

Political earthquake in India

Hindu supremacist BJP falls from power

Keith Jones
15 May 2004

To the shock of India's entire political and economic establishment, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition have been swept from office. Just hours after vote counting began Thursday morning, the BJP-led NDA conceded defeat in India's 14th general election and by evening Atal Behari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister since 1998, had tendered his resignation.

The BJP had triggered early elections calculating that it could exploit a spurt in economic growth, popular enthusiasm for its peace overtures to Pakistan, and the disarray of its principal rival, the Congress party, to win an increased majority. In this it was strongly encouraged by big business and the corporate media.

The sparse crowds at BJP rallies and a spate of exit polls during the multi-phase voting indicated that there was a strong current of popular opposition to the government. But till Thursday the media continued to insist that the NDA would win a plurality of seats and the BJP many more than the Congress.

In fact, the NDA, which in the outgoing Lok Sabha held more than 300 seats, saw its total slashed to 186, thirty less than the Congress-led multi-party alliance. As for the BJP, its individual seat tally was cut by 49 seats from the 1999 election, falling from 182 to 133. For the first time since the 1991-96 parliament, the Congress' Lok Sabha delegation will be larger than the BJP's.

The election results constitute a devastating popular refutation of the BJP-NDA's claims that the program of economic "liberalization" initiated by the Congress government of Narasimha Rao in 1991, and intensified and widened during the six-years of NDA rule, has "India Shining". The electorate also repudiated the BJP's virulent Hindu supremacist agenda. In Gujarat, where the BJP state government fomented an anti-Muslim pogrom in February-March 2002, then exploited the carnage to win re-election by a landslide, the BJP's Lok Sabha representation was sharply reduced, leaving it with just 14 of Gujarat's 26 seats.

India's traditional governing party, the Congress, will form a new coalition government. Although the Congress and its pre-poll allies are some 55 seats short of a majority, the Congress is guaranteed the support of the 62 MPs of the Left Front, the electoral bloc led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). The Stalinists concede that the Congress' socio-economic programme is all but identical to that of the BJP. Yet they claim a Congress-led government must be supported because it is the only means of preventing the BJP-NDA from wrecking India's "secular democracy".

The Stalinists are playing a pivotal role in Congress' efforts to woo other coalition partners from among a myriad of regional and caste-based parties that collectively hold about 75 Lok Sabha seats. "Whoever can be roped in should be invited to join the secular front," declared Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the CPI (M)'s general secretary and its point man in the negotiations with the Congress, its allies and potential allies. The

Stalinists are the keenest advocates of the Congress-led coalition adopting a so-called Common Minimum Program, so that it can better project itself as a stable alliance that can govern India for the duration of the new Lok Sabha's five-year mandate.

The Congress made calibrated appeals to popular discontent over the hardships caused by the closure and sell-off of public sector units, cuts to social welfare programs, higher water and electricity rates, and more generally the growth of economic insecurity, poverty and social inequality. Among its various populist promises was a claim that a Congress government would ensure that every rural family has at least one member employed on public works projects for 100 days per year.

At the same time, the Congress pledged its full support for big business' export-led growth strategy, which aims to make India a low-wage haven for transnational corporations through privatization, deregulation, tariff cuts, and reducing public services and corporate taxes.

Sonia Gandhi, the Congress' leader and presumptive prime ministerial candidate, moved quickly Friday to reassure Indian and foreign capital of her commitment to press forward with the dismantling of what remains of India's nationally-regulated economy and the minimal social welfare programs with which it was associated. "The economic reforms," Gandhi told reporters, "were initiated by the Congress, by my husband, and later by Congress governments. They will be carried forward."

To further underline her support for business' liberalization agenda, Gandhi named Manmohan Singh, the Finance Minister who was the initial architect of the reforms, as head of the Congress panel that will negotiate with its allies and potential allies the provisions of the Common Minimum Program. "Investors," declared Singh Friday evening, "can rest assured that the new Government will pursue policies to create favourable climate for growth."

