

India: Hindu supremacist BJP forms government in Karnataka

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The Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP has come to power in Karnataka, after falling just short of winning a parliamentary majority in last month's state assembly elections. This marks the first time the rightwing Hindu supremacist party has formed a government on its own in a south Indian state.

At a triumphant ceremony in Bangalore that was attended by much of the BJP's national leadership, BJP stalwart B.S. Yeddyurappa was sworn in as Karnataka's Chief Minister on May 30th.

With a population of 52 million (2001 census), Karnataka is India's ninth most populous state. Its economy, however, is India's fifth largest. Nicknamed India's Silicon Valley, Karnataka's capital Bangalore is the heart of India's IT- and IT-enabled industries and a choice destination for transnational companies.

The official opposition in India's national parliament, the BJP captured 110 of the 224 Karnataka assembly seats. The Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance coalition government, took 80 seats, while the Janata Dal (Secular) [JD(S)], which had previously ruled the state in alliance with the BJP, won just 28 seats. The remaining six seats were won by independent candidates or "rebels" from the three large parties.

The BJP's triumphalist claims notwithstanding, its victory in Karnataka hardly constitutes a popular mandate for its pro-big business and communalist agenda. The BJP won only 33.8 percent of the vote, barely one in every three votes cast. With a 34.5 percent vote share, the Congress Party actually won 0.7 percent more of the popular vote than the BJP. If it trailed the latter in seats, this is because the Congress' vote was more evenly distributed across the state.

Unlike the Congress, the BJP did increase its share of the popular vote from the 2004 Karnataka election, when it first emerged as the largest party in the state assembly, winning 79 seats and 28.5 percent of the vote. The Congress, by contrast, won 15 more seats in the just concluded election due to a fall in support for the JD(S), but its share of the vote actually fell by 0.8 percent.

The electoral turnout in the three-phase election was 65 percent. But in the state capital, Bangalore, it was just 45 percent, indicating difficulty with getting to polling stations because of the city's choked roadways or dissatisfaction with the unsavory electoral choices.

The lack of popular enthusiasm for the elections stands in inverse proportion to the amounts of money various big business cliques showered on the main contenders. Referring to the role "big money" plays in US politics, a veteran Congress Party leader was quoted by Rediff.com as saying: "A similar situation is emerging in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka." The BJP election effort in Bellary and Bangalore, for example, was massively bankrolled by the Reddy mine-owning family.

The Congress Party's loss to the BJP in Karnataka is a major blow and has given rise to a mood approaching panic within the party's high command.

The Congress had hoped to reverse a mounting tide of state election

defeats by regaining power in Karnataka, a state whose politics it has traditionally dominated. Only in 1984—that is, more 35 years after independence—did a non-Congress government first take office in Karnataka.

Since early 2004, the Congress has lost 16 of the 24 state assembly elections held across India. (Much to its own surprise, the Congress won a plurality of seats in the May 2004 national elections and with a collection of smaller parties was able to form the UPA government.)

Adding to the Congress leadership's concern over its Karnataka defeat is that fresh national elections must be held by the middle of next year.

The Congress-led UPA government, like the BJP-led coalition that preceded it, has pressed forward with neo-liberal policies. But in contradistinction to the BJP, the UPA has sought to camouflage its championing of big business interests by claiming to pursue "inclusive growth" and to represent the common man.

The Congress leadership has been banking on populist programs such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)—which guarantees 100 days of minimum-wage employment per year to one member of every rural household— and the recently announced loan-forgiveness program for poor farmers to help it avert the fate of the BJP, which crowed in 2004 about "India Shining," then suffered a massive rebuke from India's toilers at the polls. But to the Congress' dismay it has repeatedly been electorally sideswiped by popular anger over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality.

In the Karnataka elections, the BJP was able to capitalize on the widespread anger of the electorate over the rising cost of living and, in particular, double-digit food price increases. According to UNICEF and other welfare agencies, the rising cost of food is already leading to an increase in undernourishment among the 800 million Indians who live on less than \$2 US per day.

While the BJP made gains across the state, it did particularly well in the state's more northerly districts, which have not been touched by the investment boom in Bangalore.

In wooing the Karnataka electorate, the BJP did not highlight key elements of its Hindu supremacist agenda. Rather it emphasized the price-rise issue and complaints over the lack, or dilapidated state, of public infrastructure.

The BJP denounced Bangalore's inadequate water supply, garbage disposal, and sewage system and its traffic-choked roads, coining the rapid slogan "Save Bangalore, vote BJP."

In the final days of the campaign, the BJP also seized on the terrorist atrocity in Jaipur to repeat its communally-charged claim that the Congress Party is "soft" on terrorism. This may have resonated with some sections of the electorate, as Bangalore has experienced several terrorist incidents—and, thanks in no small part to the BJP, increased communal frictions—in recent years.

