



Rahul Gandhi (R) and Priyanka Gandhi (L) son and daughter of India's Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi meet supporters in New Delhi yesterday. India's oldest party, the Congress, virtually written off by political pundits and rivals, made a stunning comeback in national polls under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi. Results of India's staggered polls showed the party and its allies sweeping the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its coalition partners from power.

'Communists to call the shots in new govt'

AFP, New Delhi

Communists will provide crucial support to prop up India's new government and could press a leftist agenda that includes a reversal of the 13-year push towards a market economy, analysts said yesterday.

Communists have never been part of an Indian federal government but have held iron grips over two states, where they have proved to be both stubbornly ideological and pragmatic when necessary.

Communists gained 20 more seats in the election to reach 62 MPs, who will be vital to the Congress-led alliance which has 216 seats. A government needs 272 seats for a parliamentary majority.

"The left is the most critical ally now," said analyst Yashwant Deshmukh.

"They will be the engine that would push the train from behind. They will call the shots."

The communists have already voiced support for a government headed by Congress, the party of

the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty led by Italian-born Sonia Gandhi.

But the communists still have to decide whether to make the historic decision to join the government, or if they will support it from the outside.

The communists have been militant in their opposition to the privatisation championed by the defeated Hindu nationalist government, raising fears that sent the Bombay Stock Exchange plunging over six percent Friday.

"Obviously it goes without saying that policy of disinvesting public sector companies should go," Communist Party of India general secretary A.B. Bardhan told reporters.

Harkishan Singh Surjeet, general secretary at India's largest left party, the Communist Party of India-Marxist, echoed his views.

"We cannot afford it (privatisation). We oppose disinvestment of profit making companies. This policy has seriously harmed the country. This policy has to be changed," he said.

But the communists have also learned to be pragmatic, particularly in their two strongholds, the eastern state of West Bengal and the southern state of Kerala.

West Bengal, whose capital is Calcutta, has been a showcase for the CPI-M which has ruled the state without interruption for over two decades.

The state government has launched some of India's most sweeping agrarian reforms, issuing land deeds in the countryside that have given hundreds of thousands of peasants their first ever legal rights to their fields.

But more recently, the West Bengal government has tried to turn Calcutta into a new hi-tech hub and has banned IT workers from going on strike -- a policy long unthinkable for the far-left.

The moderation of the left can also be seen in the personal lives of communist leaders, some of whom have sent their children overseas for education and encouraged them to take top jobs in the corporate world.

N Korea won't accept complete dismantling of nuke programme

AFP, Seoul

North Korea vowed yesterday to never accept US demands for a complete dismantling of its nuclear programmes, calling it a humiliating measure that can only be imposed on a country defeated in a war.

In a statement issued outside the North Korean embassy in Beijing, foreign ministry official Park Myong-kuk expressed frustration at the US hardline stance but pledged to push on with six-nation talks in the Chinese capital.

"We had expected the US to talk differently about what kind of reciprocal measures the US and related countries will take if we freeze our nuclear program," said Park, a member of the North's delegation at the working group meeting, which entered its third day Friday despite the apparent stalemate.

"But the US repeated the same position as at the previous talks that discussions (on compensation) are possible only when we commit ourselves to CVID (complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement)."

He called the US demand "the kind of humiliating measure that can only be imposed on a country defeated in a war".

The row over North Korea's nuclear program has been deadlocked since October 2002, when Washington said the Stalinist state had broken a 1994 nuclear freeze by launching a secret weapons drive.

The early morning statement followed warnings by China that "major" differences remain on solving the 19-month-old standoff and underscored remarks by Russia's envoy on Thursday that chances of a breakthrough soon were remote.

Prior to the talks, Pyongyang had reiterated a demand that it be rewarded, politically and economically, for giving up its nuclear program, while the US government had ruled out any immediate pay-off.

Washington wants a clear-cut commitment from the North for a "complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement" before any compensation can be considered.

'Political upset may slow peace with Pakistan'

AFP, Islamabad

The dramatic election defeat of India's Hindu nationalists will slow the fledgling peace process between India and Pakistan, analysts said yesterday, predicting more caution from a Congress-led government.

"The change of government will affect the momentum" created during the government of outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, said former Pakistani diplomat Kamal Matnuddin.

"I think there will be an element of delay because whatever ground had been covered by (Pakistani President Pervez) Musharraf and Vajpayee has to be recovered by Musharraf and Sonia Gandhi if she is the next prime minister," political analyst Mohammad Afzal Niazi told AFP.

