

# Fresh elections ordered for India

by Ramtanu Maitra

The collapse of the Vajpayee government, and the Congress Party-led opposition's inability to form an alliance with a majority of parliamentarians, have forced Indian President K.R. Narayanan to dissolve the 12th Lok Sabha (parliament) and call fresh elections. India's Election Commission has decided that the next parliamentary elections will be held at the end of September, but the exact date has not yet been determined.

Both major national parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had led the government, and the Congress Party, have begun making political arrangements for the coming elections, and it is evident that both parties are in a feisty mood. An aggressive campaign in the coming parliamentary elections is anticipated at this point. Nonetheless, it is almost a certainty that neither the BJP nor the Congress will be able to muster an absolute majority (that is, secure 272 out of the 542 contested Lok Sabha seats as a single party), unless some major international or domestic incidents change the political environment in the subcontinent rather drastically.

In April, when the BJP-led coalition government was brought down in a no-confidence motion by the ridiculous majority of a single vote (269 in favor of the government and 270 against) by an opportunistic alliance of opposition parties and leaders, there were immediate hopes that yet another coalition government could be cobbled together. Attempts were made, but the failure of the leading opposition party, the Congress Party, to bring the other major opposition groups to rally behind in its support led to the dissolution of the Lok Sabha. The 1999 parliamentary elections will mark the third parliamentary elections in three years; whoever comes to power, India will have the distinction of having its fifth Prime Minister in just that many years.

## Small party-led instability

The failure of all political parties to provide stability and direction to policies and institutions is much discussed here by the people in general. Gradually, a unanimity of opinion has emerged among the vast rural population and a much smaller urban population, in condemnation of the feuding politicians. The population is quite angry, particularly with those politicians who belong to smaller parties and who act as makers and breakers of coalition governments. People have begun to realize that these small parties have chosen to exist

entirely for their own narrow benefit—political and financial—and have little concern for the nation's good.

According to political observers, there is a strong likelihood that in the Lok Sabha elections, the small state, caste, and community-based political parties will pay dearly for their reckless behavior in making the parliament a marketplace where votes are traded regularly for one favor or the other. If the small parties are routed, it would mean major electoral gains for both the BJP and the Congress Party, resulting in the formation of a two-party system at the national level, by consensus of the electorate. Present trends indicate that most small parties are in turmoil, and a few of them are about to break apart. Already, a number of middle-level politicians have joined the two major parties. This has not yet turned into a wave, but it could very well become so in the coming days.

## Successful nuclear tests

At the point the government was pulled down, amid a political spectacle unbecoming a nation of almost 1 billion people, both the Prime Minister and his BJP party, had begun to emerge from the proverbial purple patch, whereby it acted as an ineffective and even hapless government from time to time. The shift occurred as the government, with no earlier understanding of administration, began to learn on the job. One rude shock was the electoral drubbing it received at the hands of the Congress Party in the three State Assembly elections last November. Subsequently, the Vajpayee government made substantial gains politically, particularly in strengthening foreign relations. Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee's visit to Pakistan by bus raised the potential for resolving bilaterally the decades-old Kashmir dispute. Removal of Vajpayee at this crucial time from the seat of power through an organized parliamentary coup will definitely affect India's bilateral relations with Pakistan, although Islamabad has remained committed so far to a bilaterally negotiated settlement of the Kashmir dispute.

In addition to the Pakistan diplomacy, the Vajpayee government also corrected its posture of animosity toward Beijing. Just before the government fell, a delegation led by Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath made a highly successful trip to Beijing. Subsequently, the earlier-postponed talks between the Sino-Indian Joint Working Group took place.

Prime Minister Vajpayee has made it a point to announce that the five underground nuclear tests carried out on May 11 and May 13 were major achievements of his government, in addition to the successful testing of Agni-II, an intermediate-range surface-to-air missile, days before the government was pulled down. What is important to note is that earlier mistakes made by New Delhi when it identified China as a strategic threat to India, led Beijing to join voices with the West in criticizing the underground nuclear tests. But the subsequent change in rhetoric and policies toward China by the Vajpayee government has led to a warming up of relations.

