

India's Hindu chauvinist-led coalition government calls early election

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On the advice of India's current government—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—Indian President Abdul Kalam dissolved the country's parliament February 6, eight months ahead of schedule. The independent election commission, which is responsible for determining the election schedule, has now announced that India's 670 million voters will go to the polls in four voting-phases between April 20 and May 10. Full results are to be tabulated by May 13.

The Hindu supremacist BJP, the dominant partner in the NDA, calculates an early election will be advantageous because the main opposition party, the Congress, was staggered by a string of defeats in state elections last December and because India's economy is currently experiencing rapid growth, due to an influx of foreign investment and the increased agricultural production that resulted from last summer's "good monsoon." The BJP is also hoping to cash in on widespread popular sentiment in favor of better relations with Pakistan, by claiming credit for the recent opening of comprehensive bilateral negotiations with India's traditional geo-political rival. No sooner did Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee return from Islamabad in early January than the BJP's election-planning switched into high gear.

Neither the BJP nor the Congress can truly claim to be all-India parties. Nor can either hope to obtain a parliamentary majority without the support of a host of regional and caste-based political formations. The Congress, which ruled India for all but three of the first 40 years of independence, is no longer a serious political force in large swathes of the country. The BJP, which came to prominence in the late 1980s by exploiting the decay of the Congress and fomenting Hindu chauvinism, derives the bulk of its support from the mainly Hindi-speaking areas of north and central India. Its NDA is comprised of a frequently-changing roster of more than 20 parties.

The BJP's principal allies include: the Sikh communal Akali Dal in Punjab; the fascistic, Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena (literally, the army of the Maratha king Shivaji); the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party (TDP), a darling of the World Bank because of its privatization policies; the Janata Dal (United), a remnant of India's social-democratic party; and a West Bengal breakaway from the Congress, the Trinamool Congress. In recent weeks, the BJP has struck an electoral alliance with the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), the ruling party in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, and forced from the ranks of the NDA several rival Tamil Nadu parties, most importantly, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or DMK. Led by a mercurial one-time movie star, Jayalalitha, Tamil Nadu's AIADMK-government won heady praise from India's business elite last summer for brutally crushing a massive strike of state government workers.

Traditionally, the Congress has eschewed formal, pre-poll pacts. But with its decline having reached the point where it can no longer seriously claim to be India's natural governing party, it has been forced to try to cobble together a counter coalition to the BJP-led NDA. The Maharashtra-based National Congress Party (NCP), itself a breakaway group from the

Congress, the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Bihar, and the DMK and its allies in Tamil Nadu have joined the Congress-led bloc. But thus far the Congress has failed to secure the support of either of two rival parties seen as pivotal to its electoral prospects—the Samajwadi Party, the governing party in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, and the Bahujan Samaj Party or BSP, which claims to be the political voice of India's former untouchables, or Dalits.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and Communist Party of India (CPI) are unabashedly plumping for the Congress. In the name of promoting "secular forces," the Stalinist parties have proclaimed that their principal goal is to defeat the Hindu chauvinist BJP and its NDA coalition and that if circumstances allow they will provide the parliamentary votes needed to bring a Congress-led minority government to power.

The BJP is counting on the support of the dominant wing of Indian big business and to this end is projecting itself as the party most determined to press forward with privatization, deregulation and other anti-worker reforms, and the most committed to developing a strategic partnership between India and the US. Indeed, there is no shortage of evidence that India's corporate elite is rallying to the BJP. According to *India Outlook*, "While the Congress claims to be strapped for cash, there are no shortages in the BJP. ... Says a BJP general secretary, 'It's quite simple really. If a corporate house is giving Rs 10 crore [100 million (\$US2.2 million)] to us, it will also throw Rs 2 crore [20 million] at the Congress. That's how it's done.'"

Re-elected in 1999 after a year and a half in office, the NDA government has speeded up the dismantling of the nationally regulated economy begun by the Congress in 1991. It has pressed forward with privatization, opening up the insurance sector to the foreign investments, set up various special economic zones where traditional labor and other regulations do not apply and, most importantly, initiated changes long demanded by big business to the country's labor laws. These changes remove legal impediments to companies laying off workers and closing facilities and gut limits on the use of contract labor.

