Voters reject Hindu supremacist BJP's attempt to exploit Mumbai atrocity

Deepal Jayasekera
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The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party, to its own dismay and the surprise of the corporate media, has failed to make electoral gains from the chauvinist campaign whipped up by the Indian government, political and security establishment, and press following the November 26 Mumbai terrorist atrocity.

In fact, the BJP, India's second largest party and the official opposition in the national parliament, suffered significant losses in the recently concluded assembly elections in five Indian states.

The BJP was ousted from power in the northwestern state of Rajasthan by the Congress Party, the dominant partner in India's United Progressive Alliance government (UPA). The BJP had placed great stock in capturing power in the politically important state of Delhi, home to India's capital, but the Congress government there was easily reelected. The BJP did retain power in two central Indian states, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, but with substantially reduced parliamentary majorities.

The Congress, meanwhile, returned to power after a decade in opposition in the small north-eastern state of Mizoram, winning 32 of 40 assembly seats. The incumbent regionalist party, the Mizo National Front, was reduced to a three-seat rump.

The BJP has long placed accusations that the Congress and UPA are "soft" on terror at the center of its propaganda. It has railed against the government for repealing the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) that the previous BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government adopted in 2002, and, in an unabashed communal appeal, has accused the UPA of not seriously attacking terrorism so as to shore up its "Muslim vote-bank."

The BJP seized on last month's terrorist attack in Mumbai, saying it was proof of the government's failure to protect the populace, then played a leading role in fomenting hostility toward Pakistan. Citing the actions of the US as a precedent, leading BJP spokesmen suggested India should carry out cross-border raids into, or air strikes against, Pakistan—a move that could trigger all-out war between the rival, nuclear-armed states.

The Mumbai attack was doubly welcome to the BJP leadership, since, in the weeks that preceded it, the party had been thrown on the defensive, and its efforts to exploit the terrorism issue disrupted, by the exposure of a Hindu-extremist terrorist conspiracy. This conspiracy was led by persons with close ties to the BJP and allied organizations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) (See: India: Hindu supremacist terror network had ties to military)

The Congress Party's gains in the assembly elections are not a popular endorsement of its pro-big business socio-economic policies. Prior to the recent state elections, the Congress had suffered a virtually unbroken series of electoral setbacks stretching back to shortly after it came to power at the head of the UPA in May 2004. Rajasthan, which with a population of 56 million is India's eighth largest state, is the first "large state" to be captured by the Congress since 2005.

The state election results were a distorted expression of popular hostility towards the BJP's communalist, anti-terror campaign. Nor have India's toiling masses forgotten the BJP's neo-liberal policies and indifference to the growing poverty and economic insecurity that have accompanied India's "rise" as an important center of production for the world capitalist market.

The popular rejection of the BJP and its *Hindutva* line came, it should be noted, as a surprise not only to the media, but to the Congress itself. In the wake of the Mumbai attack, the Congress, which has a long and sordid record of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right, reached out in the name of "national unity" to the BJP. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh proposed to the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, that they jointly tour Mumbai. Advani is a notorious Hindu supremacist. He is an ally of the BJP chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, who instigated an anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002 and was himself the chief leader of a reactionary and obscurantist campaign to build a Hindu temple on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya that climaxed in 1992-93 the worst communal violence in India since Partition.

The Congress approached the state elections with considerable trepidation. Earlier this year, India was facing double-digit inflation, led by even bigger food and oil price increases. Now India is being battered by the world recession. Although the figures were only published after the election results were tabulated, industrial production fell in October for the first time since 1993.

Moreover, the state elections were the first time that the Congress has faced the electorate since the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front withdrew its parliamentary support for the UPA. From May 2004 to last July, the Stalinist CPM and its Left Front allies provided the minority UPA with the votes it needed to remain in office. The Stalinists justified their support for the UPA on the grounds that it could be pressured into carrying out "pro-people" policies and constituted a "secular" bulwark against the BJP. But last summer, after four years during which it pressed forward with the neo-liberal policies of the previous BJP-led government, the Congress Party broke with the Stalinists so it could implement a civilian nuclear treaty with the US that is meant to be the cornerstone of a "global, strategic" partnership between US imperialism and the Indian bourgeoisie.

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The Congress, the traditional governing party of the Indian bourgeoisie, used the Left Front's support to boost its claims to be a party concerned with the "common man" and which, unlike the BJP, is pursuing reforms with a "human face."

