

India's new premier promises stability

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

The second non-Congress party central government in India since its independence in 1947 took shape on Dec. 2 under the leadership of Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh. Exuding confidence following his swearing-in, Singh told the news media that all the participants in his coalition government are "committed to provide a clean and stable government at the center."

But much apprehension revolves around whether the coalition government can live up to that promise, given that Singh, the scion of the small princely state of Manda in Uttar Pradesh (UP), will be leading a party, the Janata Dal, which has secured only 141 seats in the 524-member Lok Sabha (parliament)—a little more than 25%. As a result, the ruling party will have to depend on the Hindu fundamentalist-dominated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) with 88 seats, and the Communists of various hues with 51 seats. In all likelihood, the coalition government can also expect support from a number of independent members.

This prospect of a minority government relying on the support of the left and right with opposing ideologies, is a unique experience in independent India. The last and only other time that a non-Congress government came to rule at the center was in 1977, and at that point it had an overwhelming majority.

Confidence-building measures

Perhaps the biggest challenge that the new prime minister will have to face in the coming days, in view of the essentially negative mandate, is how to present a positive attitude and carry the people with it. As *Economic Times* editor Many Shroff pointed out, Singh's government must "make a few swift moves which can carry conviction with the people that it means business. Thus alone can the trust be reinforced and the government will then be able to push ahead with the fulfillment of election pledges."

The first round of cabinet choices announced Dec. 5 showed promise in this direction. The same can be said for the prime minister's decision to visit the Golden Temple in

Amritsar on Dec. 6 to initiate discussions to resolve the Punjab crisis, as virtually his first order of business. Mr. Singh is being accompanied to Punjab by Deputy Prime Minister Devi Lal and the new Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral, who has long been active in efforts to restore peace to the troubled state.

The advice of others, such as *The Statesman*, to "move with circumspection," is no less apropos. It is obvious that the new prime minister will have to tread carefully, without stepping on disparate forces who are his potential supporters, and at the same time, produce results.

"V.P. Singh is a good man—if he lasts," the typical scooter driver in New Delhi will tell you today. There are some distinct reasons for the apprehension, not the least of which is the cloud of confusion that hung over the capital between the time the election results were announced and the government was finally sworn in. There is no doubt that the confusion was the handiwork of some leaders in the Janata Dal.

During the last three days following the electoral defeat of the ruling Congress-I party, many conflicting statements from elected leaders belonging to the Janata Dal and its supporting parties helped to thicken the cloud. First, while both BJP and the Communist leaders said categorically that they would not participate in the government but would provide support from the outside, the Janata Dal strongman from Haryana, Devi Lal, a veteran of many political horse-trading events, continued to exude confidence that he would get both the BJP and the Communists to become partners in the government. A letter written by a BJP leader to his Janata Dal counterparts indicating that the BJP would support the government if Janata Dal leaders ceased referring to the BJP as a "communal party," helped give the impression that a deal was in the making.

Challengers on the horizon

While some were busy taking bets whether Devi Lal was bluffing or not, another drama, equally disturbing, began to unfold publicly. Chandra Shekhar, another former Congress-socialist from eastern UP with limited support from the Janata Dal membership, announced that he would challenge Singh for the leadership position in the party—in other words, for the prime ministership. Hectic activity, mostly covert, got under way with the Janata Dal to prevent an open clash between the leaders, and strategies were drawn up to sideline Chandra Shekhar. At the same time, it became apparent to close political observers that besides Chandra Shekhar, Devi Lal was also in the fray for the prime minister's post. Activity at the Haryana House in New Delhi gave a clear signal that Devi Lal, a septuagenarian with a farming background, goaded by his politically powerful son, was indeed testing the waters and that Singh's leadership was certainly less than unanimous.

On Dec. 1, however, amidst a series of maneuvers or-

cheated by Singh's trusted backers, the Janata Dal's leader was picked "unanimously." Chandra Shekhar felt downright cheated, told newsmen that he had reservations about Singh, and made that doubly clear by conspicuously boycotting the swearing-in ceremony before the President of the Republic of India the following day. Yet another surprise was waiting at the ceremony: As soon as Singh finished taking his oath, the turbaned Devi Lal stepped in to be introduced as the "deputy prime minister"—a post which the Indian constitution does not recognize, but which was created once before informally.