Historically, the BJP has been a north Indian party, with its base of support in the so-called Hindi belt. Not surprisingly, the BJP, which has

been riven by divisions since falling from national office in 2004, is touting its first-ever election victory in a south Indian state as an historic turning point, despite its quite narrow support base and dependence on independent legislators—five of whom have been given cabinet posts—for its parliamentary majority. In a patent attempt to drum up election partners and popular enthusiasm, the BJP leadership is boasting that the Karnataka results are a harbinger of the coming national election.

The importance the BJP attaches to its Karnataka win was underlined by the attendance at the Chief Minister's swearing-in ceremony of most of the party's principal leaders. These included BJP President Rajnath Singh, L.K. Advani, the former Home Minister and the BJP's candidate for prime minister in the coming national election, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who fomented the 2002 pogrom against the state's Muslim minority, and the extremist leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), Ashok Singhal.

On taking office, BJP Chief Minister Yeddyurappa promised to implement socio-economic policies to the exclusive benefit of domestic and foreign businesses along the lines of those implemented by Modi in Gujarat. Said Yeddyurappa, "I will send a team of officials to Gujarat to see the developmental activities there for implementation in Karnataka."

Big business is looking to the new government to siphon funds from public services and social support programs into commercially-significant infrastructure projects hoping thereby to maintain the state's recent high growth rate. "We have had a recent history of infrastructure neglect," said the president-elect of the Federation of Karnataka Chambers of Commerce and Industry. "The result is beginning to show up in infrastructure deficits. We want that situation corrected."

The Congress Party laid the blame for its defeat on a purported failure to adeptly manipulate and exploit caste identities. Congress Party leader and Union Urban Development Minister Jaipal Reddy was quoted as saying: "The Congress has to get its caste arithmetic right"—a formula for even more reactionary and socially divisive politics.

There is no doubt that India's political parties—all of which have been complicit in the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a haven for cheap labor production and services for the world economy—have become ever more dependent upon reactionary caste and communal appeals to rally popular support.

In Karnataka's case, the elite of two rival caste groups—the Lingayat and Vokkaliga—have played an inordinate role in the state's politics.

Traditionally the Lingayat elite has supported the Congress, but over the last few elections it has apparently switched its allegiance to the BJP. The new chief minister, Yeddyurappa is a Lingayat and, for at least four decades, has been involved in the Hindu nationalist and virulently anti-socialist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

The JD(S) has long claimed to be the political representative of the Vokkaligas.

While caste identities play a major role in the internal politics of the various parties, including their choice of candidates, polls showed that in urban areas caste played no significant role in determining voter preference. Rising food prices, for which the Congress-led UPA government has offered no solution, were the pivotal issue.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM lost its sole seat in the Karnataka assembly. The CPM is the dominant partner in the Left Front, a multi-party alliance that has sustained the Congress Party-led UPA in power for the past four years, even as it has pursued the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal "reforms" and a "global, strategic partnership" with Washington.

The Stalinists justify their support for the UPA on the grounds that it is the only means to prevent the coming to power of a BJP-led government. Similarly in Karnataka, the CPM claimed that the chief issue was to prevent the election of a BJP government, implying support for both the Congress and JD(S).

In the aftermath of the elections, CPM Politburo member Sitaram Yechury wrote an op-ed piece for the *Hindustan Times* in which he decried the failure of the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, to pursue pro-people policies and termed the Karnataka election results "a warning about a split in the secular vote bank."

In other words, the Stalinists' response to the resurgence of the BJP is to plead for the Congress and JD(S) to join forces, claiming that they constitute a secular bulwark to the BJP.

The Congress has a decades long history, stretching back at least to the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, of adapting to, and conniving with, the Hindu right. As for the JD(S), only last year it was in a coalition government with the BJP in Karnataka.

Over the last four years Karnataka's official politics plunged to new depths, as the three major parties engaged in back-stabbing and other sordid maneuvers in pursuit of the pelf and patronage that comes with governmental power.

In the aftermath of the 2004 state elections, the JD(S) and Congress formed a coalition, with the Congress Party, by virtue of its having 5 more seats than the JD(S), allowed to lay claim to the Chief Ministership. However, two years later the JD(S) bolted from the coalition, which had been increasingly discredited by its pursuit of right-wing policies, corruption, and sheer incompetence.

The JD(S) next threw in its lot with the communalist BJP. The two parties agreed to split the Chief Minister post for the remaining 40 months of the assembly's term, with the JD(S) assuming the chief ministership for the first 20 months and the BJP slated to lead the government for the last 20 months.

But the deal fell apart when the JD(S), at the end of its 20-month term as head of the coalition, refused to back the BJP choice's for chief minister, Yeddyurappa. This precipitated an immense political crisis, prompting the Karnataka governor to request the Congress Party-led UPA government impose president's or central government rule. In November 2007, the UPA dismissed the state legislature and imposed central government rule.

Unquestionably, the JD(S)'s cynical maneuvering between 2004 and November 2007 was a factor in its recent electoral drubbing.

As for the new BJP government, events are already revealing its true character. Last Tuesday one man was killed and three more injured when police in Karnataka's Haveri District opened fire on farmers protesting against a shortage of fertilizer.



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