India’s Congress Party suffers major election reversals

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The Congress Party, the dominant partner in India’s coalition government, has recently suffered a string of electoral reversals, most importantly in two of the three state assembly elections whose results were announced earlier this week.

The principal reason for these reversals is popular opposition to rising prices and, more generally, the economic insecurity and social polarization that have resulted from the neo-liberal economic policies pursued by the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Yet the principal beneficiaries of the Congress’ electoral set-backs have been the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its regional allies—ultra right-wing, communalist forces that are no less committed than Congress to pursuing big business’ agenda.

Congress state governments were unseated this week by voters in two north-western states, the Punjab and Uttarakhand (Uttarakhand, also known as Uttaranchal, was carved out of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, in 2000). Only in the small north-eastern state of Manipur, which has long been convulsed by a separatist insurgency, was the Congress able to retain power.

The BJP also won several Lok Sabha (Indian parliamentary) by-elections this week. Among the BJP victors was Navjot Sidhu, a former Indian cricketer and television personality, who resigned his parliamentary seat late last year after being convicted of beating a man to death in 1988.

Earlier last month, the Congress suffered a setback in municipal elections in Mumbai (Bombay), Nagpur, and Thane in the state of Maharashtra, with the fascistic Shiv Sena (a BJP ally) keeping control of the municipal corporation in Mumbai, India’s financial capital, despite having been shaken by corruption scandals and suffering the defection of one of it principal leaders to the Congress.

In municipal elections held in Uttar Pradesh last November, the BJP wrested control of a number of major municipalities, while the Congress failed to make significant gains despite high hopes and much hype.

Historically, Uttar Pradesh (UP), the state from which Jawaharlal Nehru hailed, was a Congress bastion, but popular support for the Congress withered in the state during the late 1980s and 1990s. The Congress leadership believes reviving the party’s fortunes in UP to be pivotal to the party’s long-term future and views the UP state assembly elections, which are to be held this spring, as vital preparation for the next all-India general election.

The defeats suffered by the Congress in Punjab, Uttarakhand, and elsewhere are a manifestation of mounting popular anger at the pro-business policies imposed by the Congress Party-led UPA. Recent months have seen a sharp rise in inflation. While the reasons for this are complex, a key factor in the price spurt is the stagnation of the agricultural sector, a consequence of the diversion of state resources from agriculture to the infrastructure projects favored by Indian and international capital. The overall annual inflation rate is now running at over 6 percent, but government officials have admitted that for many key food products the annual inflation rate is now in excess of 10 percent.

In both the Punjab and Uttarkhand, the Congress Party state governments carried out pro-big business “development” policies. These included the setting up Special Economic Zones (SEZ), where agricultural land is seized and handed over to big business, so as to allow investors to make immense profits at the expense of workers’ health and the environment. The setting up of SEZs has resulted in the wholesale uprooting of agricultural communities, destroying the livelihood of tens of thousands of people.

The two principal Indian Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM, and the Communist Party of India, CPI—contested a total of 38 seats in Punjab, but failed to win any seats in a state that historically was one of the main areas of CP-support.

The Stalinist parties have been badly tarnished by their steady rightward movement. In West Bengal and the other states where the Left Front holds office, it is, as the Stalinists themselves concede, implementing “business-friendly policies.” The Congress Party-led UPA survives only because of the parliamentary support it receives from the Left Front.

While the recent elections have proven to be a boon to the BJP, they in no way constitute evidence of a popular groundswell for the Hindu right.

In 2004 the BJP was stunned when the electorate rejected its claims of “India Shining” and ousted the National Democratic Alliance government. (The BJP is the dominant force in the NDA, which ruled India from 1998 to May 2004.)

Since its fall from power, the BJP has been in almost perpetual crisis, with the party’s top leaders waging factional warfare over the party leadership and its future course. Like the US Republicans after they lost the presidency to the Democrats in 1992, the BJP has refused to play the role of a traditional bourgeois opposition party. Rather it has routinely sought to disrupt normal parliamentary business and mounted a series of right-wing

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provocations in the hopes of destabilizing and defeating the Congress-led UPA government. These provocations, which often have been of a communal character, have failed, however, to gain popular traction. Nor has Indian business given them their support. To the consternation of the BJP, the corporate elite has warmed to the wisdom of using the Congress Party, and the political cover provided it by the Left Front, to push forward with neo-liberal reform and to cement a new strategic partnership with Washington.

