

Heavy losses for Congress in Indian state elections

Sarath Kumara**11 December 2003**

The Congress Party—the major opposition party in India at the national level—suffered serious reverses in four state elections held last week. It lost power in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, and only managed to retain office in the union territory of Delhi. The result provides a much-needed boost to the Hindu supremacist Bharathiya Janatha Party (BJP), which had lost a string of state polls and faces national elections next year.

Speaking last Friday after the results were released, Congress spokesman Jaipal Reddy attempted to minimise the defeat by saying the party had suffered as a result of the “anti-incumbent factor”. His comments, however, are simply an admission of the party’s political bankruptcy. Congress is deeply unpopular in all four states because of the impact of its open market policies, despite widespread hostility to the BJP, which rules at the national level.

The extent of the losses is revealing.

* In Madhya Pradesh, where Congress has ruled for 10 years, its tally of seats plummetted from 124 to just 38 in the 230-seat assembly. The BJP increased its seats from 83 to 173.

* In Rajasthan, Congress secured only 56 seats, down from the 150 in the last assembly. The BJP increased its share from 33 to 120 in the 200-seat assembly.

* In Chhattisgarh, which was formed in 2000 by splitting Madhya Pradesh, Congress now holds 36 seats, down from 48, while the BJP raised its tally from 36 to 50 seats.

* In Delhi, Congress retained power but lost four seats. It now holds 47 seats, down from 51, while the BJP boosted its position from 15 to 20 seats.

In all four states, Congress exacerbated already high levels of unemployment and poverty through its policies of cutting social spending, restructuring and

privatisation. The BJP was able to capitalise on the anger with a campaign slogan of “electricity, roads and water,” highlighting the decay of infrastructure and the bleak situation facing farmers in Rajasthan after four years of drought.

In Rajasthan last year, according to conservative official figures, 20 people died of starvation as a result of the drought and poverty. The latest statistics published in the *Frontline* magazine show that 66,000 small-scale industrial units and 59 large ones were shut down over the last decade. A similar process has taken place in Madhya Pradesh, where sections of the public sector have been privatised, educational facilities cut back and electricity charges increased.

Congress retained a majority in Delhi largely by exploiting the hostility of sections of the poor to the BJP’s slum clearance programs in the national capital. The incumbent chief minister Sheila Dixit appealed to sections of the middle class and big business through a rightwing law-and-order campaign and claimed that she was elevating the city to international standards.

The heavy defeats provoked considerable anguish inside Congress. Party leader Sonia Gandhi told the media: “We have to pull our socks up and do more”. She consoled party officials by declaring that there was still time to prepare for next year’s general elections. But neither Gandhi nor any other senior official has proposed any significant change to the party’s policies.

While the BJP made significant gains, a closer examination of the election results indicates a growing disaffection with both the major parties. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the BJP won a large number of seats but only increased the size of its vote from 34 percent in 1998 to 39 percent, despite a fall in the Congress vote of 9 percent. In other words, the share going to minor parties rose by 4 percent. A similar

process took place in Rajasthan, where the combined vote for the major parties fell from 78 to 75 percent. In metropolitan Delhi, 47 percent people did not bother to vote at all.

As the results indicate, many people simply do not see any difference between the BJP and Congress. Both parties subscribe to the program of economic restructuring demanded by the IMF and World Bank on behalf of international capital. At the same time, Congress has adapted to key aspects of the BJP's Hindu communalism. How to protect cows—regarded as sacred by Hindu traditionalists—was a feature of the campaign by both parties.

Neither of the major Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—gained from the disaffection with the major parties. The CPI-M won just one seat in Madhya Pradesh and another in Rajasthan. While berating Congress for its “anti-people economic policies” and its adaptation to the BJP on communal issues, these parties continue to portray Congress as a progressive alternative to the BJP.

The results were immediately hailed by sections of big business, which regard the BJP as the best political vehicle for continuing the process of economic restructuring. The benchmark 30-share index on the Bombay Share Market jumped 20 points on Friday in response to the election outcome. Indian Merchants Chamber president Shailesh Haribhakti declared: “The trend from what we can see in the poll results is very positive for the industry and the markets.”

Confederation of Indian Industry deputy director-general N. S. Srinivasan, called on the BJP to “move forward with reforms, growth and employment generation” in the three states where it had taken power. The BJP immediately responded by indicating that it would press ahead with economic restructuring. “This is a very strong vote for further economic reform,” Trade and Commerce Minister Arun Jaitley told the *Financial Times*.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is well aware that the policies being demanded by big business will generate opposition as privatisation and cuts to government spending lead to the axing of jobs, working conditions and social services. While the BJP was able to successfully exploit the disaffection with Congress administrations in the four states, at the general

elections next year, it will have to contend with the “anti-incumbent factor”. It is no surprise therefore that despite the BJP's win, Vajpayee has ruled out any early national poll.



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