India: BJP responds to unfavorable polls by highlighting its Hindu supremacism

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The Bharatiya Janata Party, the dominant partner in India's ruling National Democratic Alliance, has responded to a spate of unfavorable exit polls in India's multi-phase general election by highlighting its Hindu supremacist agenda. Gujurat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Uma Bharti—infamous for their role in inciting anti-Muslim violence—have been given greater prominence in the BJP campaign, particularly in the pivotal state of Uttar Pradesh. Meanwhile, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the shadowy Hindu nationalist service organization and militia which provides the bulk of the BJP's cadres, is said to have assumed direct control of the party's campaign.

According to recent opinion and exit polls, the NDA will at best win a bare majority of the 545 Lok Sabha seats. The more probable outcome is that it will fail to reach the 273 seat majority mark. Should the NDA fall only a dozen or so seats short it will likely be able to cling to power, at least in the short term. But the more its seat tally falls below 260, the greater the likelihood of a hung parliament. Since the rival alliance led by the Congress, India's traditional governing party, is given no chance of surpassing the NDA's seat total, the balance of power would fall to a disparate grouping of caste-based and regional parties. In the event of a hung parliament, only after a frantic and probably protracted period of maneuvering and horse-trading would a new ruling combination emerge—a government that could be led by the BJP or by Congress or even by neither of them, but which would be on life-support from the outset.

The BJP advanced the date of the elections from the fall, believing that it could capitalize on the popularity of its peace overtures to Pakistan, the disarray in the ranks of the Congress, and an economic upswing spurred by an inflow of foreign investment and last year's bumper harvest.

To consolidate its already strong support from big business, the BJP initially made much of the fact that it intended to make economic development—i.e., the need to press forward with deregulation and privatization—not its Hindu supremacist agenda the pivot of its election campaign. But the BJP's claim that India is poised to become a great power by 2020 due to the NDA government's pursuit of neo-liberal policies and military prowess, including the deployment of nuclear weapons, has failed to resonate outside the most privileged sections of the population. Indeed, the BJP's "India shining" rhetoric has served only to underscore its indifference to the plight of the vast majority of Indians, for whom the dismantling of India's nationally protected economy has meant increased poverty and economic insecurity.

Over the course of the nearly three-month-long election campaign, the opinion and exit polls have shown a steady drop in support for the BJP and its allies. To arrest the decline, the BJP has given increasing prominence to its *Hindutva* or Hindu supremacist agenda. Both the BJP's "vision" statement and the NDA manifesto highlight the so-called Ayodhya issue. (In the early 1990s, the BJP led an agitation for the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram in Ayodhya that resulted in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque and arguably the worst communal violence since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.) The BJP and NDA policy documents also pledge legislation to bar those of non-Indian origin—read the Italian-born, Catholic Congress leader Sonia Gandhi—from holding high office.

Now the BJP is turning to Modi and Bharti in an attempt to mobilize sections of their Hindu chauvinist base that have been perturbed by its abandonment of bellicose anti-Pakistan rhetoric and in the hopes of channeling the popular resentment over the lack of job and other opportunities against Muslims and other minorities. As chief minister, Modi played a major role in precipitating the February-March 2002 Gujarat riots that resulted in the deaths of 2,000 Muslims and rendered tens of thousands more homeless. Bharti was one of the principal leaders of the Ayodhya agitation. "To improve our nominees' prospects," a senior BJP leader told the *Hindu*, "it is essential to ensure good turnouts. If this has to happen, our workers have to go from door to door to persuade voters to come out. And Modi can inspire them to give all that they have."

The prospect of a minority government and especially of a hung parliament has caused consternation in business circles. The Bombay stock exchange lost 3.6 percent of its value April 27, its sharpest drop in more than three years, after exit polls from last week's round of voting showed the BJP-led NDA failing to win a majority in the next parliament.

