

New ruling coalition emerges in India

by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra

Leading the 56-member rump of the India's ruling Janata Dal, Chandra Shekhar has formed a "workable arrangement" with the Congress (I) Party and has assumed the post of prime minister. The Congress (I), the single largest party in the Indian Parliament, and its allies have lent their 212 members of Parliament to the breakaway faction, now called the Janata Dal (Socialist), as outside support to help it prove its majority in Parliament on Nov. 16.

Chandra Shekhar's appointment came almost 60 hours after the government of Prime Minister V.P. Singh had failed to prove its majority in a vote of confidence in Parliament on Nov. 7. President Venkataraman, the ultimate arbiter under the Indian Constitution, was left with two options: dissolve Parliament and call for elections, or seek a "workable arrangement" among the parliamentary parties to put together a new government. Faced with nationwide violence and widespread popular dissension, President Venkataraman opted for the second.

But the question remains whether the new government can hold up for the next four years until the next election is due.

Who is Chandra Shekhar?

Although V.P. Singh's removal came not a moment too soon, given the upheavals he had created in his mere 11 months in power, and although the Congress Party is definitely calling the shots, Chandra Shekhar's political background does not boost confidence that the situation will now improve. An avowed socialist, Chandra Shekhar had left the Congress Party in 1975 during Mrs. Indira Gandhi's emergency rule, and became a bitter critic of the "Nehru dynasty." Earlier, in 1969, when the Congress Party was split and the majority faction rallied behind Mrs. Gandhi, Chandra Shekhar had been a star performer. Subsequently, his crusading zeal on behalf of Mrs. Gandhi, in support of the bank nationalization and abolition of privy purses, earned him a reputation as a "young Turk."

However, he soon fell out with Mrs. Gandhi by becoming an outspoken critic of her "authoritarian tendencies," and was sent to jail during the emergency. When the Janata Party took power in 1977 following the emergency, ousting Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Party, Chandra Shekhar became Janata's kingmaker and president. Although the Janata Party fell apart within two years after assuming power, Chandra Shekhar

remained president of the truncated Janata Party for another decade.

Despite the fact that he merged his Janata Party with the Janata Dal to form a combined opposition against the Congress (I) before the 1989 poll, Chandra Shekhar had always been critical of V.P. Singh, and called the latter's election as the leader of the Janata Dal a "conspiracy." During Singh's rule, Chandra Shekhar did little to smooth relations with the prime minister, and later, when the fall of the V.P. Singh government became a certainty, Chandra Shekhar brought about a vertical split within the party. He won 55 other Janata Dal members to his side and sought Congress (I) support to form the government.

Since he has been named prime minister, Chandra Shekhar has, however, taken a conciliatory tone. He told the *Times of India* in a recent interview: "Anybody who is an Indian, who belongs to the nation, howsoever wrong his policy, we should try and persuade him to come into the mainstream." It is to be seen in the coming days whether he actually adopts this policy, or continues with his old style of campaigning.

Chandra Shekhar has listed as his government's priorities: provision of safe and clean drinking water, health, food, education, and ending discrimination based on caste and religion. On major issues facing the nation now, such as secessionist movements in Punjab and Kashmir, the hot situation at Ayodhya where a group of Hindus is hell-bent on building a temple on the site where a mosque exists, and on India's relations with its immediate neighbors, he has little new to add. On the controversial affirmative action policy implemented by the V.P. Singh government, which was ostensibly to raise the status of the backward castes, and which caused a backlash that included about 100 people attempting self-immolation in protest, Chandra Shekhar has asserted that caste can not be the sole criterion to determine job reservations, and that allowance should also be made for economic criteria.

Economic course is still a question mark

However, it is Chandra Shekhar's avowed socialism, which would otherwise mean less and less these days, that raises the question of what the new prime minister's economic policies will be. So far, he has played it with caution and has tried to sound pragmatic. He has made it clear that while he is critical of multinational corporations, "We should take all the help, whether technical or monetary," but "we cannot squander resources in producing things which are not essential." He has also indicated that he would like to give "more powers to the states" in "dealing with matters of development and day-to-day situations."

Chandra Shekhar will now have to keep his dominant partner, the Congress (I), satisfied. Congressmen will be reluctant to share the blame for the failure of the new government, and if things get unwieldy, will have little hesitation in walking out of the "workable arrangement."