

Political power play threatens to derail India's Deve Gowda government

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

Just as the Indian government was moving ahead with a series of foreign policy initiatives, a sudden decision by Congress Party President Sitaram Kesri on March 30 to withdraw his party's support from the ruling United Front (UF) cabinet, has pulled the rug from under the Deve Gowda government. The 14-party coalition government under Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, supported from outside by the Congress Party, is now on the verge of collapse. However, there is no clear indication yet how the instability built into the system can be immediately removed.

Following Congress Party President Kesri's meeting with India's President Shankar Dayal Sharma, the President's office asked Prime Minister Deve Gowda to show his coalition government's majority at the Parliament on April 11. The present breakdown shows that the ruling UF, with the support of 177 coalition members in a House of 540 members, has little chance of surviving a roll call vote. Hectic negotiations have been in progress, but as of April 8, no clear solution has emerged. President Sharma has said in no uncertain terms that he is opposed to a fresh parliamentary election to resolve the crisis. The last parliamentary election was held in June 1996, and there are indications that the leading parliamentary party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is in the process of preparing for new elections on short notice.

The Gujral doctrine and the Land-Bridge

This latest round of political instability has hit hard at the UF government's foreign policy initiatives, particularly those in the South Asian region. Indian Foreign Minister I.K. Gujral's initiatives (now referred to in Delhi as the "Gujral Doctrine") have worked wonders, bringing India closer to its smaller neighbors and opening up possibilities for long-term economic development.

During its less than ten months of active rule, the Deve Gowda government can claim credit for the following successes and initiatives on the domestic and foreign policy fronts:

- India and Bangladesh resolved a long-standing water-sharing dispute with a new 30-year bilateral agreement. This involves agreement on the quantum of water to be released

by India to Bangladesh. The agreement has been hailed as "fair and just" by both sides.

- Solution of the thorny water-sharing issue led to Bangladesh agreeing to allow India to have transit through Bangladesh for access to northeast India. Northeast India, connected by a chicken-neck strip of land north of Bangladesh along the foothills of the Himalayas, has remained neglected because of transit problems. Such physical inaccessibility led to the consolidation of various terrorist-secessionist activities in northeast India. Moreover, railroad and highway transit through Bangladesh will open the way for linking up the sub-continent with Southeast Asia through Myanmar (Burma), an essential connection for the development of the southern tier of the Eurasian Land-Bridge.

- As a further fallout of the water-sharing treaty, the Bangladesh government in Dhaka has committed itself to push out the northeast insurgents who had set up camp inside Bangladesh's borders to escape the Indian security dragnet. The situation also led to a rapid growth in drug- and arms-infiltration into the area. As a corollary, Dhaka also has invited back the Chakma Buddhist refugees who had been driven out of Bangladesh and were residing in India, causing friction along the borders.

- As an adjunct to the improvement of relations with Bangladesh, Prime Minister Deve Gowda visited northeast India with the purpose of making proposals for improving infrastructural and economic conditions in the region. He is personally involved in bringing the militant Naga leaders to a series of peaceful talks. Following his visit to northeast India and Bangladesh, India suggested the formation of a sub-regional economic grouping involving northeast India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan.

- At the end of September, a reasonably free and fair poll was held in the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir, to reestablish a democratic form of government. Delhi's ability to hold polls peacefully shifted Washington and Beijing's views about the ground realities in Kashmir. It was realized by both the United States and China that New Delhi is much less disliked by the Kashmiris than the terrorists and secessionists who rule by the gun. Subsequent to

the polls, however, things have not remained peaceful and there are signs of fresh violent activities.

- Prime Minister Deve Gowda made a highly successful visit to Moscow following the Clinton-Yeltsin summit, a few days before the Congress Party president withdrew his party's support to the UF government. During this visit, Moscow, smarting from yielding on NATO expansion plans pushed forward by Washington, committed itself to supply India with two 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors, along with 50% financing. Moscow also affirmed its commitment to supply Delhi with cryogenic rocket engines, and supporting technology, sought by India for its own space program. The trip reestablished scientific, technological, and military relations with Russia.

