

India: Hindu supremacist BJP in disarray

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Three months after falling from power, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in disarray, with its leadership sharply divided over the reasons for its defeat in the April-May general election and unsure how to proceed.

True to their communalist political instincts, many in the BJP leadership want to mount an aggressive Hindu chauvinist campaign aimed at destabilizing the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance coalition government and forcing it from office at the earliest opportunity. However, big business, which was solidly behind the re-election of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (BJP), has shown no enthusiasm for such an endeavour. Both the calls for the BJP to “return to Hindutva” or Hindu supremacism and the BJP’s attempts to disrupt parliament have been sharply criticized by the press. This lack of business support has further shaken the BJP and is one of the major factors in its confusion.

The results of India’s 14th general election roiled the country’s political and business establishment. Thanks in large measure to the support it received from the Left Front, the Congress, India’s traditional governing party, found itself the beneficiary of an unanticipated groundswell of working-class and rural opposition to the neo-liberal agenda of privatization, deregulation and cuts to public and social services that all Indian governments have pursued since 1991. The BJP and its allies, who had confidently predicted victory, saw their seat tally slashed by more than a hundred and for the first time since 1996 the BJP found itself with fewer Lok Sabha seats than the Congress.

The election results left Prime Minister and BJP head Atal Behari Vajpayee with no choice but to resign. But no sooner had he done so, than the BJP and the NDA effectively sought to challenge the legitimacy of the vote by threatening a mass campaign to resist the “national humiliation” of a “foreigner”—Congress leader Sonia Gandhi—serving as prime minister.

Behind this stance lay the BJP leadership’s congenital communalism, but also its calculation that big business was wary of, if not opposed to outright, a Congress minority government dependent on the support of the Communist Party (CPI) and the Communist Party (Marxist) for its survival.

The election results, however, had given the bourgeoisie pause. The more politically astute argued that the threat of a popular challenge to its “reform” program revealed in the

stunning repudiation of the BJP-NDA and its “India Shining” rhetoric required a tactical shift. The Congress leadership, for its part, moved to calm the stock markets by reiterating its wholehearted support for the dismantling of what remains of India’s nationally-regulated economy. And, in a move universally applauded by big business, Gandhi declined the prime ministership and instead installed as head of the incoming Congress-led government Manmohan Singh, who as Finance Minister in Narasimha Rao’s 1991-96 government drafted India’s first “reform” budgets.

Historically, the Congress’ exceptional role in Indian politics has been bound up with its ability to bind the masses to the program of the national bourgeoisie. In keeping with this role, the current Congress-led UPA government has combined populist rhetoric about tending to needs of the poor with neo-liberal economic policies. Likewise the UPA regime has followed in the BJP-NDA’s footsteps in pursuing the rapid build-up of India’s military might and a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The bourgeoisie is anxious to use the BJP and NDA to pressure the UPA government to press forward with the implementation of its economic and geo-political agenda. But, at least for the moment, it views the new government, because of its populist credentials and political support from the Left Front, as a better vehicle for implementing its program than the discredited and politically-weakened BJP-NDA. Indeed, the bourgeoisie fears that the BJP’s attempts to snatch back power by stoking communal hatred and violence could dangerously destabilize the political situation and further erode popular legitimacy for the government and state. Hence the bitter complaints in the press that the BJP is not respecting the verdict of the general election.

Having tasted power, the BJP leadership is having difficulty reconciling itself to the role of loyal opposition to which the bourgeoisie now wants to consign it. As for the party’s volatile Hindu communalist base, it is incensed at seeing the “Communist-supported” UPA government reverse, or at least threaten to reverse, many of its “triumphs,” such as the communal rewriting of the education curriculum. Speaking at a recent BJP “brainstorming session,” Vajpayee reportedly accused the “Congress and Communist combine” of plotting to “relegate the BJP to such a position that it occupies no effective place in the country.”

The loss of power has also exacerbated longstanding tensions within the BJP and between it and the *sangh parivar*—a network of Hindu supremacist organizations led by the Rasthriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS—over the place of *Hindutva* in BJP policy and agitation and the respective roles of Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, the Home Minister and Deputy Prime Minister in the BJP-NDA regime.

