

Indian elections: a further shift to the right by the main parties

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7 September 1999

The first phase of India's general election was held Sunday with voters from 10 states and five Union Territories casting ballots in 146 of the 543 Lok Sabha (House of the People) constituencies. Counting will begin on October 6, three days after the completion of the fifth and final voting phase. For security reasons, India's Election Commission organizes a staggered election, with various states, parts of states and in some cases individual constituencies allotted different polling dates.

The 13th Lok Sabha election is the second mid-term national election in as many years. In April, a coalition government led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lost a no-confidence vote after just 13 months in office. Subsequently, the Congress (I), India's traditional ruling party, proved unable to muster sufficient support to form an alternative government, largely because it refused to award cabinet posts to the regional parties on whose parliamentary votes it would have depended.

Pending the outcome of the current election, Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee and his BJP-led coalition remain in office in a caretaker capacity.

The two main contestants in the election are the BJP and the Congress, but neither party will be able to win enough seats to rule without parliamentary support from a myriad of smaller parties. The BJP has forged a ramshackle alliance with 23 regional parties. Among the BJP's partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) are the Sikh fundamentalist Akali Dal; the fascistic Maharashtra-based Shiva Sena (literally the army of the Maratha king Shivaji); the Trinamool [or Grassroots] Congress, a West Bengal split-off from the Congress; the Tamilnadu-based DMK; and the ostensibly socialist Janata Dal (United).

The Congress has its own regional allies, including the Tamilnadu-based AIADMK, whose defection from the Vajpayee government last April precipitated its collapse. The Congress also can count on having the support of the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India [CPI] and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)], in forming a government. However, the Congress does not head a formal coalition and, much to the consternation of its electoral allies, was until recently insisting it would form a government on its own.

Opinion polls, which are notoriously inaccurate in India, show the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance winning a majority of between 300 and 320 seats, and the BJP, which 15 years ago had but two Lok Sabha seats, surpassing the 200 seat mark for the first time. If these forecasts are borne out, political fortunes in India will have once again shifted sharply. Only last November the BJP suffered defeat at the hands of the Congress in a series of state elections.

Central to the BJP's apparent revival has been a temporary easing of the economic crisis—last fall's state elections came after months of spiraling food prices—and India's military and diplomatic victory over Pakistan in the recent confrontation over Kashmir. India's entire political elite, including the Congress and the Stalinists, joined with the BJP in proclaiming the Pakistani-organized incursion in the Kargil-Dass-Batalik

region of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir a national crisis of the first order.

The National Democratic Alliance, and especially the BJP, have made militarism and chauvinism the central themes of their campaign. The BJP has dubbed Vajpayee the “Hero of Kargil” and its posters proclaim Vajpayee “The leader you can trust in war, in peace.”

While affirming a desire for peace, government spokesmen have repeatedly toughened their stand against Pakistan, ruling out negotiations with Islamabad until it ceases all support to the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir and agitating for Pakistan to be labeled a terrorist state by the US and other western powers.

Vajpayee used the Prime Minister's traditional August 15 Independence Day speech to announce that India will proceed with the deployment of a newly-tested intermediate range ballistic missile, the Agni-II. “We are now much stronger than before,” declared Vajpayee. “The Pokhran nuclear tests have given us strength and self-confidence. Despite pressures, we have successfully tested the Agni missile. We will induct it into our arsenal.” Two days later the government released a draft Indian Nuclear Doctrine that calls, in the name of giving India a “credible [nuclear] deterrence” capability, for the Indian military to be equipped with nuclear weapons.

The BJP and the National Democratic Alliance have made the pivot of their attacks on the Congress the pedigree of its leader, Sonia Gandhi, who is of Italian origin. It would be a national humiliation, they claim, to have a non-Indian born person as prime minister. The NDA election manifesto calls for a chauvinist constitutional amendment that would bar naturalized Indian citizens from holding “high offices of the state—legislative, executive or judicial.”

A recent BJP campaign rally featured giant portraits of the heads of India's three armed forces, a painting of an Indian missile, and a picture of Indian soldiers planting the Indian flag atop a Kashmiri mountaintop. The use of the military leaders' portraits was widely condemned in the press as “politicizing” the military, and the BJP subsequently conceded it had made a mistake.

The Indian magazine *Frontline* commented, “Among all the instrumentalities of the state, the armed forces today enjoy unprecedented public acclaim as a consequence of the war in Kargil. The mural depicting the three armed forces chiefs ... either signified the recruitment of the military command as co-equals of the political leadership or, more alarmingly, as patrons and benefactors.”

The tenor of the BJP campaign makes clear that should it retain power, it will seek to drive India sharply to the right and impose a more authoritarian government. Big business has hailed the NDA election manifesto as being the most “pro-reform”. The NDA promises to step up privatization and take other measures, including amending the labor code and directing state spending toward infrastructure development, to attract at least \$10 billion of foreign investment per year, more than triple the current rate. The NDA is also promising a constitutional amendment to

bar mid-term elections so as to better insulate governments against popular pressure.

The NDA manifesto calls for an unspecified “moratorium on contentious issues”—a reference to the BJP’s chauvinist agenda, which calls for Hindu temples to be constructed on a number of sites currently or previously occupied by structures of rival faiths; the abolition of Kashmir’s special constitutional status; and a uniform civil (family law) code. BJP spokesmen have blown hot and cold on how long this moratorium will last. The purpose of this calculated ambiguity is to maintain the support of both the BJP’s Hindu chauvinist cadre and its new secular allies in the NDA.