- Soon after the prime minister's successful visit to Moscow, the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan met after a lapse of six years to discuss "all issues that aggravate the relations" between the two neighboring countries. Precisely at the point that Delhi was thrown into turmoil by the Congress Party president, discussions were afoot to improve economic and trade ties between the two countries and set the ground for much more substantial talks which could lead to discussions toward resolving the Kashmir dispute. The subject is of vital importance for the viability of the proposed southern land-bridge corridor, a concept which is now being discussed in the subcontinent and in Southeast Asia. The southern land-bridge corridor, which must have a high-speed railroad from Singapore to Iran, needs to pass through Pakistan.

As a corollary to the above developments, India has agreed to the concept of an Iran-Pakistan-India land-based gas pipeline through Pakistan. Prior to Foreign Minister Gujral's initiatives, the pipeline was considered "unsafe" by the Indians from a security standpoint, because it would pass through Pakistan.

Tinkering by others?

These foreign and domestic policy initiatives, some of which have already begun to bear fruit, may in fact have a more direct bearing on the present developments in Delhi than one might expect. According to some observers, these initiatives were targeted to foil the geopoliticians involved in the colonial containment game of yesteryears and could be the reason why the Congress Party acted hastily. The Congress Party's decision to unseat the UF at a crucial point, namely, when talks with Pakistan were in progress and the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement was scheduled to be held in Delhi in early April, came in for severe criticism. At the same time, no one in Delhi has formally accused Sitaram Kesri of acting as a foil for any foreign power. Former Prime Minister Chandrashekhar, who is critical of Kesri's decision to quit at this juncture, told a business daily in Delhi that the showdown seemed to be "a deliberate attempt to create a

crisis," and warned against all those who might like to seize this opportunity to "destabilize the nation."

On the other hand, the arrangement by which the UF came to power last July made instability inevitable. The coalition, with Congress Party support under the leadership of then-Congress President P.V. Narasimha Rao, was put together with two objectives in mind: to prevent the BJP from getting power through one coalition or another, and to prevent another round of futile parliamentary elections. The process was dictated by the Left, which, with 50 seats, has until now refused to allow the Congress Party (with more than 140 seats) to join the Deve Gowda cabinet. The Congress, for its part, was hesitant to become a full-fledged partner of a government which was likely to fail. Hence, Congress chose to support the UF government from outside without working out a mechanism by which the Congress Party, the second largest party in the Lok Sabha (the elected house of the Parliament), could provide any input in the overall policymaking apparatus.

Arrangements designed to fail

It is also no secret that a large number of Congress Party members are not happy today with the economic policies pursued by the Deve Gowda government. The economic policies initiated so far have done little to overcome the stagnation of industrial production; deterioration of dilapidated infrastructure; high inflation, which is causing a continuous rise in prices of essential commodities; weak investor confidence in a high-interest-rate regime; a shaky and a highly underdeveloped capital market; growing unemployment; and a pervasive concern among foreign investors about whether India is actually moving forward or backward. There is no doubt that most of the government apparatus stopped functioning from day one because of the lack of policy focus to guide them.

All of this was enough to force the Congress Party to break away from what can best be described as a "false knot," that had the two conflicting interest groups pulling in opposite directions. The arrangement, in other words, was designed to fail.

Now, add to this the emerging political realities. With the weakening of the Congress Party following Indira Gandhi's assassination, and the late Rajiv Gandhi's failure to organize a massive party in disarray, it became obvious that there was no room for both the Congress Party and some of the parties which became constituents in the UF government in 1996. Most of the constituents of the UF, except the Left and some regional parties, were "breakaways" from the Congress Party beginning in the early 1970s. These parties came into existence under leaders who were unwilling to be politically dominated by the Nehru-Gandhi clan.