Although an RSS cadre since his youth, Vajpayee has positioned himself as a “moderate.” As such he was critical in managing the BJP’s relations with its NDA allies, who claim to be opponents of *Hindutva*, and in answering big business complaints that the BJP’s communalist appeals and actions were distracting the government from the pursuit of economic liberalization.

Advani, on the other hand, who spearheaded the Hindu chauvinist mobilization in the early 1990s that culminated in the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya, has long been identified as the leader of the Hindu nationalist “hardliners.”

Following the election, Advani and the RSS were quick to blame the BJP’s electoral defeat on its straying from *Hindutva*. Speaking at a BJP National Executive meeting in June, Advani said, “Somehow our political strategy and conduct during the past six years was not oriented to strengthening and enthusing our ideological *parivar* and our ideological constituency.”

In truth, the BJP-led NDA government pursued Hindu nationalism with a vengeance. It protected those responsible for the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, brought the subcontinent to the brink of all-out war in 2001-02, and systematically re-staffed India’s educational and cultural institutions with RSS sympathizers.

What rankled the most communally-blinded of its own followers was that under pressure from its parliamentary allies and big business, the BJP did not implement some of the most communally-explosive of its traditional demands, such as the building of a Hindu temple in Ayodhya. Also, to the consternation of a significant number of its followers, late last year, following the failure of its attempt to coerce Pakistan into ending its support for the Kashmir insurgency, the BJP government switched gears in favor of seeking to secure India’s domination over South Asia through a peace settlement with Pakistan and a sub-continental free trade zone.

Vajpayee at first seemed to take exception to the post-election calls for the BJP to revive *Hindutva*. He voiced support for the attempt of a dissident faction within the Gujarat BJP to strip Narendra Modi, infamous for his role in fomenting the Gujarat pogrom, of his post as the state’s chief minister. But at June’s national executive meeting, Vajpayee was given a dressing down by the party president, Vankaiah Naidu, in the name of attacking the “virus of individualism,” and Modi’s leadership was effectively reaffirmed.

In line with the calls for the BJP to give greater importance to “ideology,” power within the BJP’s top ranks has shifted

toward Advani. He has assumed the mantle of BJP parliamentary leader, while Vajpayee has been given the title of head of the NDA. The RSS, with the support of Naidu, meanwhile, has delegated a score of its top cadres to assume posts within the BJP party apparatus.

But the new emphasis on *Hindutva* has only further estranged the BJP from key sections of big business and threatens to cause serious problems with its NDA partners. After two key parliamentary allies—the Andhra Pradesh-based Telegu Desam Party and the Janata Dal (United) a remnant of India’s social-democratic party—threatened to break relations with the NDA, the BJP leadership issued a policy document from which the word *Hindutva* was excluded. Still, the BJP leadership made clear it intends to emphasize communalist agitation, announcing that among its chief objectives in the coming months will be to mobilize opposition to an Andhra Pradesh government plan to set aside a small percentage of government jobs for Muslims and to demand action to curb “terrorism” in Kashmir.

At the same time, the BJP is trying to counteract the correct popular perception that it is hostile to the needs and interests of the toiling masses and a defender of big business and the privileged in general by opposing the “anti-poor, anti-farmer, anti-worker and anti-rural policies” of the UPA government.

The crisis of the BJP underscores the fact that the growth of communal reaction over the past decade and a half has rested on a narrow social base—sections of the petty bourgeoisie and a bourgeoisie ready to aid and abet communalism, so long as it can advance its drive to make India a cheap-labor haven for world capital. The great danger is that through the Stalinist Left Front the working class and oppressed masses are being politically tied to the Congress-led UPA government. Its populist rhetoric notwithstanding, the Manmohan Singh government is pressing forward with capital’s social incendiary agenda and thereby facilitating the accumulation of profit at the expense of working people and the creation of the conditions of economic insecurity and social inequality, which, in the absence of a socialist alternative, provide the festering ground for the growth of communalism and all forms of political reaction.



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