Congress, led by Italian-born

Sonia Gandhi, has yet to name a prime minister, but whoever succeeds Vajpayee would most likely want to meet personally with Musharraf "at some multi-lateral forum," Niazi said.

"There is a danger that Congress would not move ahead substantially without meeting personally with Musharraf."

Vajpayee, 79, is credited with kickstarting the 13-month old peace process between the nuclear armed rivals by offering a hand of friendship in April last year. Peace with Pakistan was his dream, he has said.

The rapport between him and Musharraf was cemented in January when the two produced a surprise agreement to resume formal dialogue after almost three years.

The two and their closest aides

had worked on the agreement in secrecy for over six months. Both were hailed for taking the Kashmir dispute further forward than any previous leaders during the 56-year dispute.

The South Asian giants have fought three wars since Pakistan was created in 1947.

Just two years ago they were on the verge of a fourth war, which the world feared would turn nuclear, over Kashmir, the lush Himalayan region claimed by both countries but divided between them.

"The pace of dialogue may slow down as the new government will have its own priorities," former information minister and ruling party Senator Mushahid Hussain said.

"There was a personal rapport that had been established between the two leaders. It will take time to develop that rapport now."

Hurriyat upbeat on Kashmir peace

AFP, Srinagar

A senior Kashmiri separatist said yesterday he was hopeful the next Indian government will pursue peace talks in the divided Himalayan territory after the defeat of the Hindu nationalists.

"I am very much hopeful that India will continue to pursue peace talks with Pakistan and separatists in Kashmir," said Molvi Abbas Ansari, head of the moderate faction of the main Kashmir separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference.

"The will of Kashmiris has to be taken into consideration before a solution is reached" on the Kashmir dispute, Ansari told AFP.

Sonia Gandhi's Congress party and its allies are set to form a new government after an upset

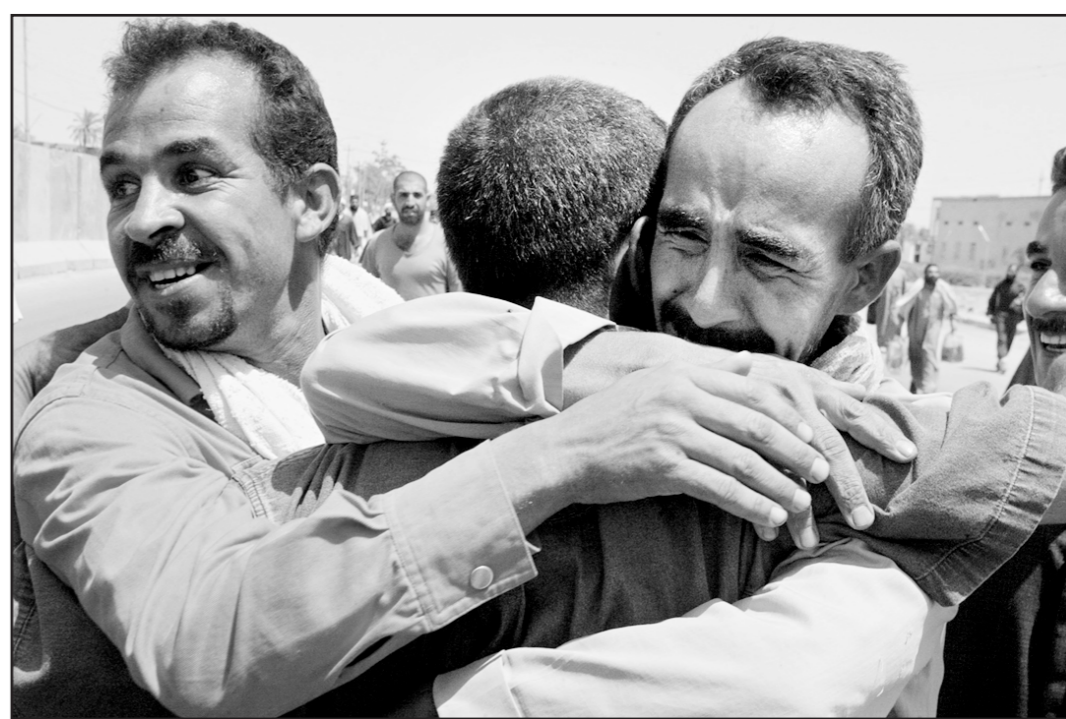
defeat of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalists.