These events, and a few others in subsequent days, did little to boost popular morale. It was proof positive that within the Janata Dal, a coalition organized to fight the Congress-I electorally and containing the bulk of both the Janata Party, the Lok Dal, and those congressmen who left the Rajiv Gandhi-led Congress-I, there are, as it were, "too many chiefs." Although Singh survived the first scramble with little damage, it would be naive to assume that the leadership battle within the Janata Dal is over and that the Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lals within the party will quietly fall into line and support the new government.

Potential boomerang effect

Ironically, though, attempts to undermine the Singh government from within will most likely only end up undermining its foes' own political credibility. As various field surveys have confirmed, Singh possesses a wealth of goodwill with those who wanted to see the Janata Dal at the center. Neither Chandra Shekhar nor Devi Lal, nor anyone in the Janata Dal, can claim such general goodwill. Chandra Shekhar's image is that of a perpetual rebel, who is incapable of working with anyone. That his own political base is not unshakable, was evident when he lost his traditional seat in the 1984 elections when the Congress-I ruled the roost in the north.

Devi Lal, the man who is fast running out of time, is considered by a mere handful—most of whom are probably his family members—to be of prime ministerial timber. His grab for the post, according to various reports, was a calculated move by his son, Om Prakash Chautala, to get the old man out of Haryana and so become himself the undisputed leader within his community. Chautala is also itching to settle a few (mostly family) scores which Devi Lal would not allow were he to remain in Haryana. Still, both Chandra Shekhar and Devi Lal are veterans, and have remained on the political map for decades by widely disbursing political patronage. It is not improbable that they could create problems which can snowball into major issues within the party.

Policy priorities

During the election campaign, Singh projected himself as a better candidate for the prime ministership than the incumbent, Rajiv Gandhi, and also posed his party as an alternative to the Congress-I. Singh is the only one in the Janata

Dal who could conceivably steer this minority government for a full five-year term. He has assured his countrymen that his party will give a government that every Indian would be proud of. In his first broadcast to the nation as prime minister, he said his government would lay emphasis on controlling corruption, restoring the sanctity of democratic institutions, and amending the Official Secrets Act in order to make the functioning of the government more transparent.

Besides law and order, which has become an issue in recent days, Indians will be looking toward the new government to provide them with a better quality of life. Known as the architect behind the Rajiv Gandhi government's economic liberalization policies, which have helped Indian industry to achieve significant growth and stimulated exports, the new prime minister will now have to keep a balanced approach to both industrial and agricultural growth.

In a recently published interview with the Delhi-based news magazine *India Today*, Singh described the agricultural sector as "one of the mainsprings" of the economy. "We don't see a contradiction between agriculture and industry," he said. "But agriculture is still the main sector which provides the largest employment. Investments in agriculture have been inadequate. While the prices of agricultural produce have not gone up, the price of what the farmer is buying has gone up. These adverse terms of trade are depleting the rural area and pauperizing it. This has to be reversed—even for the sake of industry. Otherwise, we have to think of industrial growth that is skewed. . . . We have to think of small-scale industries. Now, our biggest asset is manpower. And if this asset is idle, our main asset is idle. So you will have to adopt technologies that will result in greater overall employment. We want agro-based industry," Singh said.

In the area of foreign policy, the new administration is hardly expected to veer from the beaten path. Singh has already pledged his support for the Non-Aligned Movement and continuation of the "struggle for peace, disarmament, and development"—policies which he has described as part of the nation's tradition rather than a partisan matter. Singh said that India was committed to fighting apartheid in South Africa, and securing for the brave Palestinians their inalienable rights. "Effective steps would be taken to improve relations with our neighbors," he added. "It will be our endeavor to make the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation a dynamic institution."

The response of the Soviet Union and the United States indicates that very little change of policy is expected by the superpowers from the new administration. Although China has maintained a stony silence over the Indian elections, it is expected that Sino-Indian relations will continue on the same path of negotiated improvement. Although some Pakistani observers have expressed concern over the divided verdict of the Indian electorate, it is evident that their fear is more about an unstable government in Delhi than about what Singh's administration has to offer.