

Right-wing Hindu party leads Indian vote

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The following is a preliminary account of the Indian election results. A fuller analysis of the political situation in India following the elections will be published here soon.

Who will form the next government in India remains undecided, but a coalition based on the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party appears probable. The results of the three-week-long national election process reveal a growing political fragmentation, with several dozen parties, most of them regionally based, winning seats in the Lok Sabha, the Indian parliament.

The BJP-led electoral bloc won 249 seats, about 20 short of a majority, and up about 60 seats from its total in the last parliament. But the BJP itself increased its seat total by just 16, from 161 to 177, with its allied parties and independents gaining the balance. And in two large states the BJP actually suffered heavy losses: in Maharashtra, the state which includes Bombay, India's industrial center, where the BJP and Shiva Sena form the state government, and in neighboring Rajasthan, where the BJP holds power alone.

If the BJP is now within striking distance of forming a government it is largely because of the gains made by its allies, many of whom threw in their lot with the BJP only because they perceived it as heading for victory. Of these allies only a handful, such as the Shiv Sena and the Akali Dal, are politically close to the BJP.

The Congress Party escaped an electoral disaster. With its allies it controls 171 seats, but the Congress seat total is virtually unchanged. (It won 140 seats in 1996 and now holds 141.)

The United Front, which has headed coalition governments supported by Congress for the past two years, lost 40 percent of its seats, falling from 153 to only 93. The largest single party in the UF coalition, the Janata Dal, which emerged from the Janata Party of the 1970s and was long the second most important party in the national parliament, was virtually wiped

out, reduced to only 6 seats, compared to 46 in 1996.

Many of the regional parties that comprise the United Front also suffered sharp reversals. In 1996, the DMK-TMC alliance that holds power in the state of Tamil Nadu won all the state's 39 seats in the national parliament. They now hold just nine. Similarly in Andra Pradesh there was a strong shift in popular support away the regional party, a member of the United Front, which controls the state government.

The two Stalinist parties, the CPI and CPM, lost votes, but not as precipitately as the rest of the coalition. As a result, their four-party Left Front, which has 51 Lok Sabha seats, has emerged as far and away the biggest component of the United Front.

No sooner had the voting pattern become clear than CPM General Secretary Harkishen Singh Surjit issued a statement saying that the Left Front would support a Congress-led government to prevent the BJP from coming to power. Previously Surjit and other key United Front spokesman had ruled out support for a Congress-led government.

Surjit was reprimanded by the UF and Left Front leaderships for having acted without obtaining their sanction. The Stalinists are desperate for an alliance with the Congress, but their allies in the UF, most of whom face Congress as their main opponent, calculate that such an alliance will be at their expense.

It now appears that Congress and the UF may allow the BJP to form the government, calculating that, given the parliamentary arithmetic, it will not last long. Already some of the BJP's allies are trying to place some distance between themselves and the Hindu chauvinist party, announcing that they would not join an BJP-led government, but only support it from the outside. The BJP took office in 1996, with far fewer seats in parliament, but lost a vote of confidence and quit after 13 days.

There is no question that if the BJP forms the

government it will try to push ahead with a very right-wing agenda, coupling “liberalization” with a concerted drive to install its supporters in the state bureaucracy. On Monday, the two most senior BJP leaders, prime ministerial candidate A.B. Vajpayee and party President L.K. Advani, met with the head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh to discuss their plans to form the government. The RSS, which co-founded the BJP and supplies much of its cadre, is a shadowy paramilitary organization that espouses extreme Hindu chauvinism.



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