Vajpayee, 79, had declared it his personal mission to make peace with Pakistan and in Kashmir, where an anti-Indian insurgency has raged since 1989, despite his party's hawkish roots.

Sonia has pledged to continue peace moves, but analysts in Pakistan said the process may lose momentum without Vajpayee.

The Ansari faction held two rounds of breakthrough talks with Vajpayee's deputy Lal Krishna Advani this year.

But separatists are sharply divided, with pro-Pakistani hardliners and guerrilla groups opposed to the Ansari faction's talks with New Delhi.



An Iraqi father (C) hugs his two sons who were released from the Abu Ghraib prison yesterday in Baquba, 60km northeast of Baghdad. US forces released hundreds of prisoners from Iraq's infamous Abu Ghraib jail, at the centre of a prison abuse scandal.

Italian press trumpets Sonia's triumph

AFP, Rome

The Italian press yesterday saluted the victory of Italian-born Sonia Gandhi and her Congress party in the Indian elections.

"Italian Sonia Gandhi triumphs," trumpeted Italy's leading daily Corriere della Sera in a front-page headline.

"Sonia Gandhi: an Italian triumphs in India," echoed the headline in the leftist La Repubblica.

Born on December 9, 1946 into the family of a middle-class building contractor, Sonia was born Sonia Maino and grew up in Orbassano, located in the shadow of Italy's northern giant Turin.

But she left her Italian home town far behind when she married Rajiv Gandhi, scion of India's political first family in February 1968. She acquired Indian nationality in 1984 and her husband was assassinated in 1991.

"Against all expectations, there is now little doubt that the Italian from Orbassano will become India's next prime minister," said La Repubblica.



Pakistani people read newspapers featuring headlines regarding India's Congress Party victory in the country's general elections, in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani newspapers mostly lamented the shock exit of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee after his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) dramatic election loss, portraying him as crucial to the nascent peace process.

Suu Kyi's NLD to boycott Myanmar convention

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's main opposition party yesterday said it would boycott next week's constitutional convention after the ruling military failed to release democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi and ignored key demands.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) said in a statement it would not be in the country's interest if it attended the forum, which the junta has billed as the first part of its "roadmap to democracy."

"The NLD has come to the conclusion that it will not benefit the nation by participating in the national convention, and so we have made the decision not to attend," party chairman Aung Shwe said, reading a prepared statement.

Analysts have warned that the convention which begins Monday would lose all credibility if the NLD, which won a landslide election victory in 1990 which was never recognised by the junta, did not attend.

Aung Shwe said the decision to skip the forum hinged on the military junta's refusal to release Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and its failure to adopt reforms to the convention format recently proposed by the NLD.

"On the matter of releasing Aung San Suu Kyi and (detained vice

chairman) Tin Oo, and the reopening of the (NLD) offices, they said they had no plans to do so at the moment," Aung Shwe said.

Party secretary U Lwin admitted the decision was a near U-turn from late last month, when the NLD was almost certain of attending as it appeared the authorities would react favourably to the party's proposals, which included a call for free and open discussions.

As weeks passed, there was no response from authorities on the proposals.

"The (waiting) time is up, and since we did not get a positive response to our suggestions we made our decision not to attend," U Lwin told a packed briefing at the NLD's Yangon headquarters.

The NLD boycott threatens to trigger a mass walkout, with several ethnic groups and small political parties believed to be making their attendance conditional on the NLD's participation.

"We will not attend also," said chairman Khun Tun Oo of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), the second largest winning party in the 1990 elections and one of the most prominent opposition groupings.

Iraq prison abuse a 'failure of leadership': Powell

AFP, London

The abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US forces was caused by "a failure of leadership," US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday, while insisting this did not mean Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld should step down.

"It was a failure of leadership, something like that should never have happened," Powell said in an interview from Washington with BBC television.

Photographs showing violent and sexual abuse of detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad have shocked the world and prompted calls for Rumsfeld to take responsibility by resigning. But Powell said that this was not justified.

"Our justice system will work, and as Secretary Rumsfeld has said, our justice system will not just stop at the privates in that prison but will go up to who should have accountability," he said.

"Secretary Rumsfeld has accepted responsibility, but what's more important to us to discover now is accountability, who should have known and who should have done something about it before anything like this could possibly have happened."

SLAIN AMERICAN'S FATHER SAYS Berg died for sins of Bush, Rumsfeld

REUTERS, Philadelphia

The father of Nick Berg, the American beheaded in Iraq, directly blamed President Bush and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld on Thursday for his son's death.