The more perceptive bourgeois commentators recognize that

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all of the parties, from the BJP and the Shiv Sena on the far right through the Stalinist Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist), have supported economic "liberalization." Their concern is that the jockeying for political advantage among the myriad parties will lead to a weak government, unable to take unpopular measures. As it is, business has been pressing since the beginning of the decade for the NDA to make good on its pledge to "reform" India's labor laws by gutting restrictions on the contacting out of labor and making it easier for companies to lay off workers and close down factories.

Declared the *Indian Express* in an editorial published April 30, "The concern of the markets is not that a BJP-led coalition would be replaced by a Congress-led coalition. Rather, it is that neither national party may end up leading any coalition. That is why the reassuring statement of the Congress Party spokesman, Jairam Ramesh, that the party has three pro-reform ex-finance ministers in its top echelons—Pranab Mukherjee, Manmohan Singh and P. Chidambaram—is hardly relevant to the situation.... In the absence of a clear winner, the resultant horse-trading, with due apologies to the equine species, can give exaggerated importance to a clutch of marginal political players who may then influence specific sectoral policies in directions that hurt investors, if not the rest of the voting public."

The Stalinist parties, for their part, have sprung into action, with the expectation that they will play a pivotal role in the maneuvers to form an alternative government to the BJP-led NDA coalition.

Since before the election campaign, the Stalinist parties have made clear that their principal goal is the defeat of the BJP-led government, that they consider the Congress a "secular" ally in the fight against the BJP, and that if the parliamentary arithmetic allows they will provide the votes needed to bring a Congress-led government to power. At the same time, to keep their distance from the Congress—which is their principal electoral opponent in the three states where they are strongest (West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala)—the Stalinists have claimed to be working toward a "Third Front" of "secular" parties.

Between 1996 and 1998, the United Front, a political combination largely cobbled together by the CPI(M), held office in New Delhi, although it was dependent on the votes of the Congress to remain in power. In a move that many in the CPI(M) leadership later regretted, the CPI(M) itself did not take cabinet seats in the United Front government. Nevertheless, it was a power behind the throne, supplying the United Front regime with much of its policies and political arguments. The Stalinists claimed that the United Front was a bulwark against the right wing, but it pursued the economic "reform" agenda of big business, and many of the regional parties that comprised it and upon whom the Stalinists bestowed the blessing of "secular," switched camps after the 1998 or 1999 elections and threw in their lot with the BJP-led NDA.

While the Stalinists are once again blowing hard about creating a third front, there is little prospect that a third front will be able to stake a claim to government, leaving aside whether some of its prospective members, such as the Bhujan Samaj Party (which claims to speak for the former untouchables) and the Samajwadi (the remnant of the former Socialist Party that now rules Uttar Pradesh), can put aside their intense factional rivalries.

But the Third Front serves the Stalinists' purposes by bolstering its claims to represent an alternative to Congress—even as it is preparing to support a Congress-led government—and because it could potentially strengthen its hand in future bargaining with the Congress. In this regard, it is important to note the claim of Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the CPI(M) general secretary who is leading the inter-party negotiations, that the Congress can be pressured to the left. Whilst many bourgeois commentators concede that the BJP's and Congress's attitude to the fundamental economic and geopolitical issues is virtually identical, Surjeet told the *Hindu* that "he felt there was a realisation on the part of the Congress it could not go ahead with its old economic policies. If the Congress became part of a secular combination, it would also have to go by the views of other constituents..."

Singh is notorious for his backroom political deal-making. According to one tongue-and-cheek comment published in the Indian press, "In the steaming pot of Indian politics where no mix is unpalatable, the 88-year-old bearded Marxist veteran is the master chef who stirs, blends and coaxes to produce a cocktail."

That the BJP is a virulent enemy of the working class is indubitable, but it cannot be opposed through the Congress or other capitalist parties. On the contrary, it is the Stalinists' decades-long subordination of the working class to one or another bourgeois party, whether in the name of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism or secularism, that has opened the door to the rise of political reaction. More than ever, the foundation for any counteroffensive of working people must be the independent political mobilization of the working class.

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