

Indian state elections reveal hostility to the ruling BJP

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In elections held on May 10 in four Indian states and one union territory, the Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP) and its partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) lost badly. The defeat is already raising tensions in the ruling coalition, which has held power at the national level for three years.

Though the elections only took place in five out of country's 35 states and territories, the results reflect a growing disaffection with the BJP-led central government and the political establishment as a whole. The poll was held in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the territory of Pondicherry in southern India, as well as West Bengal and Assam in the east and north east of India.

The NDA's worst showing was in Tamil Nadu. The Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (DMK), a major regional BJP ally, which previously held power in the state, was reduced from 177 seats to just 36 seats in the state assembly. DMK leader and former chief minister M. K. Karunanidhi barely held onto his own seat. The opposition coalition led by the AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazagam) and backed by the Congress (I) Party secured 196 seats.

In West Bengal, the Left Front government led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) held onto office despite signs of growing opposition in previous polls. The Trinamul Congress, which had been a partner in the national government until just prior to the state election, managed, in alliance with Congress (I), to win just 87 out of 294 seats.

In Kerala, the CPI-M-led Left Democratic Front lost office after retaining only 40 of the 81 seats in the previous state assembly. The winner, however, was not the BJP or any of its allies but Congress (I) which now holds 99 seats and forms the state government.

In Assam, a coalition of the AGP (Assam Ganasang Parishad) and BJP alliance lost 21 seats and now holds only 42. In all, 16 ministers along with the speaker and deputy speaker lost their seats. Congress (I) was able to exploit the opposition to the sitting government and won 70 seats. In Pondicherry, the Congress Party won 13 seats in the territory's assembly and will form the next government in

alliance with the AIADMK.

The magnitude of the setback is underscored by the performance of the BJP itself. Out of the 823 seats at stake in the five regions, the BJP won only 13. In West Bengal and Kerala, the BJP gained less than 6 percent of the vote and won no seats. Moreover, in a simultaneous by-election for the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Indian parliament) in Thiruchirapally, the BJP lost to the AIADMK.

The election results do not directly affect the BJP's position in the Lok Sabha but the unpopularity of the NDA government was certainly an important factor in the outcome. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee tried to minimise the significance of the vote, saying that the BJP did not have a major presence in five regions prior to the poll. But he was forced to concede that the results were “a warning sign to the NDA government.”

The defeat has intensified centrifugal tendencies within the 18-party NDA coalition. Prior to the election the Trinamul Congress seized on the Tehelka scandal over defence kickbacks to quit the ruling alliance and distance itself from the BJP.

Last week the Samata Party threatened to leave the national coalition after the BJP pulled out of a corresponding arrangement at the state level and helped bring down the Samata-led administration in the state of Manipur. The Samata Party announced this week that its 12 Lok Sabha members will stay in the NDA, meaning that the Vajpayee government still has slender majority of just 19 in the 543-member lower house.

The BJP is also under fire from some of its closest allies—the Hindu chauvinist Rashtiya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Shiv Sena and Vishva Hindu Parshad—which, in turn, are responding to resentment towards the government. Following the elections, RSS leader Dallopant Thengadi announced that his organisation would hold a series of rallies across the country culminating in August to “attack the government's economic policies in strongest terms.”

The BJP-affiliated trade union, the BMS (Bharathiya Mazdoor Sangh), has also threatened to call strikes against

Vajpayee's policies, branding them "anti-people and anti-national".

The BJP came to power on a program of Hindu extremism and economic nationalism, exploiting the disaffection of layers of the middle class with the policies of market reform carried out by Congress (I) and subsequent coalition governments. Once in office, however, the BJP-led government continued to implement the policies demanded by big business and international finance capital, and, as a result, has alienated sections of its own social base.

The economic restructuring was accelerated in the last budget handed down in February, which cut subsidies to the poor, eased tariffs and import restrictions, changed the labour laws to speed up retrenchments, cut corporate taxes and accelerated the sale of government corporations.

The government is already confronting protests by small farmers and strikes in the electricity, telecommunications, air and banking sectors. In the run-up to the election, there was a one-day general strike in the city of Bombay and surrounding areas against the changes to the labour laws. At Bharath Aluminum Corporation (BALCO), workers were on strike for over two months until May 5 against the company's privatisation.

Amid concerns in ruling circles over the election result, Vajpayee has reassured investors that the government will not abandon its budget package.

A number of commentators have claimed that state election outcome represents a "victory" for Congress (I) but a closer examination reveals that its gains were limited.

In last state election in West Bengal in 1996, Congress (I) won 82 seats and 39.48 percent of the vote. The following year, the party split at the state level, leading to the formation of Trinamul Congress. In the recent poll, Congress (I) received only 8 percent of the vote and 20 seats, while Trinamul picked up the bulk of the anti-CPI-M vote.

A similar fracturing of Congress (I) along regional lines has taken place in other states with the formation of the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra and the Tamil Manila Congress (TMC) in Tamil Nadu. In each case, these regional parties, representing layers of the local ruling elites, seek to appeal to narrow parochial and chauvinist sentiment based on language and ethnicity. As a result, Congress (I) is dependent on alliances with regional parties in a number of states. In Tamil Nadu, it is the junior partner in the AIADMK-led government.

While the CPI-M-led Left Front won its sixth successive election in West Bengal and party leaders trumpeted their victory, support for the alliance of Stalinist and "left" parties has been steadily declining—from a high of 251 seats in 1987 to 203 in 1996 and 199 this year. The number of CPI (M)

seats has dropped from 188 in 1987 to the present 144. Moreover, the Left Front's most solid base of support is not in Calcutta and the major urban centres but in the rural areas where the peasantry has made some limited gains as a result of land reforms.

Like governments in other states, the CPI (M) administration has engaged in the cutthroat competition to attract investment to West Bengal and has close relations with sections of big business. Lauded after the elections as the "Bengal Tiger" in the press, Bhattacharjee immediately met with a top delegation of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). The CII hosted a lavish dinner for key state ministers to discuss government programs to assist investment. Bhattacharjee has declared his motto to be "Work Now!" and indicated that his administration will be even more "business-friendly" than previous ones.

The latest state elections underline the broad discontent and dissatisfaction with all political parties and official politics as a whole. In the last decade and a half, the incumbent state governments have routinely been thrown out of office by their opponents, who in turn find themselves on the receiving end of huge swings in the opposite direction at the next poll.

The trend is most pronounced in Tamil Nadu where the DMK and its allies came to office in 1987 with 151 out of the state assembly seats. In 1991, they were dumped when an AIADMK-led alliance returned to office with 164 seats, only to be thrown out in 1996 when the DMK came back with 173 seats. Now the AIADMK have won with an even larger majority.

A sizeable proportion of the electorate does not vote at all. In the recent election in Tamil Nadu, the turnout, which has consistently fallen since 1984, was just 59.06 percent, the lowest in 50 years. In the state capital of Madras, only 43 percent voted and in the state's second largest city, Madurai, the figure was 49 percent. Similarly in West Bengal, the turnout was down 9 percent from the 1996 election to just 75.24 percent, the lowest since 1982.

The election results confirm that none of the present parties, which represent the different and competing interests of sections of the ruling Indian class, have a solid social base and point to further political instability as hostility mounts to the BJP-led government at the national level.



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