

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Rao cabinet affirms continuity

Belying media predictions, the newly elected Congress (I) government is an extension of the Indira-Rajiv tradition.

Despite opposition from certain quarters within the newly elected Congress (I) party, Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao has entrusted ministerial responsibilities to the individuals who are widely acknowledged as Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi loyalists. The most significant achievement of the new prime minister is to have included in his cabinet Sharad Pawar, the chief minister of the state of Maharashtra and the man widely projected in the media as the Congress leader ready to lead a rebellion against Rao himself. Pawar is likely to be sworn in as defense minister, a highly prized post in the present context.

The crucial Finance Ministry job has been given to Dr. Manmohan Singh, who served as the governor of the Reserve Bank of India, the country's central bank, during Mrs. Gandhi's last tenure, and as deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, the body which prepares India's five-year plans, during the Rajiv Gandhi tenure. The Planning Commission will now be under Pranab Mukherjee, who had served as Mrs. Gandhi's finance minister and was considered as the number two in her cabinet during the 1983-84 period.

Besides establishing his credentials as both a money man and development planner, Dr. Singh was most recently the Geneva-based secretary general of the South-South Commission, a grouping which formed at the initiative of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohammad to address development issues. Though the commission did little to initiate new policy programs in the global economic con-

text, it is considered the precursor to the Group of 15 "heavyweight" developing countries. There is no doubt that Dr. Singh's appointment will be acclaimed widely in the developing nations, particularly in Southeast Asia and Japan. In a television discussion following his appointment, Dr. Singh emphasized that the modernization of the Indian economy will be his prime objective.

While the appointments of Dr. Singh and Mukherjee are considered most appropriate, little can be said about the naming of Madhavsinh Solanki, former chief minister of Gujarat and a state politician with a significantly reduced political base, as the foreign minister. Solanki, who did a short stint as planning minister during the later part of Rajiv Gandhi's administration—a stint which ended with the electoral defeat in the 1989 general elections—can hardly be considered qualified for the job. The appointment can only mean that Prime Minister Rao, who was Mrs. Gandhi's foreign minister following her return to power in 1980, will make the foreign policy decisions himself. Traditionally, the Congress (I)-led governments' foreign policy has been conducted from the prime minister's office, as was particularly evident during the reigns of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi.

The other important portfolio, Minister for Home Affairs and Internal Security, has been given to the old Congress (I) stalwart from Maharashtra, S.B. Chavan. Chavan held the same portfolio under Rajiv Gandhi and is a state politician who is more at

home in Delhi handling national affairs.

The other major Indira-Rajiv loyalist, Arjun Singh, has been given the less controversial Human Resource Development portfolio. Singh is a very powerful figure in the Congress (I) party hierarchy, and was the chief minister of the state of Madhya Pradesh on more than one occasion. Singh served as a minister in the Rajiv Gandhi cabinet for a short while, besides assuming such challenging positions as governor of Punjab and vice president of the party under Rajiv Gandhi's presidency.

From all available indications, Arjun Singh's position in the party has been further consolidated by the party's unexpectedly good showing in the state of Madhya Pradesh in the recent elections. In that state, the Congress (I) under Singh's leadership turned the tables on the high-profile Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rules the state, and won 27 out of 40 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament. According to sources in Delhi, handling a less controversial portfolio will free Singh to make significant inputs into the party reorganization which is reportedly on the anvil now.

It is also evident from the broad representation in the cabinet from all parts of the country, that while the Indira Gandhi-Rajiv Gandhi loyalists dominate, the present leadership of the party is trying to integrate the party on a nationwide basis. To start the process is particularly essential in light of the weak showing of various centrist parties in the latest elections, and the steady, although not spectacular, growth of the right-wing Hindu religious party, the BJP. There are indications already that some of the leaders of the non-Congress centrist parties are hobnobbing with the influential members of the ruling Congress party.