An indication of the Vajpayee government's success, is that China made no negative comment when the Agni-II was tested. Chinese sources point out that since the Vajpayee government has stated clearly that the Agni-II has been developed to strengthen India's security, and is not targetted against China or any other nation, Beijing has no objection whatsoever.

### **Poor economic performance**

The Vajpayee government's Achilles' heel was the national economy. Refusing to look clearly at the nature of the global economic breakdown, brought about by speculative economics worldwide and the economic paralysis reigning in Japan and Europe, the Vajpayee government had assumed a business-as-usual attitude. Poor export figures, low economic growth, low tax revenues, stagnation in the industrial sector, and an enormous financial requirement to meet infrastructure development needs, had crippled financial policymaking. It must be acknowledged, however, that the Vajpayee government managed to keep the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-World Bank at bay, and did not allow the currency to be drastically devalued. The economy, after a lot of hiccups, may show a growth rate of 6% when all the figures come in.

In contrast to the bleak economic picture that the BJP-led government inherited last spring, the basic indicators of the Indian economy are much better now. India had a bumper wheat crop and the central grain pool is brimming over with estimated stocks of 36 million tons. Rice stocks, at 11.7 million tons, are slightly less than the minimum requirement of 11.8 million tons. But, the total grain reserve is much higher than the minimum buffer stock requirement.

On the overall economic achievement of the BJP, however, there is little to crow about. Aside from the agricultural sector, the government takes pride in stating that inflation has come down to less than 5% during its 13-month stint, and foreign exchange reserves grew from \$25 billion to \$29 billion. But these figures, however important, have little to do with people, particularly the poor and the middle class which make up the vast majority of the population. What bothers this majority is that industrial growth dropped from a poor 6%, to a miserable 4%. In addition, exports, badly affected by the Asian economic crisis, grew at a measly rate of 1.6%, leading to a bloated \$6.8 billion trade deficit.

All this meant larger unemployment and lower investment. The second budget presented by the Vajpayee government, in the midst of growing political instability, did not help the situation either, because interest rates were kept too high, evoking angry responses from industrial firms and investors.

### **The bad omen**

Following the collapse of the Vajpayee government, the IMF and its toadies in India have become active again. At a recent seminar in New Delhi organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry, the International Monetary Fund harped on India's slow reform. Nobody pointed to the IMF-led catastrophes in Venezuela and Brazil, and how the IMF has helped, through its so-called fiscal stabilization plan, to loot Russia. The IMF team also inquired when India would open up currency trading in its capital account. It is currency trading in the capital account which triggered the Southeast Asian collapse and ravaged the Thai and Malaysian economies. But the treacherous IMF continues to pressure India to increase trade liberalization, lower taxes and tariffs, and give preferential treatment to foreign investors, at a time when domestic industry is in a recession and the government has to mobilize large funds from within to develop India's dilapidated infrastructure.

Whether the Vajpayee government was targetted by any external power or institutions other than the small domestic parties which withdrew their support, is difficult to say. There is no smoking gun, but what is evident is that the political instability that India is experiencing has made investors wary. Net fresh investments during fiscal year 1998-99, the period that the Vajpayee government was in power, were 63% less than those in 1996-97. On the one hand, a report says, fresh proposals are not forthcoming and, on the other, already-proposed projects are being put on the back burner or are being delayed, for a variety of reasons.

The fall of the Vajpayee government will also have a negative impact on India's foreign relations. Beside the historic initiative by Vajpayee vis-à-vis Pakistan, the Indian Prime Minister had also significantly improved relations with Bangladesh, and a bus-service between Calcutta and Dhaka became operational during the Vajpayee regime. Some point out that the sustained dialogue between Delhi and Washington was heading toward a mutually beneficial outcome. And the Indian Prime Minister, at least on one occasion, mentioned something about visiting China by bus as an historic gesture to India's powerful neighbor.

Also during the Vajpayee regime, discussions began to take shape around developing a rail line that would traverse the subcontinent connecting Southeast Asia to Europe. This would complement the Eurasian Land-Bridge developed in the north on China's initiative. There was some movement in bringing this very important development to the fore. It is only expected that whoever comes to power in Delhi next October, would give the project a much-needed push.