While pursuing an unprecedented military build-up, the BJP-led government has aggressively courted better relations with Washington, endorsing the Bush administration's "war on terrorism"—from the US conquest of Afghanistan to its missile defence initiative—and even flirted with sending troops to assist the US-occupation of Iraq.

Deepak Lal, a prominent Indian political commentator who has connections with US think tanks, wrote in the January 28 *Business Standard*, that a BJP victory would represent "a national political consensus to move swiftly and directly" to "implement the badly needed second stage of economic reforms". He then praised the BJP regime's wooing of Washington, claiming that it has "unlocked the gates for the entry of advanced technology into India (particularly in the areas of space and armaments, where the US has an incontestable lead) ..."

The emphasis the BJP's election campaign is placing on economic

growth stands in sharp contrast with the 1999 all-India elections and the December 2002 elections in the state of Gujarat. In 1999, the BJP placed anti-Pakistani chauvinism at the heart of its campaign, claiming its decision to formally proclaim India a nuclear power had raised India to the status of a great power and touting the Pakistan military's failed incursion into the Kargil region of Kashmir as a colossal Indian triumph. In Gujarat, the BJP won re-election with a campaign that blamed Pakistan and India's minority Muslim community for the communal riots that had rocked the state in February 2002—riots whipped up by the BJP state government and in which Muslims were the principal victims.

So striking is the change in BJP rhetoric, some commentators have claimed that BJP is "moderating." This is nonsense.

Insofar as the BJP is de-emphasizing its Hindu chauvinist agenda, it is to convince big business that if re-elected it will make implementing capital's socio-economic program its top priority. Also, the strategic shift that the Indian elite is trying to make in its relations with Pakistan—a shift born of its inability to cow Pakistan through the threat of all-out war in 2002 and its calculation that it can secure its domination over South Asia through an Indian-led sub-continental free trade bloc—cuts across the BJP making anti-Pakistani chauvinism the focus of its campaign.

The BJP, nevertheless, continues to trumpet its noxious Hindu chauvinist propaganda, if at a somewhat lower volume. Such appeals are essential in mobilizing the party rank and file, which is largely drawn from the ranks of the Hindu nationalist RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and its affiliates. For example, BJP General Secretary Pramod Mahajan insists that the party will continue to raise the issue of building a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque, which was demolished by Hindu fanatics in 1992, sparking the worst communal riots since the 1947 partition. "Till a grand temple is constructed at Ayodhya," Mahajan told a February 11 press conference, "the issue of Ram Temple will continue to be an issue during elections directly or indirectly."

The BJP has also repeatedly raked up the question of Congress leader Sonia Gandhi's foreign birth and indirectly her Catholic faith, claiming that Gandhi's non-Indian parentage make her unfit to be prime minister.

Should the BJP election campaign begin to falter, there is no doubt it will ratchet up its Hindu chauvinist and anti-Pakistani appeals, no matter the consequences for the current peace negotiations with Islamabad.

The Congress Party, the other main contestant in the coming elections, is in an advanced state of putrefaction. Over the course of the past half-century, the fate of the Congress Party has become increasingly inseparable from the fortunes of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Sonia Gandhi's only credentials for the Congress leadership are that she is the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was himself the son of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru.

Ultimately the decomposition of the Congress is rooted in the collapse of the Indian bourgeoisie's national development project, whereby India's elite attempted to resist economic and political domination by imperialism through high tariff walls, import substitution, state ownership of key industries and close ties to the Soviet Union. In 1991, with India facing a balance of payments crisis, the then-Congress government of Narasimha Rao instituted a fundamental shift, abandoning the historic national development strategy in favor of India's full integration in the world capitalist market and an export-led growth strategy, under which Indian capital allies with foreign investors in exploiting India's vast reserves of cheap labor.

Stung by its defeat in last December's state elections, the Congress has been groping for an election strategy. To boost the sagging morale of its cadres, it announced, with much fanfare, that Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, the daughter and son of Sonia Gandhi, have become full members of the Congress. "The Gandhi children," commented the *Times of India*, "can provide a touch of glamour to their ageing party; they can't revive its fortunes."