Big business has every confidence that the Congress, its traditional party, will cede to its wishes and recognizes that the Left Front's denunciations of the reforms are largely rhetorical. Responding to the election results, Confederation of Indian Industry President Y.K. Modi said he didn't think the Left would constitute a "problem" since West Bengal's Left Front government has pursued economic policies in line with those of the Congress and BJP. His remarks were seconded by S.K. Birla, chairman of the Birla group, who labelled the West Bengal regime "pro-reform".

But the more sober and farsighted representatives of the India's ruling class cannot but be shaken by the gulf the elections revealed between the elite's policy consensus, perceptions and aspirations, and those of India's toiling masses. In effect, the political establishment was blindsided by a massive popular backlash against its "reform" program.

That the BJP could claim India was "shining" under conditions where unemployment and underemployment are estimated at around 20 percent, where hundreds of millions have no access to clean water, where a third of the population lives in "absolute poverty," where debt and famine have led thousands of small farmers in recent years to take their own lives, only

served to highlight its indifference to the plight of the majority.

The “Other India” tries to strike back

The BJP and its NDA allies lost support in virtually every part of the country, with voters generally turning to the party most critical of the reforms among those considered as having a genuine shot at capturing their constituency.

Thus in India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh, the principal beneficiary of the anti-reform backlash was the Samajwadi or Socialist Party and in Bihar, The Rashtriya Janata Dal.

The Left Front, whose electoral support comes principally from West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, captured its largest ever number of Lok Sabha seats, 62, an increase of some 20 seats from 1999. In West Bengal, the Left Front, not the Congress, was the beneficiary of the swing against the BJP and the BJP’s West Bengal ally, the Trinamool Congress. In Kerala, where a Congress-led state government has been pressing forward with liberalization, the Left Front won 18 of the state’s 20 seats, the Congress none.

The depth of the popular anger against big business’s reform agenda is further manifest in the results from three south Indian states that have been at the centre of the foreign investment and information technologies boom—Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu and Karnataka. In two of these states, state elections were held concurrently with the all-India election.

In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP-allied Telugu Desam Party (TDP) was routed in the state elections, winning just 47 state assembly seats as compared to 226 for the Congress-led opposition alliance. The Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh for nine years, TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu had become a darling of the World Bank for his readiness to privatize electricity and otherwise adhere to its structural adjustment programs. He delighted in calling himself the CEO of Andhra Pradesh. Together the BJP and TDP won just 5 of Andhra Pradesh’s 42 Lok Sabha seats.

In Tamilnadu, the BJP and its ally the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or AIADMK won not a single of the 39 Lok Sabha seats. The AIADMK, which currently forms Tamilnadu’s state government, has won the plaudits of big business for its pro-investment policies and especially for its use of emergency legislation, scabs, and mass firings to break a strike last year of 200,000 state government employees.

In Karnataka, the Congress state government, which also has strongly identified with the drive to make India a magnet for foreign investment, was pummelled in the state election, losing seats to the BJP, but especially to an anti-BJP remnant of the Socialist Party, the Janata Dal (Secular). The Congress may retain a share of power in Karnataka’s state government, but only if the Janata Dal (Secular) decides to block with it to prevent the BJP and the rival Janata Dal (United) from forming a minority government.

India’s economic growth over the past decade has been heavily concentrated in urban areas. Agriculture, which continues to employ more than half the workforce, has stagnated, at least in part because state resources have been diverted from agriculture to highway-building and other infrastructure projects demanded by big business.

The backlash against the economic policies of the Indian elite, however, was by no means just a rural phenomenon. The BJP and its allies were trounced in India’s major urban centres, losing seats in Kolkata (Calcutta), Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras) and the IT hub Hyderabad. Of Delhi’s seven Lok Sabha constituencies, the BJP won only the middle class enclave of South Delhi.

