

**FOCUS-India set for Hindu-led coalition government.**By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

617 words

10 March 1998

Reuters News

English

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NEW DELHI, March 10 (Reuters) - India was set on Tuesday for a new coalition government led by Hindu nationalist leader Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Vajpayee, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was invited by President K.R. Narayanan to form a new federal government, ending a week of suspense after the counting of votes from an inconclusive national election.

"I will be meeting the President tonight. I am going to tell him that BJP and its friendly allies in a coalition are capable of giving a stable government," Vajpayee told reporters at his residence.

It will be the second time in two years that Vajpayee steps into India's top political post. The BJP formed a short-lived government for 13 days in May 1996 but was forced to resign when it failed to win backing in a parliamentary vote of confidence.

But the 71-year-old poet-politician was more confident this time after pledges of support from a patchwork quilt of regional parties.

"Everybody knows we are short of a clear majority but we are in contact with other (parliament) members. We are confident of making a majority," he said.

The BJP and its allies account for 253 of the 539 declared seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament. The coalition needs the backing of 19 more members in the 545-seat house for a clear majority.

The gap is likely to be filled by more regional groups in the fragmented parliament that do not join the treasury benches but offer conditional support.

President Narayanan's office confirmed Narayanan had sent Vajpayee a letter that read:

"Insofar as yours is the single largest party in Lok Sabha (the lower house of parliament) and the single largest pre-poll alliance, I request you to let me to know whether you are able and willing to form a stable government, which can secure the confidence of the house."

Vajpayee said he would meet Narayanan at 8 p.m. (1430 GMT) on the offer and convey his readiness to form a government.

Under India's constitution, Narayanan will then convene a session of parliament's lower house to test Vajpayee's majority.

Vajpayee was the BJP's prime ministerial candidate throughout the two-month election campaign. Elections for the 539 declared seats took place on February 16, 22, 23, 28 and March 7. Four remaining constituencies will vote later this month and in June.

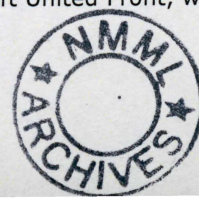
The two remaining seats in the Lok Sabha are nominated by President Narayanan.

Vajpayee has won backing from a rainbow coalition of at least 17 groups, including independent MPs, that embraces firebrand socialists as well as regional politicians who will be influential in the handing out of key government portfolios.

The BJP is looking for a magic majority figure of 272 among 543 elected members.

Asked how he would cope with the demands of such a diverse alliance, Vajpayee said: "The task is difficult but we think we can achieve it."

The centrist Congress party and its allies command 167 seats, and the centre-left United Front, which was toppled from power last November, has 98 lawmakers.





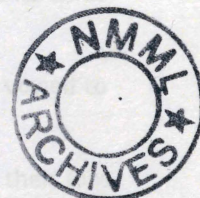
But they have failed in their efforts to revive a political marriage that foundered after the Congress withdrew vital backing to the Front's government.

President Narayanan had mandated last December 4, when he disbanded parliament, that a new government must be in place by March 16.

The new government will end three months of political flux, but late on Tuesday the BJP was still busy thrashing out a "national agenda" that will cover common ground with its allies.

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Their leaders were confident they would be asked to form India's next government, but their rivalry and ideological differences are combining uneasily, if only to thwart the BJP.

The country's orthodox Marxists said they would even be prepared to support a government led by the Congress.

"It's not just the question of what the BJP purports to represent. It is the entire ideological baggage that the BJP represents," said Brinda Koral of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M).

The Communist Party of India's secretary-general A. B. Bardhan put it more bluntly. "The country must have a government. We would certainly like to be with them (Congress) rather than with the BJP," he told a private television network.

No other party arouses such strong passions among rivals.

On television talk shows and in newspaper editorials, India is divided into "communal forces" - code for the BJP's perceived militant Hindu agenda and anti-Muslim bias - and everybody else under the "secular three umbrellas."

Nearly every other politician in India traces his or her roots to the 112-year-old banner of the Congress.

With its disciplined cadres and its overt links to the Hindu ultrarightists of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP is a homegrown, post-independence phenomenon.

A reincarnation of the Jansangh, an older and even more disciplined party, the BJP was formed in 1980 and has steadily grown its influence.

It won 161 parliamentary seats in the last general election in 1996, against 120 in 1991, 35 in 1989 and a paltry two seats in 1984.

The party tried strenuously during the 1996 election campaign to present itself as a "moderate" proponent of "cultural nationalism" but was not very successful.

The BJP's concept of "Positive Discrimination vs. Justice for All, Aggression-free of None," the party manifesto said.

It tried to calm fears among India's 112 million Muslims by promising "equal opportunity and prosperity" and charged that its rivals had "shamelessly pandered to communalism and indulged in 'vote-bank politics'."

But the party unequivocally vowed to build a shrine to the Hindu god Rama at Ayodhya, where Hindu zealots tore down a 16th-century mosque in 1992, triggering India's worst sectarian riots since the subcontinent was partitioned on Hindu-Muslim lines into India and Pakistan in 1947.

For Supreme Court Justice Singh leaped out at the commentators in a recent interview with Reuters and said the "communal" label had worn thin.

"It is their way of abusing somebody, calling somebody rightists, capitalists, the shoddy of the society... that is the communal way of using a word many times. In many ways the BJP is a secularist (movement) movement," he said.