"My son died for the sins of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld. This administration did this," Berg said in an interview with radio station KYW-AM two days after a video showing the execution of his son was shown on an Islamist Web site.

In the interview from outside his home in West Chester, Pennsylvania, a seething Michael Berg also said his 26-year-old son, a civilian contractor, probably would have felt positive, even about his executioners, until the last minute.

"I am sure that he only saw the good in his captors until the last second of his life," Berg said. "They did not know what they were doing. They killed their best friend."

Asked to respond to Berg's comments about the president, White House spokesman Scott McClellan said, "The Berg family is

going through a very difficult period and they remain in our thoughts and prayers."

Meanwhile, Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee to challenge Bush in the November election, said he had spoken to Michael Berg to express sympathy. "I know as a father how I would feel if it were one of my daughters or stepsons. I think every American is pained by what is going on."

Asked if Bush had also called Nicholas Berg's family, McClellan said he had not but pointed to the president's public expressions of condolence to the family.

Michael Berg's criticism came amid finger-pointing between Berg's family, US military officials and Iraqi police over the young businessman's imprisonment before his execution.

Berg rejected US government claims that his son had never been held by American authorities in Iraq. The Iraqi police chief in the city of Mosul has also contradicted statements by the US-led coalition concerning the younger Berg's detention.

Senate committee grills Pentagon officials

US officials unaware of interrogation rules

AP, Washington

The Pentagon's No. 2 general and the deputy defence secretary said they were unaware of interrogation rules approved for use in Iraq allowing the use of dogs or days of sleep deprivation.

Marine Gen. Peter Pace, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz appeared Thursday before the Senate Armed Services Committee. The panel is trying to determine if the prisoner abuse was limited to a small group of soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison or if the problem was more widespread and military leaders were involved.

Photos of hooded, naked Iraqi prisoners being sexually humiliated

and apparently injured by their American captors have touched off an international outcry. Pentagon officials say the treatment in the pictures goes well beyond approved interrogation techniques.

But the approved techniques have also raised concerns on the committee. A summary of "Interrogation Rules of Engagement" provided to senators by Army officials says that, with a general's written approval, prisoners could be subjected to stressful positions for up to 45 minutes, isolation for more than 30 days, military dogs and up to 72 hours of "sleep management."

Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., said he believed the policy would allow prisoners to be held "naked, with a bag over their head, squatting with

their arms uplifted for 45 minutes."

Both Pace and Wolfowitz said such treatment would appear to violate the Geneva Conventions. But they said they weren't familiar with the interrogation techniques approved for use in Iraq.

The Pentagon late Thursday issued a statement saying the scenario Reed described would be "contrary to our regulations. Senator Reed is mistaken."

As senators pursue their inquiry, they are expected to call other top military officials. Senators have particularly expressed interest in hearing from Undersecretary of Defence Douglas Feith; Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, the top US commander in Iraq; and Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller, the commander of Abu Ghraib.

US soldier details Iraq abuse, to plead guilty

REUTERS, Los Angeles

US guards at the Abu Ghraib prison stripped Iraqi prisoners naked, mocked, struck and kicked them and then "in the crudest of humiliations, forced them to hit each other," the Los Angeles Times reported on its Web site on Thursday.

The paper said that Spc. Jeremy Sivits, the first soldier to face a court-martial in the abuse scandal, has told investigators "a harrowing tale" of how guards led by Spc. Charles Graner abused the detainees during nightly rounds.

The Times said that according to documents it had obtained, Sivits claimed Graner was always "joking, laughing ... acting like he was enjoying it."

Sivits, one of seven military police officers facing charges in the case, will plead guilty at a court-martial proceeding next week, the Washington Post reported on Friday.

Sivits, 24, of Hyndman, Pa., admitted in a sworn statement that he photographed the abuse but

never reported it, according to the newspaper.

His offer to plead guilty was accepted by the staff judge advocate overseeing his court-martial, according to a memo reviewed by The Washington Post and lawyers representing others charged in the case, the newspaper said. But the paper said it could not be determined to which charge he would plead guilty.

The Times also reported that Sivits' statement implicates five of the other six soldiers accused of abusing detainees at the prison outside Baghdad.

According to the Times, Sivits said all of the abuse was done without the knowledge of his superiors in the Army chain of command. "Our command would have slammed us," he said, according to documents quoted by the paper.