The Congress is in full agreement with the BJP that what remains of India's nationally-regulated economy and minimal social safety net must be dismantled so as to benefit indigenous and foreign capital. It has thus been at something of a loss as to how to distinguish itself from the BJP. Congress spokesman S. Jaipal Reddy told *Frontline*, "We will eventually find a slogan to match the BJP's. ...You cannot coin an effective slogan overnight."

Indications are that the Congress will try to revive its fortunes by making a limited appeal to mass popular discontent over the impact of the economic reforms. While the BJP and Indian capital are hailing India's economic progress—with the government mounting a lavish "India Shining" publicity campaign to coincide with the elections—the reality is that the economic reforms have led to a wave of layoffs and plant closures, the further privatization of education and health care, and growing social polarization.

According to the *Hindu*, Congress pollsters found a vast undercurrent of popular dissatisfaction, "with the inability of the Vajpayee government to tackle burgeoning unemployment and address itself to economic development in the rural areas" emerging as key issues across India.

At the same time, the Congress is anxious not to alienate big business, so it is working hard to calibrate any criticisms of the BJP's economic reforms. Earlier it toyed with the slogan, "Reforms—but with a human face." In this regard it is important to note that the Congress-aligned trade union federation, the INTUC, refused to join last month's one-day general strike against a Supreme Court judgment that public sector workers have no right to strike. In justifying its boycott, the INTUC used rhetoric similar to that of the court, claiming that strikes have severely damaged India's economy.

The Congress will also seek to portray itself as the champion of secularism. The Congress' decline, however, is bound up with its repeated attempts to exploit ethnic and religious divisions and increasing adaptation to Hindu chauvinism. In the Gujarat election, the Congress ran a campaign that was derided in much of India's press as "soft Hindutva" (Hindu supremecism.) Not surprisingly, the party has wavered in the face of the BJP's communal attack on its leader. Congress has refrained from formally naming Sonia Gandhi as its prime ministerial candidate. According to Congress Working Committee member, Pranab Mukherjee, "The coalition leader will be decided only after the poll results. We are not going to have a leader for the united opposition."

Both major parties—the Congress, which once did enjoy mass support, and the BJP, a Hindu supremacist party formation that has always been identified with extreme hostility to the working class and socialism—are increasingly alienated from India's working people. Behind this alienation lies their inability to address any of the pressing social needs of the vast majority of the population. One third of the Indian population lives on less than a dollar per day. Per capita availability of food grain has dropped to 380 grams per day, though the government's minimum requirement rate is 500 grams. As the *Asia Times* web site noted, half of India's "children are malnourished and 350 million go to bed hungry. One third of India's one billion people are illiterate and the country spends only 1.9 percent of its Gross Domestic product on education, about half of what most East Asian countries spend."

Under these conditions, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and Communist Party of India (CPI) have aligned with the "secular" Congress. They claim that it is the lesser evil and are appealing to Congress to temper its support for the further privatizations, deregulation and the dismantling of agricultural price supports and public services. Thus Jyoti Basu, who as the CPI (M) chief minister of West Bengal himself implemented the pro-market reforms and has in recent in months joined with the rest of the CPI (M) leadership in calling for the trade unions in West Bengal to forsake strikes and accept responsibility for ensuring production, urged this week that the Congress "adopt a

common minimum programme based on protecting the interests of the people.”

Officially, the CPI and CPI (M) will not join the Congress-led bloc, so as to maintain the pretence of independence, and because in the states in which they have the bulk of their electoral support—West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala—the Congress is their principal competitor. But the Stalinists are closely coordinating their electoral strategy with the Congress, with the aim, explains CPI (M) spokesman Sitaram Yechuri, of “minimi[zing] the division of secular votes which has been helping communal forces.”

Unquestionably the BJP is a mortal enemy of the working class and toiling masses. But its rise over the past two decades points to the urgency of the working class breaking from the pro-capitalist politics of the Indian CPI and CPI (M). These parties have married socialist phrases with Indian nationalism and collaboration with the parties of the Indian bourgeoisie—first in pursuing a program of national capitalist development and now in implementing an even more unabashedly anti-worker export-led growth strategy.



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