

Indian general election begins

Polls indicate race tightening

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India's general election, which is to be held in five phases ending May 10, began Tuesday with voters in 140 parliamentary constituencies spread over 13 states and 3 Union territories going to the polls.

India is currently governed by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a multi-party coalition dominated by the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At the BJP's prompting, the NDA advanced the elections slated for next September in the hopes of capitalizing on a spurt in economic growth, popular enthusiasm for the opening of peace negotiations with Pakistan, and the disarray in the ranks of the principal opposition party, the Congress.

A spate of opinion polls and an exit poll from yesterday's first round of voting have forecast an NDA victory, but the NDA lead in the polls has been shrinking. There is increasing press speculation that the BJP-led alliance may fail to secure a parliamentary majority, in part because of a projected voter-swing against two key allies, the Telegu Desam Party (TDP) and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). Respectively the governing parties in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, the TDP and the AIADMK, are strongly associated with the economic liberalization agenda that Indian big business has been pursuing since 1991.

Should the NDA fail to win a majority, it would not necessarily fall from office, since the balance of power would be held by an as yet unknown number of MPs from "non-aligned" caste-based and regional parties. These include likely NDA allies, including parties that have refused to join the NDA in the hopes of getting a better price for their support.

Like the BJP, the Congress has no chance of winning a majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament, on its own. Until this election the Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, always rejected formal electoral alliances at the all-India level. But such is the Congress's decline it has had to place itself at the head of its own multi-party coalition and in several key states, including Bihar and Tamilnadu, agreed to play second fiddle to regional partners.

The Congress-led alliance has no real chance of winning enough seats to form the government. Its ambitions to come to power are dependent on it having support from the "outside" from 50-odd MPs from the Left Front, an electoral bloc led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist). For their part, the Stalinist parties have proclaimed that their principal objective is to oust the BJP and bring to power, should the election arithmetic permit, a "secular" government"—i.e., a Congress-led coalition.

Big business has made clear its preference for the BJP-led NDA, which has held power continuously since 1998, although the roster of the junior parties in the coalition has changed frequently. The NDA

has pressed forward with the dismantling of India's nationally-regulated economy, privatizing public sector units, opening up banking, insurance and other sectors to foreign investment, and beginning a second stage of economic "reforms" that focus on eliminating obstacles to closing down factories, laying off workers, and contracting out work.

The NDA government has pursued a "strategic partnership" with the US, supporting the US invasion of Afghanistan and voicing its willingness to join the Bush administration's missile defence initiative. So as to press India's claim for great-power status, the NDA government has presided over a massive build-up of India's military and in 1998, within weeks of coming to office, formally proclaimed India a nuclear-weapons state.

Officially the NDA does not subscribe to the BJP's Hindu supremacist *Hindutva* doctrine. Yet the BJP-led government has taken a number of significant steps to promote its notion that India is a Hindu *rashtra* or state, most importantly changing the education curriculum so as to propagate a Hindu supremacist interpretation of Indian history and culture.

The Congress, which when it last formed the government (1991-96) initiated the dismantling of India's nationally regulated economy, is no less supportive than the BJP-NDA of an alliance between Indian and international capital to exploit Indian's vast reserves of cheap labor. As the *Times of India* observed in an editorial this week, "On the economic front," the BJP and Congress "cosy up as if they were identical twins. Both are bullish on reforms, indeed, both claim credit for pushing reforms. Naturally, experts delightedly point to the commonality on crucial policy issues, from fiscal and financial sector policies to those on trade, agriculture and industry. What's more, nowhere in its manifesto does the Congress threaten to reverse anything the NDA has done."

If big business at present prefers the BJP-led NDA to the Congress, it is because it wants the Left Front confined firmly to the opposition benches and because it views the Congress as still living too much in the shadow of its past role as architect of the India bourgeoisie's post-independence national development strategy, which included modest social welfare provisions. After all, the only real credentials of the Congress leader and prime ministerial candidate—Sonia Gandhi—is that she married into the Nehru-Gandhi family, is the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was the son of Indira Gandhi and grandson of India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The BJP-NDA is projecting itself as a force for stability led by the experienced and internationally respected elder statesman Atal Behari Vajpayee. In fact the BJP-led government stumbled from crisis to crisis, bringing the subcontinent to the brink of war and a possible nuclear conflagration in 2001-2002 and inciting communal strife most

tragically in Gujarat, where several thousand people were killed in communal riots fomented by the BJP-state government in February/March 2002.

