India's elections: the decline and decay of the Congress Party

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In the elections currently underway in India, the main opposition to the ruling Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) is the Indian National Congress: the traditional party of the national bourgeoisie with roots going back to the anti-colonial struggles of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For decades after formal independence in 1947, Congress completely dominated the Indian political stage at the national and state levels. Until it was ousted in 1996, the party had held office continuously at the national level with the exception of two three-year terms. Today, the party is shadow of its former self. Its claims to stand for the interests of the masses are in tatters and its bases of support are rapidly dwindling.

In the last national election in 1999, Congress was eclipsed by the Hindu supremacist BJP, winning just 112 seats out of 545 in the Lok Sabha or lower house of parliament. While the BJP fell short of a parliamentary majority with 182 seats, it was able to form a coalition—the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—with a number of smaller parties. Congress was only able to gain the support of allies with a total of 22 seats.

In the current election, Congress is not expected to make any significant gains, despite growing hostility to the NDA government's program of economic restructuring, which has led to a widening gulf between rich and poor. According to the London-based *Economist* magazine, "even party strategists say the maximum it can achieve is around 135 [seats]". The party could, however, do considerably worse. It was routed in state elections last December in three out of four states—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chattisgarh.

One sign of Congress's decline is that the party has been compelled to turn to a series of electoral alliances with regionally-based parties. The rise of these parties in the 1990s, which whip up local prejudices on the basis of language, ethnicity and caste, is another reflection of the widespread alienation from the major parties. In previous elections, Congress eschewed electoral pacts, believing such arrangements were not necessary and undermined its national image.

Now, however, Congress is desperate for partners and in this election has accepted a subordinate status in several key states. In its alliance with the Rastriya Janatha Dal (RJD) in Bihar, Congress had to be satisfied with just 4 of the state's 40 seats in the national parliament—far less than the 14 it had demanded. Congress has also forged alliances in Andhra Pradesh, Maharasthra and Tamil Nadu. But in the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party and Samajwadi Party have shunned its approaches. Currently, Congress only holds 9 of the state's 80 seats.

Nothing underscores the party's bankruptcy more than its dependence on the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. Not only has Sonja Gandhi, the Italian-born widow of assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, been pressed into leading the party, but her two children have also been enlisted in the campaign. Her son Rahul is standing as the Congress candidate in the Uttar Pradesh seat of Amethi, in an effort to lift the party's standing in that state. His sister Priyanka is also campaigning prominently in the seat.

The party's tenuous links to the leaders of the anti-colonial movement—Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru—are all that remain of its claims to represent the interests of the working masses of India. Congress was always a party of the Indian bourgeoisie, which ensured that the vast movement against British rule never threatened private property and became the means for securing its own privileged position. At the same time, through its leadership of the anti-colonial opposition, Congress established deep political roots and a reputation as a party of progressive change that enabled it to dominate the political stage after the end of British rule.

Congress's ability to maintain its increasingly tarnished image was a product of the peculiar global economic and political conditions that followed World War II. Successive Indian governments were able to maintain a highly regulated national economy, based on import substitution, and make limited concessions to workers and the oppressed masses. In the context of the Cold War, Congress leaders were able to balance between Washington and Moscow, and, with the assistance of the Stalinist bureaucrats, posture as "anti-imperialists". India was one of the leaders of the so-called non-aligned movement.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, the processes of globalisation undermined all forms of national economic regulation—the sharpest expression being the collapse of the Soviet Union. The impact was no less profound in India where, in the early 1990s, the Congress government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao initiated the first stage of market reforms and opened up the country's huge reserves of cheap labour to foreign investors. While a layer of business and the middle class benefitted, the economic restructuring resulted in savage attacks on the living standards of the working class and oppressed masses. The mounting resentment was the main reason for the party's defeat in the 1996 elections.

While it capitalised on the disaffection with Congress, the BJP has implemented the same program of restructuring since 1998. Foreign investors have exploited India's supplies of low-cost, educated, English-speaking labour to create a range of computing, research and office services, and produce a spurt of growth that has benefitted layers of the Indian middle class. The BJP election campaign has centred on a government-funded "India Shining" media blitz designed to portray the party as bringing India economic growth and international recognition.