# London's mafia war against Sierra Leone

by Linda de Hoyos

Direct talks between the Sierra Leone government of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) are scheduled to begin on May 18 in Lomé, Togo, under the mediation of Togo's President Gnassingbe Eyadema, chairman of the Economic Community of West African States. As suspected by Ambassador John Ernest Leight, Sierra Leone's ambassador to the United States (see interview), the RUF is using the talks to force the Sierra Leone government to permanently release RUF leader Foday San-koh from detention. "The man must be free, and our own position is that this is a prerequisite for the talks to succeed and the talks to continue," said Omrie Golley, a Sierra Leone exile living in England who works with International Alert.

As Ambassador Leight discusses in detail, the RUF is a gang of demoralized soldiers culled from a succession of corrupt military regimes extending from that of President Joseph Momoh, overthrown in 1992, to Valentine Strasser, overthrown in January 1996. In war against Sierra Leone since 1991, the RUF has waged a campaign of violent terror against the people. Ambassador Leight also documents that, at the center of the continuing war which has devastated a country whose citizens already had one of the lowest life expectancies in Africa, are the country's resources, its vast wealth in gold and diamonds.

The reaction of the Western powers to the RUF war against Sierra Leone has been ambiguous at best. Sierra Leone is a former British colony and a member of the British Commonwealth. In 1991, President Momoh asked the British Defense Ministry for help to defend his country against the RUF onslaught. *The British government turned down the request.* From there, over successive regimes and governments, the people of Sierra Leone have been crushed between a rock and a hard place. On the one side is the deranged RUF, ravaging the country, killing and maiming civilians, kidnapping children and turning them into drugged-up child-soldiers. On the other side, are all the British "private security forces," which seek to come to the aid of whatever non-RUF government is ruling in Freetown, to crush the RUF—at a price. And what is that price? The government should hand over to that private foreign interest the franchise for mining Sierra Leone's gold and diamonds.

In short, the RUF could be likened to the gang of street hoodlums hired by the mafioso fat cats at the top to terrorize people into seeking "protection" from the hoodlums the fat

cats had sent to steal, burn, and kill in the first place. This accounts for the fact that the British Broadcasting Corp. is considered a major booster of the RUF (and of its ally, Charles Taylor of Liberia), and accounts for the fact that the RUF was able to receive highly sophisticated equipment for its January assault on Freetown, in part delivered by such British companies as Occidental Airways and Sky Air Cargo. On the other side, in March 1995, the Strasser regime brought in Executive Outcomes to deal with the RUF, which the South African mercenary company managed to do, while its affiliate, Branch Energy, mined the gold and diamonds of Sierra Leone for itself.

EO, as *EIR* has documented, is close to the center of the British Commonwealth financial nexus around the British Crown. The Kabbah government terminated the agreement with EO in January 1997, but then Indian-born Thai banker Rakesh Saxena attempted to bring in Col. Tim Spicer's Sandline International, to aid Kabbah's restoration to power after an RUF-backed coup against him in May 1997. The terms were the same: Sandline will deal with the RUF, in exchange for Sierra Leone's mineral wealth. To keep the game going, the British government and its underlings at the U.S. State Department maintained that a UN Security Council embargo had been placed on both the RUF-backed government of Johnny Paul Koroma, and the Kabbah forces.

While praising the Nigeria-dominated Ecomog which intervened on behalf of the Kabbah government in Sierra Leone in 1998, the Western powers have failed to deliver substantial aid to Ecomog. Thus, the war continues—while thousands of Sierra Leone citizens die of starvation, disease, and murder caused by that war. Ambassador Leight avers that the current peace talks in Lomé will be used by the RUF as just another tactic in the war. Given the game imposed on the people of Sierra Leone by their former colonial masters and their helpmates in Washington, he is likely correct in that assessment.

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## Interview: John Ernest Leight

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# The grab for Sierra Leone's resources

*Mr. Leight is Sierra Leone's Ambassador to the United States. He was interviewed by Lawrence Freeman in Washington, D.C., on April 21.*

**EIR:** There is a bloody conflict going on in your country. Can you tell us what is at the center of this controversy?

**Leight:** At the center of the trouble in Sierra Leone is our