

# India: Hindu-communalist BJP wins assembly elections in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh

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The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has retained power in Gujarat despite a major drive by the Congress Party—led by its president and the current head of the Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty, Sonia Gandhi—to wrest control of the west Indian state.

Under Narendra Modi, the BJP won 117 of the 182 seats in the Gujarat assembly.

Gujarat's chief minister since October 2001, Modi instigated the anti-Muslim pogrom that convulsed the state in February-March 2002, leaving 2,000 dead and 100,000 homeless.

The Congress Party, for its part, captured 59 Gujarat assembly seats, eight more than in the last election in 2002, while the National Congress Party, a Congress ally, took three. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM was partnered with the Congress in the Gujarat election. It failed to win a single seat. The CPM-led Left Front is helping to sustain the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in office in New Delhi.

In a crude adaptation to the BJP's foul communal politics, the Congress sought to defeat Modi's government by allying with dissident BJPers. Not only are these dissidents themselves as committed to Hindu communalist ideology as Modi himself (as attested by the open support given them by the VHP and other Hindu supremacist organizations); many of them played important roles in fomenting and facilitating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom. But whether running as Congress candidates, independents or under the banner of a BJP split-off, the Bharatiya Janshakti Party, all the Congress-supported BJP dissidents, with just one exception, failed to win their seats.

In the second state assembly election held last month, the Congress was ousted from office in the north-western state of Himachal Pradesh by the BJP. The BJP took 41 of the 68 seats in the Himachal Pradesh assembly, while the Congress saw its seat tally slashed by 20, to 23.

With a population of 6 million (2001 census), Himachal Pradesh is considered a minor state. Gujarat, with a population of over 50 million, is, by contrast, one of India's larger states. It is also one of the more industrialized and urbanized.

The twin election defeats in Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh constitute a major blow to the Congress. The Congress leadership and a significant section of the Indian elite had

hoped that a Congress victory in Gujarat would give the party the political momentum it needs to trigger and win early parliamentary elections and thereby short-circuit the Left Front's opposition to the Indo-US nuclear cooperation treaty. Such calculations now lie in tatters.

Immediately following its stinging defeat in Gujarat, the Congress leadership gathered for an "introspective session." Predictably, it drew the conclusion that its campaign had not been reactionary enough, terming its calibrated attacks on the BJP government over the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, including suggestions the central government might reopen its inquiries into the massacre, a mistake.

The BJP's win in Gujarat has sparked triumphalist declarations from its top leaders.

The BJP's parliamentary leader and newly named prime ministerial candidate L.K. Advani termed the election victory a "turning point in national politics because it signals the BJP's comeback as the frontrunner in the next parliamentary election."

BJP president Rajnath Singh claimed the election results were a decisive endorsement of its Hindu supremacist ideology, *Hindutva*. Said Singh, "The party's thought and ideology have won as much as the leadership and performance of its Gujarat government under Narendra Modi."

The BJP has been in almost perpetual crisis since its unexpected fall from office, as the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance coalition, in the May 2004 Indian election. And as Singh's remarks indicate, there is much dissension within the BJP over Modi's leadership—over his ambitions to some day become the party's foremost national leader and his attempt to cast himself as the personification of *Hindutva*.

The corporate media has been sharply divided over Modi's bid to monopolize control of the Gujarat BJP and win a second full-term as the state's chief minister. While some sections view his extreme communalism and advocacy of "street justice" as dangerously destabilizing, others hail him for "good administration," that is, for ruthlessly implementing the neo-liberal "reforms" advocated by the most powerful sections of Indian and foreign capital.

Gujarat has now become the top investment destination of all

India's states, dethroning even Maharashtra, which is home to India's financial center, Mumbai (Bombay). According to statistics from India's central bank, Gujarat attracted a quarter of all foreign investments made in India in 2006-2007. BJP election posters emblazoned with the slogan "Resurgent Gujarat" featured Modi alongside Indian capitalists Mukesh Ambani and Ratan Tata.

In the aftermath of the Gujarat elections, the corporate media was all but unanimous in praising Modi, arguing that his well-timed and skilled use of communal appeals had overwhelmed an incompetently managed Congress campaign. In a December 24 editorial, the *Times of India* proclaimed the election "a referendum on Modi. And he won it hands down."

Reading the corporate press's election analyses, one gets the impression that Gujarat is a seething cauldron of Hindu communalism. The reality is far more complex.

The voter turnout in the December 2007 election was close to 60 percent, down marginally from 2002. The BJP won around 49 percent of the votes cast as compared with 38 percent for the Congress Party. The BJP's vote-share thus works out to 29.4 percent of the registered electorate. If the state's unregistered voters are taken into account, the BJP's vote-share is even smaller. Nevertheless, the BJP won 64 percent of the 182 assembly seats.

That being said, there is no doubt that Modi and the BJP did command the electoral support of the bulk of the urban middle class. Much of this layer has materially benefited from the neo-liberal reforms of the past 15 years, especially the recent investment boom. And, in the absence of any progressive alternative, the BJP's claims of "development" resonated among wider layers who are desperate for some improvement in their lives.

The BJP's electioneering notwithstanding, the investment boom has almost entirely bypassed rural Gujarat and in the cities it has resulted in deepening social inequality. Moreover, this investment boom is highly unstable, tied as it is to a world capitalist economy fraught with contradictions and imbalances.

The BJP has also had some success in channeling the frustrations of the most impoverished—the tribals and sections of the so-called lower castes—against the state's Muslim minority, having previously exploited the absence of elementary public and social services, to develop, through various *Hindutva*-ite "social service organizations," a base of support.

The Congress Party represented no alternative to the BJP in Gujarat.

Despite ample evidence to indict and convict Modi and other BJP leaders for their role in instigating the anti-Muslim pogrom and shielding its perpetrators—as underscored by a recent *Tahelka* magazine exposé—the Congress-led UPA government has failed to even mount a proper investigation into the 2002 events. (See "In run-up to Gujarat elections: Magazine exposé shows BJP state government organized 2002 pogrom")

And with its courting of the BJP dissidents, one of whom was the minister in charge of the state police at the time of the pogrom, the Congress has taken a further step right and into the cesspool of communal politics.

Nor could or would the Congress make the growth of economic insecurity, social inequality and poverty in the state a major election issue. After all, the UPA government is pursuing similar pro-investor policies and hopes, once it can free itself from dependency on the parliamentary support of the Left Front, to more aggressively to gut remaining restrictions on layoffs, plant closures and contracting out.

That the Congress Party should have acted in this manner is not in the least surprising. It is the Indian bourgeoisie's oldest party and its historically preferred party of government.

Yet the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front allies have systematically subordinated the working class to the Congress and the UPA government on the grounds that they constitute a "secular bulwark" against the BJP and can be pressured into tempering the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal reform program.

The Gujarat elections have once again exposed the politically criminal character of this policy, with the Congress facilitating the BJP's return to power and further legitimizing its noxious Hindu supremacist ideology.

But the Stalinists, no more than the Congress, can change their spots. They have responded to the Congress defeat in Gujarat by ratcheting up their calls for the "unity of secular forces," that is, for the working class and toilers to rally behind the right-wing UPA government, and by making tepid appeals to Sonia Gandhi and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to see the error of their ways and adopt "pro-people" policies.



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