With the rise of the Hindu BJP party in the mid-1980s, it became necessary for like-thinking politicians (who identify themselves as "secular" and left-of-center) to form a com-

mon front against the BJP. The issue, of course, was whether such a front would be formed under the umbrella of the dying, yet still large Congress Party, or under the umbrella of an irrelevant United Front, which encompasses a mish-mash of parties with conflicting world views.

Because the Congress Party was in the doldrums following a shattering electoral defeat in 1996, and with most of its major leaders under criminal investigation for indulging in corrupt practices and amassing wealth, Prime Minister Deve Gowda seized the opportunity and aggressively pursued more Congress leaders, including Sitaram Kesri himself, with fresh criminal charges. The objective behind the

prime minister's "initiative," one surmises, was to smash up the Congress Party and pick up the pieces to enrich the UF. There were accusations from the Congress Party camp that the prime minister personally was working hand in glove with the BJP on this "demolition" project, an allegation which the prime minister denied forthwith.

Meanwhile, the BJP has gained visibly in a string of elections in these ten months, at the expense of both the Congress Party and the UF, both of which had poor showings. These include the Punjab State Assembly elections, civic elections in Delhi and Mumbai (formerly Bombay), and by-elections in Madhya Pradesh.

Pakistan-India dialogue promoted by China

Indian Foreign Minister Inder Kumal Gujral was optimistic about progress in reestablishing bilateral relations with Pakistan, in an interview with the Italian financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* on March 29. If the discussions begun in New Delhi on March 28, between the undersecretaries of the two countries' foreign ministries (Salman Haidar and Ashamsad Ahmad), turn out to be positive, he believes, then the two foreign ministers should meet in early April, opening the way for a summit between Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

After giving his view of the Kashmir dispute (that India will not "yield one meter" and that a referendum can take place only after "the territory is in Indian hands"), Gujral is asked an intelligent question by Nicol Degli Innocenti, of *Sole*: "Could the same happen with Pakistan, which happened with China, that is, that a decision be made to 'freeze' the thorny question of the borders, negotiating everything else, and accelerating political and commercial collaboration?" Gujral answered, "Precisely. Relations with China have improved immensely, to the point that there is an agreement on the progressive and joint reduction of troops on the border. The point had been reached at which the choice was between being friends or being enemies, and fortunately we chose friendship. Chinese President Jiang Zemin himself advised the Pakistani government to follow the track of the Sino-Indian talks: improve economic, commercial, and cultural relations, and with time, a new atmosphere of détente and reciprocal trust will be established. This tranquility will help then to solve the key question of Kashmir as well."

Asked about concrete projects of economic coopera-

tion, Gujral said: "Some multinationals invested a lot of money in electrical energy in Pakistan, to then discover that the country did not need it yet. The World Bank asked India to buy the surplus energy generated in Pakistan: We'll buy 2,000 megawatts this year and 5,000 in the future. Then, there is the question of the gas pipeline from Turkmenistan and Iran: It makes sense economically, only if India, as well, will utilize the gas. Regional collaboration should be given incentives for reasons of economic common sense."

Asked to illustrate the fruits of his "Gujral doctrine," he replied: "The heart of the doctrine is India's clear desire to have good neighborly relations with the countries of the area. India is big and strong, and therefore must help its neighbors without expecting anything in exchange and without interfering in the internal affairs of other countries. After years of conflict and tensions, we have signed an historic agreement with Bangladesh on the waters of the Ganges, and we have relaunched good relations with Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal. Pakistan remains a shadowy area, but the dialogue is going ahead. In general, I think the success [of the doctrine] has been this: None of our neighbors fears India because it is big."

In the context of responding to a question about the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, Gujral said that cooperation will improve as bad political relations are overcome. He cited the removal of tariffs in trade with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal, and added: "We have to be realistic: The 'leap' out of poverty for the neighboring countries will take place only if India is for it. It is the presence of the enormous Indian market which makes investments in Bangladesh or Nepal attractive. And let it be clear: 'My' foreign policy aims at privileging subregional cooperation and at contributing to the economic development of the neighboring countries, not out of altruism, but to protect India's interests. It is in India's interests to have neighbors which are economically, socially, and politically stable."