

Voters in India's most populous state spurn traditional parties

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To the surprise and dismay of India's political establishment and media observers, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has won 206 of the 403 seats in the Uttar Pradesh (UP) Assembly, empowering it to form the state's first majority government since 1992.

Formed in 1984, the BSP (Society's Majority Party) claims to be the political representative of the Dalits (formerly the "untouchables") who have suffered and continue to suffer severe social discrimination and economic oppression. It also purports to champion social justice and strive for the "welfare of all people in society (*sarvasamaj*)".

In reality, the BSP speaks for a narrow, petit-bourgeois Dalit elite that is seeking to harness popular anger against poverty and caste oppression so it can enrich itself by attaining political power. The BSP has thrice allied with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to form coalition governments in UP and has joined forces with India's political establishment in implementing the socially incendiary big business agenda of neo-liberal economic "reform".

While the BSP defied the conventional wisdom of the political elite and media pundits by securing a majority in the UP assembly, it did so by winning just 30 percent of the popular vote. Moreover, when one takes into account that only 45 percent of the UP electorate cast a vote in the staggered, seven-round, six-week election, the BSP's triumph translates into it having won the support of less than 14 percent of the state's voters.

The historically low voter turnout was first and foremost a result of widespread disenchantment with all the political parties. But a second factor was the intimidating presence of heavily-armed police and security personnel, deployed at the direction of India's election commission, ostensibly to prevent violence.

The Congress Party and the BJP, the two main national political representatives of big-business and finance, both suffered major reversals in the UP elections.

The Congress, which dominates India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, won just 21 seats, a loss of 4 from the last election, and polled less than 9 percent of the popular vote. The BJP, which captured 18 percent of the vote, saw its seat total almost cut in half, from 97 to 50.

This electoral drubbing was delivered despite both parties expending considerable resources and political energy on the UP election. With good reason, they viewed a strong showing in UP, which with 165 million inhabitants is far and away India's most populous state, to be vital to gaining political momentum for the next national general election, slated to be held in the first half of 2009.

The losses suffered by the two big-business parties represented an indirect popular reprimand for their relentless imposition of pro-business economic policies over the past two decades—policies that

have enriched a small social layer while increasing the suffering and economic insecurity of hundreds of millions who were already living in abysmal poverty.

The BSP's election victory was the outcome of a confluence of factors: the fragmentation of official politics along caste lines, giving rise over the past decade and a half to a succession of unprincipled and ephemeral political alliances; the popular alienation from the main national parties, the Congress and the BJP; the advanced degeneration of the Stalinist Communist parties; and finally mass disenchantment with the previous minority Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party) government.

The Samajwadi Party (SP) is one of the many offspring of India's moribund social-democratic party (another has been a long-time ally of the BJP). Like its arch-rival the BSP, the SP makes populist caste-based appeals while courting business support and presiding over a patronage network that trades in political favors. The SP leader and now defeated Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, is notorious for his close connections to Reliance Industries, one of India's largest business houses.

Although the SP increased its popular vote by a single percentage point from the 2002 election to 26 percent, its seat tally was slashed to 97 seats, as voters in many constituencies turned to the BSP, so as to ensure the defeat of the SP candidate.

BSP leader Mayawati placed the corruption of SP government, which did include elements widely reputed to have close connections with criminal gangs, at the center of her party's campaign. She claimed that "law and order" had broken down and she would ensure that Yadav and other SP leaders were prosecuted and jailed. This focus on corruption allowed Mayawati to skirt the question of how a BSP government would address the state's endemic poverty.

While there were many long faces among the BSP's rivals when the election results became known, it was the BJP that suffered the biggest blow.

In the early 1990s the BJP was able to come to the fore by exploiting an upper-caste backlash against agitation for the expansion of reservations (affirmative action) for the so-called Other Backward Castes and by whipping up a furor over a mosque in the UP city of Ayodhya that the Hindu right claimed was built on the birthplace of the mythical Hindu god Ram.

In 1991 the BJP won a commanding 221 UP assembly seats, albeit with only 31.5 percent of the popular vote. It has also participated in several coalition governments in UP since falling from power after allowing a mob of Hindu fanatics to raze the Babri Masjid mosque in December 1992.

In an attempt to again whip up Hindu supremacist sentiment, the

BJP leadership produced a vile anti-Muslim CD for diffusion during the 2007 UP election campaign. (See India's Hindu-chauvinist BJP attempts to incite communal riots ahead of pivotal state election.) But the ploy backfired and served to further isolate the BJP. Within the shocked BJP leadership and its allies in the Rashtriya Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS), whose cadres were very active in promoting the BJP campaign, knives are now being drawn.

