

Hindu chauvinist-led coalition to form India's next government

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The National Democratic Alliance, a coalition of more than 20 parties headed by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, has secured a majority of about 50 seats in India's 13th Parliament and will form the next government.

The return to power of a BJP-led government, with an apparently comfortable majority, has caused euphoria on Indian stock markets. Share values on the Bombay Stock Exchange, India's largest, rose more than 5 percent Thursday. Meanwhile, Moody's, the international bond-rating service, upgraded India's credit rating from "stable" to "positive".

Both the BJP and its principal electoral rival, the Congress (I), pledged during the election campaign to quicken the pace of economic "reform," by which they mean the pursuit of policies tailored to attract domestic and foreign investment—privatization, deregulation, the financing of infrastructure development through cuts to social spending and price supports, and the abolition of restrictions on the laying off and firing of workers.

But big business has also been anxious to see the coming to power of a "stable government"—one with a parliamentary majority large enough to push through unpopular policies. It has decried India's recent experience with hung parliaments and minority government, deeming that the constant jockeying for position among India's myriad of political parties has caused unnecessary delays in dismantling India's nationally-regulated economy and given too much political importance to the Left Front.

The previous BJP-led coalition lost a non-confidence last April, after just 13 months in office. Its United Front predecessor had two Prime Ministers in less than two years in power.

To underline the BJP's determination to move swiftly to implement the policy demands of big business, Prime Minister and BJP leader Atal Vajpayee conferred with business leaders Wednesday evening, after it had become clear the BJP-led NDA would be forming the government. Vajpayee told a delegation from the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) that the right-wing economic program outlined in the NDA's election manifesto would be "pushed ahead with full force".

Said FICCI President Suhar Jalan: "There is a feeling of buoyancy. Corporate India is relieved that uncertainty is finally over and the economic agenda is again on top."

Meanwhile, the Clinton administration's satisfaction with the election result was signaled by a statement from Democratic Congressman Gary Ackerman, proclaiming the time was ripe for India and the US to consummate a new strategic partnership.

There is no question that the re-election of a BJP-led coalition heralds a further shift to the right on the part of India's economic and

political elites. Recognizing the unpopularity of its economic program, the NDA and particularly the BJP made militarist and chauvinist appeals the focus of their election campaign. Vajpayee was proclaimed a tested "war" leader; the withdrawal of a Pakistani incursionary force from Indian-held Kashmir a great military victory; and India's new nuclear missile capability proof that India is a great power. Meanwhile, the Congress was denounced for having someone who was foreign-born—Sonia Gandhi, the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi—as its leader.

The core of the BJP's leaders and activists, including Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani, are life-long members of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh or RSS, a fascistic, Hindu chauvinist organization, repeatedly implicated in communal violence. During the decades when the Congress, admittedly fatuously, claimed to stand for socialism, anti-imperialism and secularism, the BJP and its forerunner the Jana Sangh espoused virulent anti-communism, pressed for deregulation and a pro-US foreign policy, and derided the government for coddling India's minorities.

The claim that the BJP's election heralds a new era in political stability doesn't pass muster however. The NDA is itself an alliance of 24 parties, some of which remain reluctant to even join the government for fear of being too closely identified with the BJP. Among these is the NDA's second largest component, the Andhra Pradesh-based Telegu Desam party (TDP), which crossed over to the BJP from the United Front, in stages, beginning after the March 1998 election.

Only the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena can be said to share the BJP's Hindu nationalist ideology. Most of the rest are regional parties that find it in their interests to ally with the BJP, because their principal rival is the Congress or a party allied to the Congress.

The BJP is unquestionably the dominant partner in the coalition, holding more than 60 percent of all the NDA's total seats. The TDP, by contrast, has less than 10 percent of the NDA's seats. Moreover, for the third straight election the BJP has emerged as the largest parliamentary party.

Nevertheless, the BJP failed to improve markedly on its seat total in the last election, winning at most two or three seats more than the 181 it captured in 1998. The increase in the BJP-led coalition's parliamentary strength is thus entirely due to the increase in the seat tallies of its partners.

And in several key states, the BJP suffered significant electoral reversals. The most important of these were in Maharashtra, where it appears that in a state election held concurrently with the national poll, the Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government has been unseated. The final

result is unclear, because there is a hung parliament. Maharashtra is India's third largest state and home to its financial and industrial capital, Mumbai (Bombay). In Uttar Pradesh, which with 140 million people is Indian largest state, the BJP's seat total was virtually halved, from 57 to about 30.

One way the BJP may try to bolster its position is by seeking to pass a constitutional amendment fixing a five-year term for all parliaments, making it impossible for its parliamentary opponents to force a mid-term election by enticing its coalition partners to defect. But this would likely provoke a bitter dispute within the political elite, which could become the occasion for a venting of popular dissatisfaction with the government.