To the BJP, the election results have come as a welcome and unexpected boost. Predictably the BJP leaders are trying to make the most of them. Lal Kishan Advani, the BJP parliamentary leader and former Home Minster, boasted that the BJP, not the Congress, is now the party of "aam aadmi" (the common man). Narendra Modi, the BJP Chief Minister of Gujarat and the infamous inciter of the anti-Muslim pogrom that convulsed Gujarat in 2002, said the election results were a rejection of the Congress' and UPA's "soft stand" on terrorism and inflation.

In Punjab, which is home to the majority of India's Sikhs, the Congress Party won 44 seats, a loss of 18 seats from its total in the previous election. Meanwhile, the right-wing alliance of the BJP and the regional Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), literally the Akali (or Sikh) Religious Party, won 67 seats giving them a solid majority in the 117-seat Assembly. The BJP, in particular, made significant gains, increasing its seat total from 3 to 19.

In the state of Uttarkhand, where the Congress previously had 36 seats in a 70-seat assembly, it won just 21 seats. The BJP, meanwhile, won 34 seats, almost double its previous tally of 19.

Only in the state of Manipur was the Congress Party able to retain the reins of power. Whereas previously it was heavily dependent on allies in forming the state government, the election swelled the Congress' seat total from 20 to 29, leaving it just 1 short of an outright majority in the state's 60 member assembly. The Congress Party won despite widespread agitation in the state against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) 1958. This law gives unchecked powers to the security forces. Under the legal cover provided by the AFSPA the security forces have committed widespread atrocities against civilians under the guise of battling armed separatist groups.

As soon as the election results were known Laloo Prasad Yadav, the Union Railway Minister and head of the Bihar-based Rasthriya Janata Dal (RJD), stormed into Congress President Sonia Gandhi's office and postured as someone concerned with the plight of the poor. Laying the blame for the defeat on the price rises, he lectured her that, "Poor people do not understand what is GDP growth [sic]. Our concern is the price of pulses."

CPM Politburo leader Sitaram Yechury similarly appealed for the Congress—the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional ruling party—to modify its socio-economic policies, so as to take greater heed of the concerns and needs of India's toilers. Said Yechury, "The Congress needs to learn its lessons. With the kind of policies that they pursue, they could not have expected anything better."

This criticism from the Stalinists is thoroughly duplicitous since it is their steady support to the UPA government that has enabled the Congress Party-led government to pursue neo-liberal policies aimed at enriching the Indian bourgeoisie by making India a cheap-labor producer for the world capitalist market. To attract investment, the UPA, like the NDA before it, has pushed forward with privatization, tax and social spending cuts, and business-backed infrastructure projects, while seeking to further the Indian elite's ambitions to be a world power by pouring money into the armed forces.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was quick to dismiss the criticisms from within the UPA and from its Left Front allies. Singh declared that assembly elections should not and will not be considered by his government to have been a referendum on the policies of the UPA.

"I do recognize that inflation is a problem," said Singh. "The government is trying to tackle it as best as it can". But he hastened to reassure any doubters in big business circles, "There is no question of referendum against the Central government. These elections are part of local elections [and have] no bearing on the Centre."

"We are trying," continued Singh, "to control inflation while stimulating the growth impulses in our economy"—i.e, pursuing the agenda of capital—"because that is the only way you can create more jobs for our youth, for our young people."

The contempt shown by Manmohan Singh for the sentiments expressed by the people in the state assembly elections shows the immense gulf between the world of finance and profit-making that he inhabits and that of the vast majority of the Indian population, which must struggle on a daily basis to eke out its existence.

The election results must be taken by the working class as a serious warning: The Stalinists' policy of tying the working class to the Congress-led UPA is not only allowing the bourgeoisie to implement its socially incendiary "reform" agenda. It is creating conditions in which the discredited and divided Hindu right is able to reap electoral gains from the popular anger over the resultant unemployment, inflation and economic insecurity.

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