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The slick media campaign glosses over the fact that the government's economic policies have led to a widening of the deep social divide between the rich and the vast majority of the population who remain mired in poverty. In seeking to attack the BJP's record, Congress faces a fundamental problem: its policies are no different from those of the government. As a result, its campaign is fraught with contradictions: Congress attempts to convince big business of its ability to continue the open market agenda, while trying to dupe the masses with empty promises to improve their living standards.

Thus the party's election manifesto boasts: "It is the Congress that launched liberalisation and economic reforms. It is the Congress's policies that made India the world's fourth largest economy by 1998." Moreover, it promises to provide further financial incentives for private investors and to streamline the system for approving foreign investment by making it "more transparent".

At the same time as pledging to continue and extend the BJP's policies, Congress blames the government for growing unemployment and rural poverty. To appeal to the rural masses, its manifesto calls for a "National Employment Guarantee Act" to provide one member of each rural household with "at least 100 days of employment on asset-creating public works programs every year at minimum wage".

The hollow character of the party's promises is exposed by its willingness to support the anti-working class measures of the NDA government. When more than 50 million workers went on strike on February 24 to protest against a Supreme Court ruling last year scrapping the right to strike in public sector, Congress sided with the BJP in opposing the industrial action. Significantly, the Congress manifesto is ominously silent on the BJP's proposed sweeping changes to the labour laws that will further water down legal barriers to the ability of employers to hire and fire at will.

Congress's stance on other issues is no less contradictory. During the Cold War, the party was a leading proponent of non-alignment. Now, however, it tacitly supports the BJP's forging of close strategic and military relations with the Bush administration. Its manifesto blandly declares a Congress government will "engage the United States in scientific, technological, strategic and commercial cooperation," but the real test of its foreign policy was its attitude to the illegal US occupation of Iraq. Congress leaders did not challenge the US invasion in any fundamental sense, only calling for it to take place under the UN umbrella. Last June when Washington pushed for Indian troops to be sent to Iraq, Sonia Gandhi met with the prime minister to assure him that Congress had no objection.

In the name of "national security," Congress has adopted an even more militarist stance than the BJP, criticising the government for failing to sufficiently strengthen the security forces. "The Congress will ensure that all delays in the modernisation of our forces are eliminated and that funds budgeted for modernisation are, in fact, spent to the fullest." Such a policy will further intensify the tensions within the region—especially with Pakistan.

In the past, Congress has attempted to differentiate itself from the Hindu supremacism of the BJP by claiming to be secular. But the party has a long history of exploiting communal tensions for political purposes, going right back to its support for the catastrophic partition of British colonial India into a Muslim Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. Congress led India into three wars with Pakistan and is just as strident in its denunciations of Islamabad as the BJP.

With the rise of the BJP, however, Congress has more and more adapted itself to the BJP's Hindutva or Hindu chauvinism. So blatant was its campaign in the 2002 state election in Gujarat that the media branded its policies as "Hindutva-lite". Its attitude to the issue of the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya by mobs of Hindu fanatics in December 1992 is revealing. Hindu communalists have been pressing provocatively for the "right" to build a Hindu temple on the site and, while not actively supporting the demand, Congress, like the BJP, declares that it is a matter for the courts to decide.

To maintain the increasingly transparent fraud that the party represents in any way a lesser evil as compared to the BJP, Congress is heavily dependent on the two main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI). For decades the CPI-M and CPI have in various ways deliberately fostered the illusion among working people that Congress represents a progressive, even socialist, alternative. Today, the Stalinists have formed an alliance with Congress in the state of Tamil Nadu and have pledged to support a Congress government from the outside, based on the threadbare argument that Congress is at least "secular" as compared to the BJP.

The ability of the CPI-M and the CPI to bolster Congress's electoral fortunes is very limited. After decades of wretched betrayals, in particular during the CPI-M's rule in the states of West Bengal and Kerala, both parties are deeply compromised in the eyes of the masses. The two parties have virtually abandoned even formal adherence to Marxism and form a loyal part of the Indian political establishment, wheeling and dealing with the major bourgeois parties—the BJP as well as Congress.

All these efforts to prop up Congress will not halt its continuing decline. As far as the ruling elites are concerned, the BJP is considered, at present at least, the best political vehicle for pressing ahead with their economic and strategic agenda. And after decades of broken promises and lies, the overwhelming majority of the population are not inclined to vote for Congress, even as the lesser evil.

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