Indian elections reveal chasm between political elite and voters

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Elections being held today in four northern Indian states—Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi—will be an indication of the standing of the major political parties as they prepare to confront each other in national elections due to be held before next September. An election has already taken place in the northeastern state of Mizoram on November 20.

The Hindu chauvinist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP)—the leading party in the national coalition government—is clearly hoping for major gains. All of the states—some of India's largest—are currently ruled at the state level by the opposition Congress Party. But the dominant sentiment among voters appears to be disaffection with both the major parties over their policies at the state and national level.

The British-based *Economist* noted on November 20: "An abiding feature of Indian elections is the 'anti-incumbency' factor. Almost every Indian government disappoints most voters, and suffers some electoral consequence." The article went on to note that the situation was more complicated in these state polls as "the incumbency burden" was shared by Congress locally, and the BJP nationally.

Such is the extent of the political alienation that parties have had difficulty finding volunteers and have been forced to pay people to conduct their election campaigns. Ramlal, a labourer told the *Sify.com* website: "I am paid 50-65 rupees for shouting slogans in favour of the party." He added: "Whichever party is ready to pay me money, I join the chorus in their praise". It appears to be a thriving business. Lala, who contracts to provide campaigners, outlined the charges: "For listless sloganeering the rate is 100 rupees, for enthusiastic sloganeering 150 rupees and for the work to be done on polling day not less than 200 rupees."

A great deal is at stake for the two parties. Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani suggested four months ago calling snap national elections to coincide with the state polls, warning that defeat in the states would "weaken the morale of the party [BJP] rank-and-file." Since the last national elections in 1999, the BJP has lost every state election except two—the small state of Goa, and Gujarat, where the BJP openly exploited the communal tensions created by last year's anti-Muslim pogrom. Congress needs a major boost from the state elections to make up for lost ground and to garner the support of the large number of parties that have sprung up based on regional parochialism and caste.

Behind the hostility to the major parties lies their inability to provide for the pressing social needs of the vast majority of the population. Both parties are completely committed to the policy of economic restructuring that has had devastating social consequences for the working class, small farmers and businessmen over the past decade and resulted in a widening gulf between rich and poor. Both the BJP and Congress have resorted to mudslinging, campaign stunts and electoral bribes, as well as appeals to caste issues and communalism, in desperate attempts to shore up their bases of support.

These basic processes are evident in all of the four states.

Madhya Pradesh is the state that the BJP is most likely to win. Congress has held power here for the past 10 years and faces widespread discontent over its policies. Despite the boasts of Chief Minister Digvijay Singh to have improved social conditions, the state continues to be one of the most backward in India. In 1997, life expectancy was just 55 years. The literacy rate is still only 64 percent—23rd out of India's 32 states. The infant mortality rate is 97 per thousand—the third worst in India.

The state's power supplies are in a shambles. Not long ago there were power cuts of five hours a day in urban areas and 15 hours a day in rural areas. To prevent a financial collapse and upgrade the electricity system, the Singh government recently took out a 7.2 billion rupee ($US157 million) loan with the Asian Development Bank. But under its terms, electricity tariffs have been increased for all users, including the very poor. The charge to farmers has gone up by 300-600 percent and new connection fees have risen by 50 percent. As a result, about half of all connections to farmers have been discontinued.

The condition of the road system is just as bad. The Calcutta-based *Telegraph* recently described the roads as "back-breaking, dotted with huge craters". Despite routine complaints to the media, no significant repairs have been done. "This time, shortage of electricity and bad roads are doing to the Congress what onion prices did to the BJP," one teacher commented to the press. In 1993, the BJP lost control of the state after onion prices soared to 40 rupees a kilogram.

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Economic restructuring under Congress has led to widespread unemployment. Over the past decade, the state administration has shut down 12,000 small-scale state industries. In the industrial sector of the state capital Bhopal, only 25 percent of factories remain open. In the organised industrial sector, around 76,000 jobs were lost between 1991 to 2001. According to official figures, 37.43 percent of the state's population is now living below the poverty line.

The BJP is attempting to win control of the state with a mixture of empty promises on electricity, roads and jobs, along with appeals to Hindu communalism. The BJP state leader Uma Bharati is well known as one of the party's hardliners, who was centrally involved in the communalist campaign that culminated in the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992. She has also been elected for caste reasons—to appeal to those classified formally as Other Backward Classes (OBC) who make up 52 percent in the state's population.

The welfare of cows—regarded as sacred by strict Hindus—rather than people has been made a major election issue. The BJP manifesto calls for a ban on the killing of cows—a deliberate attempt to stir up communal sentiment. Congress leader Singh has responded in kind by promising to erect cow shelters if his party is returned to power.

Delhi, the national capital, is likely to remain under Congress rule. Chief Minister Shiela Dixit has attempted to build a reputation as a defender of the poor. She has ostentatiously stood in front of a bulldozer as part of the protest to prevent the razing of a slum settlement and proclaimed her concern for shanty dwellers. But about half a million people continue to live in slums in the capital under appalling condition. There are just 7 to 10 water taps per 1,000 households. Diseases including influenza and tuberculosis are widespread, as is alcoholism and drug abuse.

Since the last election in 1998, the capital has grown by more than two million people—most of them poor migrants from the neighbouring states. Neither Congress nor the BJP has shown any interest in ensuring their registration for the elections. Only around 27,000 of these newcomers are registered as compared to an estimated 1.4 million people who are not in the electoral rolls.

Dixit's main concern is not winning the votes of the poor but those of the middle class who have tended in the past to vote for the BJP. In response to rising crime rates associated with continuing high levels of poverty and unemployment, she is running a law-and-order campaign, demanding more police powers to crack down on criminals The BJP has attempted to appear even tougher on crime by calling for the establishment of a "citizen's register" and for the expulsion of so-called illegal immigrants from Bangladesh from the capital.

Rajasthan, in western India, has had four successive years of drought, which has had a devastating impact on farmers. Both parties have traded accusations over who is responsible. At least 10 pages of the 42-page Congress manifesto are devoted to the party's record on the issue. Party officials point out that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has not visited the state once during the four-year drought. The BJP has replied by accusing the Congress of failing to take advantage of national relief programs. Both parties are making big election promises to farmers that are highly unlikely to be carried out.

Unemployment is also a major problem. After coming into power in 1998, the Congress government continued the previous BJP government's policy of freezing recruitment to government jobs. About 6,000 factories have been closed down, and small-scale industries are in crisis. Both parties have attempted to divert discontent into divisive caste issues to shore up their electoral base. In doing so, they have spawned the growth of other caste-based organisations and parties seeking to protect or enhance the narrow interests of their particular social strata.

Chhattisgarh was only created in 2000 through the division of Madhya Pradesh. Congress held a majority of assembly seats in the area and thus continued to rule the new state. The party has used power to push through an aggressive program of market reform. Over the past three years, 52 of the state's 60 public sector enterprises have been shut and the number of government departments has been slashed from 54 to 18. Expenditure on administration has been cut from 70 percent of the state budget to just 32 percent, leading to a large number of retrenchments.

Regardless of who wins today's state elections, the new administrations will rapidly tear up their election promises and continue to implement the program of economic rationalisation. The states are in a cutthroat competition with each other to woo foreign investors by offering labour at the cheapest costs. Neither of the major parties nor any of the smaller competitors have a program that addresses the needs and aspirations of the majority of ordinary working people.

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