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP—World Hindu Council) is the BJP sister organization that spearheaded the agitation over the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, which culminated in 1992 in India’s worst communal violence since partition. It has announced that while it will campaign for the BJP, it won’t support the NDA. The VHP vows that whatever the make-up of the next government, it will agitate for the implementation of its “Hindu agenda.”

The Congress, which has ruled India for 45 of the past 52 years, is awaiting the elections with great trepidation. By making the political neophyte Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv Gandhi and daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi, its supreme leader, the Congress leaders had hoped to find a candidate whose name would resonate among the masses and who could arbitrate their internecine quarrels over patronage and other spoils. But the party’s Maharashtra boss Sarad Parwar took umbrage at being passed over for the party leadership and broke away, forming the Nationalist Congress Party. In breaking with the Congress, Parwar echoed the BJP’s complaints about Sonia Gandhi’s foreign birth. Several other Congress leaders, most notably Arun Nehru, a former close associate of Rajiv Gandhi, have joined the BJP.

The mood of panic that now prevails in the Congress was evident in the way Sonia Gandhi filed her nomination papers. Her choice of constituency was kept top secret and Congress leaders engaged in an elaborate game to try to fool the media and the BJP as to where she would run. However, it was all to no avail. Within hours of Gandhi having filed her papers in a constituency that has always voted Congress, a BJP “star,” former Delhi Chief Minister Sushma Swaraj, arrived in the same south Indian constituency and successfully filed her own nomination papers.

For months the Congress tried to contrast itself with the BJP by insisting it would bring India “stable government” by refusing to enter a coalition and governing alone. But the days when the Congress was India’s natural governing party are long gone. Ultimately, the party leadership had to bow to the realities of parliamentary arithmetic and, in a humiliating reversal, concede that the Congress is ready to head a coalition regime. Had the Congress leadership been ready to concede this last April, it would have gained the reins of power and might well have been in a position to engineer an election on its own terms.

The Congress supported the BJP-led coalition’s economic program and in its own election manifesto calls for the pace of privatization and the reduction of state expenditure to be speeded up. As Sonia Gandhi’s star has waned, the Congress election campaign has increasingly projected Manmohan Singh, the architect of India’s 1991 economic “liberalization,” as chief party spokesperson.

The Congress has responded in kind to the BJP’s and NDA’s chauvinist attacks. It accuses the BJP-led government of having failed to prevent the Pakistani incursion into Kargil and of importing sugar at high prices last year from Pakistan, so as to benefit the family of Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which owns Punjabi sugar mills.

Obscured by these exchanges is a worsening state fiscal crisis which the next government, whether headed by the BJP or the Congress, will seek to resolve at the expense of the masses by cutting price supports and social spending. Although India’s economy continues to expand, taxation

revenues have fallen far short of projections. The military confrontation with Pakistan and a just-launched weapons buying spree have greatly exacerbated the shortfall.

The campaign for the 13th Lok Sabha and the political jockeying that preceded it have seen the collapse of attempts to form a “third force” government, offering a “secular” alternative to the communalist BJP and the corrupt Congress machine. Put simply, the United Front (UF) is no more.

An alliance of regional and caste-based parties with the Stalinist-led Left Front, the UF came to power in 1996 and held office for two years with the parliamentary backing of the Congress. But it did not long survive the UF’s defeat in the March 1998 election, and all attempts to cobble together a new alliance have foundered.

Two of the main UF partners, the Telegu Desam Party and the DMK, have defected to the BJP-led NDA. The Janata Dal, the largest party in the UF government, meanwhile, has suffered a series of debilitating splits. In the most recent, about half of the Janata Dal defected to the NDA and joined with two previous Janata Dal split-offs—one, the Samata Party, headed by longtime BJP ally and ex-railway union president George Fernandes, and the other based in Karnataka—to form the Janata Dal (United).

The CPI and CPI (M) played a pivotal role in the UF, providing it with much of its program and strategy and brokering disputes among its regional and caste-based constituents. The passing of the UF, however, has occasioned little comment from either party. Their alternative to the BJP and Congress having collapsed, the Stalinists are now rallying behind the Congress, proclaiming it the “lesser evil.” Two minor components of the Left Front, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party, have objected to the abandonment of the Left Front’s previous stance of “equi-distance” from the Congress and BJP. As a result, the Left Front has been unable to produce a common manifesto.

Still, if the NDA fails to win a majority, the Left Front could play a major role in determining the shape of the next government.

Even the capitalist press has complained that the current election has largely ignored the main issues facing the Indian masses. Declared the *Indian Express*, “Let these worthies be reminded that real issues of the country go beyond the vicarious thrills afforded by a Kargil ‘Victory’ or the breast-beating over government ‘failure’ in protecting the borders. They could, perhaps, spare a thought for the 86 million unemployed and underemployed people in this country and for the estimated 7 million that are being added to the list every year. They could pause a while and wonder why, despite the Constitution promising that ‘no child below the age of the 14 years shall be employed to work in any factory,’ there are whole armies of children, estimated at anything between 14 million to 100 million, who work for a living in the worst possible conditions in this country.

“And if these macro-level issues seem too complex, how about addressing the straight-forward local problems—those like dry taps, oozing drains, pot-holed roads, substandard food grain—which are the blight of every citizen in this country? ... Where in these elections has any significant political player demonstrated an ability to listen to voters for a change instead of blabbering on and on? Thus one more General Election goes by, powered by noxious rhetoric, even as people’s lives remain completely untouched by the process.”



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