

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

A shakeup in Bihar

But the chaos refuses to die down in what is a painful and possibly ominous episode for the Congress (I).

After months of open rebellion and acts of defiance against the ruling party leadership, a large section of elected Congress (I) assemblymen from the state of Bihar received the news on March 10 that they had got what they wanted: Bihar's one-year-old Bhagwat Jha Azad ministry resigned, apparently at New Delhi's behest, and the 70-year-old Satyendra Narain Sinha was asked to form the new state cabinet.

The powerful Pradesh (state) Congress Committee, or PCC(I), also got a new chief—Dr. Jagannath Mishra, a former Chief Minister and, according to many, the *el supremo* of Bihar politics.

What all this will add up to is anybody's guess. If initial responses of various players in the sordid drama are any indicator, the chaos in Bihar is far from over. According to the daily *The Hindu*, an estimated 51 "neo-dissident" Congress (I) legislators met in Bihar's capital Patna, within a day after the new Chief Minister took his oath of office. Former PCC(I) chief Tariq Anwar failed to show up at the swearing-in ceremony following his appointment as a minister in the new cabinet, and reportedly was in Delhi seeking a meeting with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi.

From the standpoint of Bihar's economic, political, and social problems, a mere change in Chief Minister, or even the entire cabinet, does not mean anything (see *EIR*, Vol. 15, No. 30, July 29, 1988). What is painful and potentially ominous about the episode is that it demonstrates clearly the extent of contemptuous disregard

for the Congress (I) leadership in Delhi among state Congress party members. Further dissidence along these lines, and the prospect of it being aped in other troubled Congress (I)-ruled states could seriously weaken the center.

Bhagwat Jha Azad, an honest and no-nonsense individual, if a somewhat guileless politician with a small base, was sent to Patna as Chief Minister in February 1988 to deal with problems which are manifold and multi-layered. To facilitate his work, New Delhi moved most of the prominent Congress (I) leaders and potential tinkerers out of Bihar, offering them ministerial posts at the center. The ubiquitous Dr. Jagannath Mishra was persuaded to accept nomination to the Rajya Sabha, Parliament's upper house.

But, from the outset, Azad's one-year tenure in Patna was tumultuous. Besides the usual law and order problems—such as Naxalite killings, excesses by overzealous cops, tribal demands for an autonomous state within Bihar, organized caste wars, and long-institutionalized financial corruption in the state—Chief Minister Azad faced some new difficulties. He soon got into trouble with the state governor, an appointee of the President of India, who, according to the Chief Minister and his supporters, had begun to work actively for Azad's removal.

Nonetheless, Azad had some real successes—and that is arguably precisely what caused his downfall. He went after the local mafia who rule the coalfields and also after the political

executives, who have turned various cooperatives into financial rackets, with fierce determination. In the process, Azad stepped on not a few toes of Congress party heavyweights in the state.

Open rebellions against Azad following caste or other lines were launched, and when Dr. Mishra, according to many the main man behind Azad's travails, launched the Bihar *Jana Vikas Manch* (People's Development Front) within the Congress (I) party on Dec. 3, 1988, it was all but over for Azad. Dr. Mishra's movement was a direct challenge to the Congress (I) high command: If Dr. Mishra is not given what he wants, he may go his own way, making the situation precarious for the ruling party in this election year.

For three months, Delhi resisted Mishra's pressure, insisting that Azad was doing good work and would continue in office. The end came swiftly with a series of resignations from Bihar that thrust the crisis into New Delhi's lap. In the ensuing politicking, Dr. Mishra let slip the Chief Minister's job and instead took over the PCC(I) chief's posts—no doubt the most powerful position in an election year, since he will be in charge of running the state assembly and parliamentary elections.

The new Chief Minister, S.N. Sinha, comes from an old Bihar political family. That his father was a protégé of Mahatma Gandhi and a political powerhouse in his own right will act favorably for the new Chief Minister. However, S.N. Sinha himself had left Congress in 1967 to join various parties, and only came back into the Congress fold in 1984, when he won a seat in Parliament as a Congress party member. His long absence from the Congress (I) may act against him in the new job.