As for Vajpayee, the octogenarian leader of the BJP, he is a lifelong member of the fascistic, Hindu nationalist Rashtiya Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS), who provides the “moderate” counterpoint to L.K. Advani, the Home Minister who led the agitation that resulted in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 and the worst communal bloodletting since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent. Like Advani, Prime Minister Vajpayee continues to call in the name of “national reconciliation” for a Hindu temple to be built on Babri Masjid’s ashes.

Central to the BJP-NDA election propaganda is that its policies have paved the way for India to rapidly emerge as an economic dynamo and great power. Its “India Shining” campaign reflects the buoyant mood of the Indian bourgeoisie, under conditions where India has become a magnet for foreign investment and has carved a niche for itself in the global economy as a site of office and software outsourcing, and of the most privileged sections of the middle class, who now have easy access to Western made luxury and consumer products.

But for the vast majority of the population, the opening of India to international capital and the related policies of privatization, deregulation and cuts in social spending have meant increasing economic insecurity and poverty. Even Vajpayee had to momentarily admit that there is another “side of India, which is not shining, which has areas of darkness” after more than 20 impoverished women were trampled to death while trying to obtain free saris (the traditional women’s garment) at a BJP-linked function in Lucknow.

In the run-up to last February’s dissolution of parliament, Vajpayee and other BJP leaders claimed that their party’s election campaign would focus on the issues of economic development, good governance, and the pursuit of peace with Pakistan and that *Hindutva* would be downplayed. This was meant to reassure Indian big business and international capital, which view the BJP’s communal agenda and brinkmanship against Pakistan as destabilizing and a diversion from pressing forward with economic reforms. Indeed, so confident is Indian big business of its new economic prowess that it believes it will be better able to suborn Pakistan through the establishment of a South Asian free trade than by the BJP’s sabre-rattling.

However, as the campaign has progressed the BJP has evermore frequently made rank Indian chauvinist and Hindu supremacist appeals. At the BJP’s insistence, the NDA manifesto calls for legislation banning non-Indians—read the Italian born, Roman Catholic Sonia Gandhi—from high office and calls a “solution” to the Ayodhya dispute a national priority. Among the BJP’s leading campaigners has been the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is notorious for his role in fomenting and defending the communal outrages against Muslims in 2002.

The BJP’s decision to beat its Hindu supremacist drum may be a response to mounting fears that its campaign is not going as well as hoped. What is certain is that the NDA government’s peace overtures to Pakistan and pursuit of a “liberalization” agenda that serves the most powerful sections of Indian capital, but often has a ruinous impact on the petty bourgeoisie, has caused dissension among its followers. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the organization that led the Ayodhya agitation, has issued a number of statements highly critical of the BJP. In an attempt to rally the RSS and its affiliates behind the BJP election campaign, top RSS leaders met with Vajpayee

and other senior BJP leaders at the prime minister’s residence in early March.

The Congress campaign meanwhile has sputtered. In Uttar Pradesh, the country’s largest state, the Congress expected to be able to form an electoral alliance with the governing party, the Samajwadi Party (SP), or the Bahujan Samaj (BSP), a party that claims to speak for India’s former untouchables. In the end, both the SP and BSP spurned its overtures. So bankrupt is the Congress, that to excite its cadres it conscripted Sonia Gandhi’s son to run from a UP seat. His sister has also been given a prominent role in the Congress campaign.

The Congress has attacked the BJP from both left and right, a considerable feat given the BJP’s reactionary rhetoric and program. The Congress has made calibrated appeals to the popular opposition to the economic reforms by naming unemployment the number one election issue and denigrating the NDA’s claims that India is shining. Yet it has also proclaimed the Congress the true party of liberalization. Similarly, the Congress has criticized Vajpayee for having voted against continuing India’s nuclear weapons development program when he was a minister in the Janata Party government in the late 1970s.

The CPI and CPI (M) justify their alliance with Congress on the grounds that it is a lesser evil to the BJP. There is no question that the BJP is an extremely reactionary political formation, utterly hostile to the interests of India’s toiling masses. But it is the Stalinists’ decades-long systematic subordination of the working class to the parties of the Indian bourgeoisie, including at times alliances with the BJP and its forerunner the Jan Sangh, that paved the way for the BJP’s rise to political power.

In the past, the Stalinists justified their alliances with one or another bourgeois party on the grounds that it was pursuing an anti-imperialist or anti-feudal national development strategy. Now that Indian capital has forsaken its pretensions to national development and is allying openly with international capital in pursuit of an even-more unabashedly anti-working class agenda, the Stalinists continue the same essential policy but in the name of upholding the secularism of a state founded through the communal partition of the subcontinent.

The Indian elections underscore the urgency of Indian workers adopting a new perspective, based on the independent political mobilization of the working class and socialist internationalism.



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