

# India: BJP routed in state elections

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The Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata or Indian People's Party (BJP), the dominant force in India's ruling coalition, suffered a major defeat in state assembly elections held in four states November 25. This reversal, in what many observers called a mini-general election, has again placed a question mark over the continued existence of India's 18-party, BJP-led coalition.

In Delhi, the state covering the national capital region, and in poverty-stricken Rajasthan, BJP governments were routed, with electors sweeping the Congress, India's traditional ruling party, to power. In Delhi, long a BJP-stronghold, the Congress won 51 of 70 seats and in Rajasthan it captured about three-fourths of the 200 assembly seats.

In Madhya Pradesh, the most populous of the four states in which polling was held last week, a sitting Congress government was returned to power with a majority. Prior to the elections, the BJP had claimed that it would oust the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, but it in fact gained just three additional seats, raising its representation in the 320-member state assembly to 120.

In the small, north-eastern state of Mizoram, a Congress government did go down to defeat, but at the hands of regional parties. The Mizo National Front and the Mizo People's Conference won 20 and 13 seats respectively, while the Congress took just 6 of the 40 seats in the Mizoram Assembly. Although the Hindu-chauvinist BJP did contest 12 seats in Mizoram, it is not a political force in the state, whose population is 84 percent Christian.

## Price rises

Popular discontent over spiralling food prices, especially the rising cost of vegetables, was the principal factor in the swing against the BJP. The price of onions, an essential ingredient in most Indian meals, has risen more than six-fold over the past year. Because of the mass poverty that prevails in India, food price increases and shortages can have a devastating impact on tens, if not hundreds, of millions.

A second factor in the BJP's electoral debacle was a growing sense of insecurity among India's religious minorities and among the lower castes, which are historically deprived and discriminated against, over the BJP's chauvinist agenda. The BJP joined with its Maharashtra-based ally, the Shiv Sena, in

burying a public inquiry report that indicted the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government of Maharashtra for instigating communal riots in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1992-93. Last summer the BJP state government in Delhi threatened to strip Christian churches of their religious status because of their use of wine in celebrating mass, and the leader of the VHP, an ostensibly non-political 'service' organisation with which the BJP is allied, has publicly justified the rape of nuns in Madhya Pradesh.

Long a marginal force in Indian politics, the BJP began gathering strength in the latter half of the 1980s as the Congress's national capitalist development project--based on high tariff walls, a large public sector and a privileged economic relationship with the USSR--began to unravel. The BJP spearheaded the drive for India to reduce state expenditure and open its doors to Western consumer goods, while scapegoating the Muslims and other minorities for fears and anxieties rooted in rising social inequality and economic instability. In the 1998 elections, the BJP sought to appeal to all sections of the electorate by promising to press ahead with the economic 'reforms' under which India has been opened up to unfettered exploitation by the transnationals and simultaneously pledging to resurrect 'swadeshi,' or the program of indigenous economic development.

Last May's nuclear tests, the first undertaken by India in 25 years, were aimed at consolidating the BJP's position within the new ruling coalition and generating an outburst of popular chauvinism that could be used as smokescreen for a new wave of privatisations and cuts to food, fertiliser and other subsidies. The nuclear tests did evoke a certain nationalist fervour, particularly after Pakistan responded in kind and the US and other Western powers imposed economic sanctions. But, to the dismay of big business, the BJP has made little headway in advancing its right-wing socio-economic agenda, because of popular opposition and the regional and other rivalries that plague its coalition.

Last week's elections point to the essential political weakness of the BJP and the hollowness of its communal demagoguery. The BJP's chauvinist declamations notwithstanding, Hindu and Muslim workers and peasants confront common social problems, while 'Hindu' India is riven by class conflict. As the news magazine *India Today* quipped, 'The humble onion' has prevailed 'over the nuclear mushroom.'

This is not to say that the BJP and its mentor, the fascistic

Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, do not constitute real dangers to the working class and oppressed masses or that the assembly elections are equivalent to the emergence of a progressive alternative to the BJP-led coalition.

The very fact that mass discontent against the BJP turned into electoral gains for the Congress Party, whose decades of rule have paved the way for the rise of Hindu chauvinism, caste-ism and regionalism and for India's intensified subordination to the dictates of international capital, underscores the urgency of the working class finding a new political orientation.

Here the parties of Indian Stalinism, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), play a critical and reprehensible role. For decades they have worked to subordinate the working class to the Congress and various other bourgeois parties, claiming that the struggle for socialism must await the completion of the democratic revolution in alliance with the 'progressive' wing of the national bourgeoisie. In the past, the Stalinists supported the Congress on the grounds that its 'national project' was anti-imperialist. Now the CPI and CPI(M) urge the masses to support the Congress's return to power on the grounds that it is the last bulwark against communalism.

#### Congress in no hurry

Despite the Congress Party's sweep of the assembly polls in three northern Indian states, Congress President Sonia Gandhi has declared it is 'too early' for her party to try to form a government at the centre. 'We will see as things develop,' she told a television interviewer, adding that the Congress's policy all along has not been to topple the BJP government but to 'wait for it to fall'. Shortly thereafter, the Congress Working Committee voted not to support a motion of no-confidence in the BJP government to be tabled in parliament by two regional opposition parties.

Eager to show their readiness to toe the line laid down by the Congress leadership, the leaders of the CPI have announced that they too will abstain on the non-confidence motion.

There is little question that were the Congress to press the issue, the BJP government would fall. The AIDMK, a Tamil-nationalist party and next to the BJP the largest party in the current coalition, has repeatedly sent signals of its readiness to defect to a Congress-led coalition.

There are several reasons that the Congress, a party notorious for its patronage networks and other forms of corruption, is not immediately staking a claim to office. The parliamentary arithmetic is such that a Congress government would be as dependent as is the current BJP regimes on a large number of fractious regional and caste-based parties. The longer the Congress waits before trying to form a government, the stronger will be its hand if it chooses, on assuming office, to press the president to dissolve the current parliament and call a mid-term election. Finally, fallout from the East Asian

economic crisis is increasingly impacting on India. Earlier this week, India's Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha felt it necessary to publicly rebuke critics who have suggested that a shortfall in government revenue will force India to turn, as in 1991, to the IMF for emergency assistance. The Congress leadership calculates that it is to its advantage to keep the BJP in office until the economic situation becomes acute, so that its rivals reap the public blame for the crisis.

The BJP has responded to the election results by promising to press ahead with economic 'liberalisation.' Just hours after the president of the Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry said he feared the election results would cause the government to delay 'tough decisions,' Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee declared that 'the democratic drama of the day' will have 'no fundamental impact' on his government's agenda.

The trade union federations affiliated with the two Stalinist parties and with the Congress have called a 'Bharat bandh' (India-wide strike) for December 10 and 11 to protest against the privatisation and closure of public sector companies. On the part of the union bureaucracy, the strike is a political stunt aimed at covering up its complicity and that of its political allies in carrying out the restructuring demanded by international capital. The privatisation program was initiated by the Rao Congress government and was continued by the Stalinist-backed United Front coalition.

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