourn of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had formed a government after it emerged in the May election as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha with 160 members, ended on May 28, when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, facing certain defeat in the Lok Sabha in his quest for a vote of confidence, threw in the towel. President S.D. Sharma had given the BJP prime minister-elect an ultimatum to prove his government's majority on the floor of the Lok Sabha by May 27.

Wasting no time following Vajpayee's resignation, President Sharma called in H.D. Deve Gowda, who by then had emerged as the consensus candidate of the United Front, and asked him to form the government. The Congress Party had already made known its disinclination to form a government.

The United Front government has been extended a reserved welcome by the people and media in general. Such caution is based on the abject failure of two past experiments, in 1977 and in 1989, when the anti-Congress parties had hatched a common front to grab power. In both cases, the fronts disintegrated within months, because of internecine fights among the coalition leaders, bringing India to near chaos as a consequence. And in both cases, fresh elections brought the Congress Party back into power.

This time, most of the centrist parties and the Left parties had come together under the principal objective of preventing the "Hindu chauvinist" BJP from forming the government. Otherwise, the major parties represented in the United

Front have no mandate to rule in New Delhi, as their bases have actually dwindled in the 1996 vote tally. The Janata Dal party has a strong base in only three major states; its partner, the Samajwadi Party, has a base only in the crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, where it is struggling to remain as the number-two party; and some of the United Front's participating regional parties are fast losing ground to the BJP.

## Congress Party politics

The crumbling of the Congress Party has also left the door open for the United Front to come to power. The Congress Party, which led the movement for India's independence from Great Britain, has ruled in New Delhi for 45 out of the 49 post-colonial years. In the May elections, the Congress Party lost almost 45% of its parliamentary representation, ending up with a mere 136 seats out of a total 535. The elections five years ago had returned the Congress to power with a working majority of 248 members.

The leadership crisis within the party, brought to the fore with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in May 1991, has remained unresolved. Bereft of leadership from the Nehru-Gandhi family, the party has also run out of grass-roots leaders.

Before the next elections, the Congress Party may be forced to undergo a thorough reorganization. One analysis making the rounds in Delhi is that the Congress Party will eventually join the government in 1997.

One of the major English-language dailies claims that a deal is being worked out whereby Congress Party leader and its most recent prime minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, whose five years in office were rife with allegations of personal financial wrongdoings of massive proportions, will be nominated as the next President of India by the United Front, and will seek immunity under the Constitution to remain free. Once such deals are worked out between the United Front and the Congress Party, the latter would formally join the cabinet. The Janata Dal would then merge with the Congress Party and obliterate itself. A few other smaller parties may also come back to the Congress fold, in order to counter the BJP electorally.

## What next in India?

Visible conflicts within the United Front in the first days have already caused concern. Hours before the cabinet members were scheduled to take the oath of office, the regional party chieftains and state-level leaders of the centrist parties exerted pressure on the prime minister-elect to secure plum posts. Behind the scenes was former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, a manipulator par excellence, whose reckless caste politics had brought down the 1989 experiment amidst violence and chaos.

In this set-up, Prime Minister Deve Gowda himself is definitely the most reliable element. For the last 17 months,

he has been chief minister of Karnataka state, which is fast becoming a major industrial state, with the city of Bangalore emerging as the country's capital of clean industries.

With a diploma in civil engineering, Prime Minister Deve Gowda represents the villager caste, and had worked side-by-side with his father, a paddy farmer, in his youth. Following a short stint as a contractor, Deve Gowda joined politics in 1953 as a member of the Congress Party. However, his first entry to the state legislative assembly in 1962 was as an independent, having severed his relationship with the Congress Party back then.

With Janata Dal establishing itself as the ruling party in Karnataka in 1983, Deve Gowda, along with S.R. Bommai (now a minister in the Deve Gowda cabinet) and the high-profile former Karnataka chief minister Ramkrishna Hegde, emerged as one of the triumvirate that holds the key to the party's political successes. Despite the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress Party onslaught that almost decimated the Janata Dal in Karnataka in 1987, the efforts of Deve Gowda, Bommai, and Hegde brought the party back to power at the state level in 1991.

In 1994, Deve Gowda was the only Indian chief minister who attended the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, ostensibly to attract foreign investment into Karnataka. Another of his forays, into Singapore, resulted in the first-ever high-technology Information Technology Park in Bangalore. At the same time, it was noted that, despite the Janata Dal's formal opposition to the establishment of the Cargill office and the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet in Bangalore, chief minister Deve Gowda protected these multinational ventures to boost his state's image with foreign investors.

### **A common minimum program**

So far, in New Delhi, Deve Gowda is drafting a common minimum program (CMP) for the infrastructure sector, which emphasizes implementing environmentally friendly policies and greater support for science and technology. The draft said that "economic stability, responsive and corruptionless administration along with acceleration of reforms," would be the major plank for governing India.

On the issue of taking those measures recommended by the International Monetary Fund to adapt the Indian economy to free-trade globalization, an issue which interests the international investors and financial institutions as much as it interests their Indian counterparts, Deve Gowda is categorical that so-called economic reform would continue with a "Gandhian face"—an expression which has yet to be defined. Undoubtedly, his appointment of P. Chidambaram, a Harvard-trained former member of the Congress Party who was a close associate of the late Rajiv Gandhi, and one of the strongest backers of the liberalization policies of Narasimha Rao and outgoing Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, will reassure the free traders in London and other western capitals.

## **Indian elections: shifting vote patterns**

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The nation of India today stands as the world's largest democracy, a fact that is at the core of India's identity as an independent nation. The election results that trickled in slowly during the week following the last election (May 7; the other two were April 27 and May 2) showed that the Indian electorate has refused to pin its hopes on any single party.

Unlike the past four or five general elections, particularly the elections of 1977, 1980, 1989, and 1991, this time around, the Indian electorate was not charged up to remove the ruling party in order to bring in some other party just for the sake of a change in government. There was no "wave" as such.

In addition, the Election Commission enforced the maximum expenditure of 450,000 rupees (about \$13,500) per parliamentary candidate, making the election a low-key affair. The Election Commission thus took away the money power of some of the wealthier parties to influence votes. Interestingly, the low-key campaigning did not result in less participation by the electorate.

Although the poll results appeared to perplex the political pundits, the voting patterns cohered with a growing trend that has appeared among the voters in both 1989 and in 1991.

In the 1989 elections, the ruling Congress Party, led by the late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, was soundly defeated. From an unassailable majority in the Lok Sabha (parliament) with 405 members, secured in the 1984 elections following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the party was reduced to a minority party with fewer than 200 seats. But while rejecting the Congress Party, the electorate did not indicate a positive winner. A rag-tag group of former congressmen formed the Janata Dal and took power, with the outside support of the surging Bharatiya Janata Dal (BJP).

The dismissal of the Janata Dal government within a year, and the upheavals that followed, set the tone for the 1991 elections. The tragic murder of Rajiv Gandhi during the 1991 election campaign, and the collapse of the Janata Dal, gave the Congress Party enough parliamentary seats to form the government.

But even then, the BJP, increasing its tally from 86 in 1989 to 124 in 1991, had served notice.

The trend has in fact continued: The Janata Dal and its allies took 43 seats, the Congress Party went down to 136 seats, and the BJP inched further upward with 160 seats.