The Congress Party lost seats despite mounting a high-profile campaign using party president Sonia Gandhi, her son and Lok-Sabha member Rahul Gandhi, and her daughter Priyanka Gandhi. For the first three decades after independence, the Congress dominated UP's politics and UP was the anchor of Congress support nationally. Now its support in UP has been reduced to little more than two pockets, the Lok-Sabha constituencies of Rae Bareilly and Amethi, which are represented respectively by Sonia and Rahul Gandhi.

The twin Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the larger Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM], failed to win a single seat in the UP assembly. The steep decline of the Stalinist parties can be gleaned from the fact that in 1957 the undivided Communist Party of India won 46 seats in UP. Nationally, the CPI and CPM are united in propping up the Congress-led UPA government, even while they concede that it is pursuing economic and foreign policies akin to that of the previous BJP-led national coalition. In UP the parties went their separate ways, with the CPM, which had supported Yadav's SP in the previous assembly, striking a tacit electoral alliance with the governing party, and the CPI allying with a rival bourgeois grouping.

The Stalinists, it must be added, have done much to legitimize the caste politics espoused by Mulayalam and Mayawati, claiming that their promotion of caste identities voices lower-caste discontent. They have championed the reservation system—affirmative action programs that create a divisive and diversionary struggle to dole out “more equitably” the misery created by capitalism, while leaving the social order unchallenged.

Uttar Pradesh is among India's poorest states. In 2003-4 per-capita income in the state was the second lowest in the country at an abysmal 5,700 rupees (\$130), about half that year's national average. In 2001 only 57 percent of adults were said to be literate. At least 10 percent of the villages have no electricity and the state's per capita power consumption is the second lowest of any state.

Such sustained economic backwardness has given rise to the most unsavory political parties led by various petty bourgeois elements bent on enriching themselves by employing crude caste appeals so as to gain an opportunity to feed at the state's trough and to cavort with businesses, legitimate and criminal.

Mayawati and the BSP fit this mould.

That the Dalits face horrendous systematic discrimination and are vastly over represented in deprived socio-economic groups is incontestable. Some 60 years after “untouchability” was proclaimed abolished, Dalits are still denied access to village wells, are frequently the target of upper-caste violence and constitute more than half of the landless, although they constitute only around 15 percent of the India's population. Today, as in the past, many are forced to eke out a living performing the most menial and debasing tasks, such as the manual clearing up of human waste and disposing of the dead.

But the BSP does not articulate the pent-up anger and alienation of the Dalit masses. Rather it speaks for the petty bourgeoisie that has been created as a result of the reservation policy, pioneered by the British colonial state, which sets aside a set number of seats in

colleges and a portion of civil service jobs for what the government officially terms the “Scheduled Castes”.

Mayawati, who routinely flaunts her personal wealth as a purported testament to Dalit assertion, is a quintessential representative of this grasping social layer. College educated, they clamor to become part of the ruling establishment hitherto dominated by people from the upper castes. Rather than fighting for the expansion of educational and job opportunities for all, calling for land reform and the radical reorganization of the economy to address the plight of the Dalits and the poor, and fighting to eradicate caste divisions, this elite layer concentrates on expanding reservations while tenaciously promoting caste identities.

Mayawati made her political name by using vitriolic language to denounce the upper-castes and to demand, in the name of the Dalits and Dalit dignity, a share of the political pie for the BSP.

She became UP Chief Minister in a coalition government for the first time in 1995 and has on two subsequent occasions led fractious coalition governments. When in office she has promoted Dalits within the civil service to positions of influence and sought to assert “Dalit power” by building statues of the 20th century untouchable politician B.R. Ambedkar. But her governments have instituted no serious reforms, let alone taken measures to challenge the Indian socio-economic order.

Mayawati has amassed a huge fortune, estimated at millions of dollars, that she has reputedly distributed to close relatives to conceal its extent. In 2003, she was forced to resign as Chief Minister when she was indicted in the 1.75 billion-rupee (\$40 million) “Taj Heritage Corridor” scandal. She is alleged to have given out lucrative contracts in exchange for kickbacks to build commercial buildings near the famed Taj Mahal that would have destroyed the ambience of this historic monument. The state court in Lucknow, UP's capital, has ordered the police to submit a report of their investigation of Mayawati's involvement in this scandal forthwith.

In the campaign for the current election, Mayawati modified her rhetoric, spurning her traditional violent anti-upper caste rhetoric. This was part of a maneuver, which saw the BSP seek to reach out to high-castes, including the Brahmins, by doling out seats on a caste-basis to notables from these groups in exchange for financial support.

She justified this move by stating: “Since numerous rich people were keen to contest elections on our party's tickets, there was nothing wrong in taking contributions for them. After all, I used the money to enable poor and economically weak Dalit candidates to contest elections.”



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