Some editorialists and business leaders are taking comfort in the balance of forces within the NDA, claiming that the BJP's dominant position in the coalition will ensure that the government carries forward a right-wing economic agenda, while the BJP's dependence on its coalition partners will temper the BJP's communalism and force it to rein in the RSS's cadres.

This only points to the precarious nature of the new political stability and the extreme crisis of the Indian bourgeoisie. The BJP is itself an inherently unstable political formation, long kept away from the corridors of power, or at best allowed a subordinate role. It unites Hindu chauvinist ideologues and more traditional rightwing politicians, who generally have come to the BJP after careers in other parties. While US and Indian commentators wax eloquent on the "moderation" of Vajpayee and his first coalition, his government embarked on the nuclearization of India's military and brought India to the brink of war with Pakistan. Word that the US is considering relaxing the economic sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan after last year's nuclear tests, brought swift condemnation from BJP spokesmen, who have been pressing for closer ties to the US. The sanctions have economically and militarily impacted on Pakistan, traditionally a beneficiary of US arms deals, far more than on India.

The principal reason that India is not entering a new era of political stability is that the economic "reforms" demanded by big business in India and internationally are inherently destabilizing, producing hardship for large sections of the population already living in misery and squeezing small traders and other more prosperous layers.

The Indian ruling class's new economic strategy is predicated on the possibility of dramatically increasing exports to Asia and especially the West. An international economic slump would gravely undercut such efforts.

Already there are signs of a gathering economic crisis. There is talk in government circles that a drop in tax revenue, the cost of the recent fighting in Kashmir, and a post-Kargil military procurement program are opening up a vast budgetary gap. No sooner was the polling process completed last weekend, than the government announced a 40 percent hike in the price of diesel fuel, which will impact on the price of all goods, especially food.

A recent World Bank report pointed to the social polarization produced by the past decade of "liberalization" and in a society already marked by a vast gulf between rich and poor. According to the report, *Poverty Trends and the Poor*, "In India, home to the majority of the world's poor, evidence suggests that the rate of poverty reduction has slowed dramatically in the nineties, particularly in rural areas." The report also notes that "liberalization" has increased the gap between India's richer and poorer states—a phenomena that no doubt has contributed to the growth of regional antagonisms within India's political elite.

In the elections, there was no way that the opposition to the reorganization of India's economy to meet the needs of domestic and foreign capital could find genuine expression. All the parties, including the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), have proclaimed that there is no alternative to capitalist globalization.

Both the Congress and the Left Front, which is led by the Stalinist CPI and CPI (M), have tried to mollify their supporters' angst over the election results by pointing to the contradictions within the NDA.

The truth, however, is that the political calculations of both have been blown sky-high.

Three times in the past three years, the Congress has brought down governments, thinking it would be able to maneuver back into office. Instead, the Congress has been reduced from the natural party of government—it has held power for 45 of India's 52 years since independence—to a second party. Having renounced its own national economic program and ideology, the Congress has splintered into rival factions. Then, in an ultimate expression of political bankruptcy, it turned to Sonia Gandhi, a political neophyte, hoping the Gandhi name would muster votes and that she could serve as arbiter of the party's factional quarrels. Today the Congress holds about one fifth of the Lok Sabha seats, its worst showing ever.

For years, the CPI and CPI (M) promoted alliances with the Congress and other parties on the grounds that the national bourgeoisie had to be supported in opposing "imperialism." Then, when the Indian bourgeoisie felt compelled to renounce its national economic strategy, the Stalinist parties supported and joined governments that implemented the new economic policy, claiming that such alliances were necessary to hold the chauvinist BJP at bay. But the growth of Hindu chauvinism was itself rooted in the growing social polarization—in the bourgeoisie's inability to offer any progressive solution to the problems of the masses.

The United Front, in which the Stalinists participated, pressed forward with liberalization between 1996 and 1998, when the struggle for power between the BJP and Congress threatened to produce parliamentary paralysis. Following the defeat of the United Front, and the predictable defection of several of its "secular" components to the BJP-led coalition, the Stalinist parties embraced the Congress of Sonia Gandhi and corrupt caste-ist politicians like Laloo Prasad Yadav. After the March 1998 elections and in the run-up to the current vote, they announced their readiness to support a Congress government. Equally reactionary was the Stalinists' stand on the recent Kashmir conflict. They joined the Congress in attacking the BJP for failing to uphold Indian sovereignty against Pakistan.

All these maneuvers served only to strengthen reaction. The Left Front saw its seat strength cut from 48 to 42. Particularly hard hit was the CPI, which lost as many as five seats, and now has only four Lok Sabha deputies.



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