Chauvinism and fear-mongering fall flat

In Delhi, the BJP placed ads in newspapers in the days immediately prior to the November 29 vote proclaiming, "Brutal Terror Strikes at Will. Weak Government. Unwilling and Incapable. Fight Terror. Vote BJP." Delhi had itself witnessed a series of five serial explosions on September 13, which killed 30.

But the BJP's "anti-terror" campaign fell flat. The Congress won its third consecutive state election victory in Delhi, winning 42 of the 69 assembly seats in a vote held only hours after Mumbai authorities had declared that they had restored order in India's commercial capital. The BJP, for its part, won 23 seats.

Congress Chief Minister, Sheila Dixit, who had focused her election campaign on infrastructure projects like the Delhi subway and a network of flyovers, termed the Congress victory, "the victory of [India's] secular ethos." Referring directly to the BJP campaign she added, "There was an attempt to exploit the issue of terrorism. People rejected that." However, Dixit passed over the Congress-led UPA government's own attempt to use the Mumbai bombing to place additional pressure on Islamabad to end its support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

In Rajasthan, the Congress won by increasing its seat total by forty, from 56 to 96. But it did so while increasing its share of the popular vote by just 1.2 percentage points to 36.9 percent. The BJP, meanwhile, lost 42 seats and suffered an almost 5 percentage point fall in the popular vote, winning a 34.5 percent vote-share.

Rajasthan, which adjoins Pakistan, has been central to the BJP's "anti-terror" propaganda. Its capital Jaipur witnessed serial terror blasts in May which killed at least 80 people. The BJP quickly seized on the incident to intensify its attacks on the UPA government's "failure" to fight "terrorism." The BJP state government unleashed a police crackdown on Jaipur's poor Bangladeshi immigrant population, making them scapegoats for the blasts.

Although the BJP retained power in Madhya Pradesh, its seat tally dropped to 143 from 173, while the Congress increased its representation in the assembly from 38 to 71.

While Advani and BJP national president Rajnath Singh campaigned almost solely on the "terror" issue, Madhya Pradesh BJP Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan centered his campaign on "promises" to develop agriculture. The vast majority of Madhya Pradesh's 60 million people remain dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.

In the neighbouring state of Chhattisgarh, the BJP also retained power winning 50 out of the 90 assembly seats. The central plank of BJP chief ministerial candidate Raman Singh's campaign was a subsidized rice scheme for families below the poverty line. In a poor state like Chhattisgarh with severe malnutrition and poor maternal health, such a scheme, like Chouhan's promises to prioritize agriculture, had some popular appeal.

India media analysts have referred to the recent state elections as the "semi-finals" before the national elections, which must be held by May of next year, suggesting that the outcome of the former would indicate the results of the latter. In making this claim, they have noted that the five states that just voted have about 100 million voters, approximately one-sixth of the national electorate.

Such claims should be viewed critically and not only because the five states, apart from Delhi, are especially economically backward. There is widespread popular disaffection with both of the Indian bourgeoisie's main parties, especially in rural India which has long been beset by crisis.

Moreover, India's economy is being roiled by the world recession and the Congress, no less, than the BJP is committed to bolstering Indian big business by placing the burden of the economic crisis on working people.

The BJP's failure to gain electorally from its "anti-terror" campaign has led to some criticisms within the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. On December 9, a day after the election results were announced, Shivanand Tiwary, national spokesman of the Janatha Dal (United), a major NDA partner, urged the BJP to dump the "terror issue" and concentrate on socio-economic questions. This proposal was quickly torpedoed by Advani and the BJP.

Indian working people have no choice among the establishment parties—the ruling Congress, the opposition BJP, a myriad of regionalist and casteist parties, and the various components of the Stalinist-led Left Front. All have implemented the Indian bourgeoisie's "new economic policy," which aims to make India a haven for cheap labor production for world capital, and all support the Indian elite's drive to attain world power status.

The Stalinists for years propped up the right-wing the UPA government. Now that they have been forced to distance themselves from the Congress—so blatant is its alliance with US imperialism and so discredited is it among working people—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM is seeking to cobble together a "Third Front," in ostensible opposition to the Congress and the BJP. Toward this end, the Stalinists are aligning with various regional bourgeois parties, including the All-India Anna Dravida Munnethra Kazagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh. Both of these parties, whom the CPM has anointed as "secular," are former coalition partners of the Hindu supremacist BJP. Both are also notorious for their ruthless implementation of anti-working class, neo-liberal economic reform measures when they last ruled their respective states.

Even as they seek to tie the working class to these retrograde forces, the CPM is keeping open the door to a possible post-national election alliance with the Congress. This is exemplified by its slogan, "Defeat the BJP, Reject Congress."

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