The role of the Congress

The Congress is the historic party of the Indian bourgeoisie. Its chief utility has been its ability to use anti-imperialist and socialist verbiage to bind the masses to the program of Indian capital.

Under M.K. Gandhi, the Congress appealed to worker-peasant discontent to mount controlled mass movements so as to pressure the British to the negotiating table. Because it feared that the mass popular upsurge which erupted in India in the immediate aftermath of World War II was escaping its control, the Congress moved to reach a quick settlement with the British in order to stabilize capitalist rule. In the process, it accepted and imposed the communal partition of the subcontinent.

Under Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress used limited land and other reforms and socialist rhetoric to win popular support for the bourgeoisie’s national development project, setting in place the policies of import substitution and widespread state ownership of industry that were pursued by all Indian governments till 1991.

No doubt, in the wake of the 2004 elections big business is again looking to Congress to contain and divert the popular masses. But the political and socio-economic dynamics are very different.

The Congress is but a shell of its former self. It is a corrupt political machine whose connections to the masses long ago atrophied. The Congress leadership was at least as shocked by the outcome of the 2004 general election as the BJP. Recognizing that the media and financial houses were plumping for the BJP, the Congress began the campaign in a state of disarray and demoralization. Its best-case scenario was that it could marginally increase on its 1999 electoral performance, the worst in its history. In what has become a reflex action for the Congress when in crisis, the leadership sought to generate enthusiasm among the party apparatus by conscripting as a star candidate, Rahul Gandhi, whose only political credentials are, like his mother—Sonia Gandhi—a family tie to the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty.

Although the Congress will lead India’s next government, it has not won a parliamentary majority since 1984. In four successive elections it has captured less than a quarter of the Lok Sabha seats, and will require the Left Front to muster the Lok Sabha votes to bring it to power.

Moreover, if the Congress became the vehicle for a mass venting of popular anger against the reforms, it was largely because of the support and legitimacy lent it by the Stalinist-controlled Left Front.

Elections portend social convulsions

The failure of the Indian bourgeoisie’s post-independence national project and the social devastation produced by its attempt to transform India into a cheap labor haven for world capital has produced a mounting social and political crisis.

While the masses will be looking to the new Congress government to provide jobs, support for small farmers, and public and social services, within hours of the elections the Congress leadership was already making clear it will continue where the BJP left off in implementing the liberalization agenda of big business.

And it will do so under conditions where the likelihood of a major international economic crisis—whether due to the bursting of China’s investment boom economy or the gargantuan US government, trade, and current account deficits—is growing rapidly. And because of India’s increasing integration into the world capitalist economy, it will not be partially insulated from such a crisis, as it was from the 1997-98 East

Asian economic meltdown.

In a pre-election analysis of the Indian economy, Moody's warned about the need for the next Indian government to sharply curtail spending due to a rising budget deficit. The Congress election manifesto made an oblique reference to this, saying that a Congress government would "restore fiscal discipline".

The election results thus portend a new period of social convulsions.

Yet if the masses are moving to the left, the Stalinist apparatus is moving even more emphatically to the right, to support and likely enter a Congress-led government. The Stalinists justify allying with the traditional party of the Indian bourgeois on the grounds that the Hindu supremacist BJP must be thwarted. But in so far as the working class is prevented from advancing its own solution to the mounting social crisis, the Congress government's pursuit of big business' reform agenda with Stalinist support will only provide the ground for the further growth of social reaction, including all manner of communalist, caste-ist and regionalist movements that set working people against each other.

The struggle in defence of democratic rights and against communal reaction cannot be separated from the struggle against Indian and international capital and for social equality. The Indian working class must reject the Left Front's attempts to chain it to the big business Congress, place itself at the head of the struggles of the toilers and oppressed, and, by fusing the struggle of the Indian masses with the world struggle against capitalism, provide a coherent and viable strategy for their democratic and social emancipation.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact