

India: Intense maneuvering in run-up to spring elections

Deepal Jayasekera
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All of India's major political parties and coalitions are approaching the national elections, which are to be held in April and May, with great apprehension.

Because of the world economic crisis and the widespread and deep-rooted popular disaffection with the political establishment, the outcome of the elections is highly uncertain.

No single party has won a parliamentary majority since 1984 and it is all but assured that India's next government will again be a large, oftentimes shaky multiparty coalition.

Recent weeks have been marked by frantic maneuvering as the three major national political formations—the Congress Party, which leads the current United Progressive Alliance government, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the Stalinist-led Left Front—attempt to stitch together electoral alliances and potential governmental coalitions from a host of regional and caste-based parties.

In 2004, the Congress Party, to its own surprise, unseated the BJP and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) by making a calibrated appeal to popular anger over the increased economic insecurity, social inequality, and poverty that have resulted from the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for the world capitalist market. Pivotal to the Congress' success was the support provided it before and after the elections, by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front.

For four years, from May 2004 through last June, the Left Front propped up the Congress-led UPA government in parliament, on the grounds that it was susceptible to popular pressure and a "secular bulwark" against the BJP. Yet, as the Stalinists have themselves had to concede, the UPA has continued down the road blazed by the BJP, implementing neoliberal "reforms" and forging a "global, strategic" partnership with US imperialism.

Opposition to the UPA government's policies found repeated, albeit distorted, expression in state election results over the past four years, as well as in a series of one-day general strikes mounted by the Stalinists and the trade unions.

Now the world economic crisis is battering India, including sections of the middle class who benefited disproportionately from the recent years of rapid economic expansion and, consequently, provided a base of popular support for the reforms.

Indian exports have fallen sharply in every month since October, including a year-to-year fall of 24 percent in January. Late last month the

Reserve Bank of India slashed its growth projection for the current fiscal year—which ends March 31—to 7 percent, but many economic commentators believe this is highly optimistic.

The Indian government does not have accurate employment data, but it concedes that since mid-September at least a million workers have lost their jobs. In early January the Federation of Indian Export Organizations claimed that ten million jobs could be eliminated in coming months. The economic and political consequences of even several million job losses would be enormous, warned the chief economist for Standard & Poor's Asia-Pacific. "Such large numbers of job losses would have significant macroeconomic implications," said Subir Gokarn. "It's unprecedented, and we don't know which way it will go politically."

In December and again in early January, the UPA government announced stimulus packages, but these only served to highlight the fiscal crisis of the Indian state and the weakness of Indian capitalism despite the past four years of 8.5 percent annual growth. Government expenditure was increased by only \$4 billion or significantly less than 0.5 percent of GDP.

Congress' bluster about the "common man"

The interim budget Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee introduced this Monday was essentially a political document, since under India's election laws governments are supposedly barred from making major fiscal changes in the immediate run-up to an election. Mukherjee claimed that the UPA's policies had "ensured" a four-year "dream run" for India's economy, that the government's focus had been and remained "Aam Aadmi" [the common man], and that the UPA is committed to "inclusive growth."

Mukherjee declared the answer to the economic crisis to be "accelerating" the pace of reform, thereby making India "more competitive." But with a view to the coming elections, the finance minister talked about such changes only in the most general way, while making certain to highlight the government's support for "flagship programmes which directly impact Aam Aadmi."

Under conditions of the most rapid economic expansion in India's history and a deep-rooted agrarian crisis that has seen tens of thousands of indebted farmers take their own lives and per capita grain consumption fall in rural India, the Congress-led UPA government did modestly

increase social spending over the past five years. But programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee—which is meant to provide one member of each rural household 100 days of menial labor per year at less than \$1.50 US per day—have at best kept ten of millions from sliding from hardship and destitution into the abyss of hunger and outright starvation.

Moreover, the deepening economic crisis means that once the elections are over there will be increasing pressure from the UPA's true core constituency, big business, to slash social spending. In Monday's budget Mukherjee had to increase the deficit forecast to 6 percent of GDP from 2.5 percent for the current fiscal year and to 5.5 percent of GDP for the 2009-10 fiscal year.

The most significant announcement in the budget was a 34 percent hike in defence expenditure to almost \$30 billion. Mukherjee justified the hike by pointing to last November's Mumbai terrorist attack. "A threshold has been crossed," claimed Mukherjee. "Our security environment has deteriorated considerably."

Likening the Mumbai atrocity to the 9-11 attacks in the US, the Congress-led government has mimicked the hardline anti-terrorist rhetoric of the BJP. It has used the Mumbai attacks to ratchet up pressure on India's traditional rival, Pakistan, with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh charging that Islamabad bears responsibility for the attack because it hasn't done enough to stamp out Islamicist terrorist groups. In December the government introduced and secured unanimous parliamentary support for draconian new anti-terror laws that overthrow important democratic juridical principles like habeas corpus and the presumption of innocence.

In recent weeks, the Congress Party has been trying to hammer out the details of an electoral alliance with the Samajwadi Party. The Uttar Pradesh-based Samajwadi Party came to the UPA's rescue last July when the Left Front withdrew its support for the government, after it chose to press forward with implementing the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty.

The negotiations are proving factious. The Congress has objected to the Samajwadi Party's burgeoning friendship with Kalyan Singh, who as BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh spearheaded the Hindu chauvinist campaign to raze the Babri Masjid mosque—a campaign which in December-January 1992-3 culminated in the worst communal violence in India since partition. The Samajwadi Party leaders have retorted that Congress governments repeatedly facilitated the Hindu chauvinist campaign over the Babri Masjid.

The reality is that the Congress, notwithstanding its claim to be a champion of secularism, has a decades-long record of adapting to, and consorting with, the Hindu chauvinist right. One measure of this is the increasingly long list of BJP and Shiv Sena defectors accepted into the Congress' ranks.

The real root of the Congress-Samajwadi frictions is the bind in which the Congress Party finds itself as it pursues the double objective of retaining power in the coming elections and rebuilding its shattered organization in the "Hindi belt" of north India. The latter objective requires that it supplant or at least marginalize its prospective election allies.

To the discomfort of its UPA partners, the Congress Party is refusing to stand its candidates under the UPA banner, thus emphasizing that there is no national alliance, only electoral pacts between the Congress and various partners at the state level.

The BJP and its NDA

The BJP, India's official opposition, has been in almost perpetual crisis since unexpectedly falling from power five years ago. It has repeatedly mounted chauvinist provocations against the government and, to the consternation of the significant sections of the bourgeoisie, refused to assist the UPA in passing the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty, although when in office it had pressed Washington for a like agreement.

The BJP has long charged the Congress with being "soft" on terrorism, adding, so as to make the communal edge of this claim explicit, that this is because the ruling party does now want to alienate the "Muslim vote bank." The BJP had expected to capitalize on the Mumbai atrocity in the November-December state elections, but it failed to defeat the Congress government in Delhi and was unseated by the Congress in Rajasthan.

Following the state elections, one of the BJP's key NDA allies, the Janata Dal (United), suggested the alliance cool its anti-terrorism rhetoric, so as to better make an appeal to socioeconomic grievances. This was quickly rebuffed by the BJP leadership.

This is not to say that the BJP will not try to demagogically exploit the popular anger over mounting unemployment and last year's double-digit rise in prices.

Many in and around the BJP roundly denounce Mahatma Gandhi for "Muslim appeasement" and venerate the Hindu supremacist ideologue V.D. Savarkar, one of whose disciples was Gandhi's assassin. But that did not stop BJP President Rajnath Singh from invoking Gandhi's name in promoting an undefined indigenous Indian path of economic development. Said Singh earlier this month, "The fall of communism and now the crisis of capitalism in the entire world reminds us of what [Gandhi] had said 100 years ago."

Of course, when in power the BJP has ruthlessly pursued the agenda of big business. This fact was underscored by the enthusiasm expressed last month by many of India's leading capitalists, including Anil Ambani and Sunil Bharati Mittal, for making Narendra Modi, the current BJP Gujarat Chief Minister and inciter of the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, India's next prime minister.

Modi subsequently reiterated his support for the party's prime ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, the former Home Minister and the initiator of the Babri Masjid agitation of the early 1990s.

The BJP-led NDA has suffered a series of defections in recent years. The Tamil Nadu-based All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the [Kashmir] National Conference (NC) have all quit the NDA.

Behind these defections lie multiple calculations: The BJP has failed to develop sufficient traction to oust the Congress; the BJP has only very limited support in the aforementioned states, meaning that it can do little to help its erstwhile allies capture power at the state level; for the NDA defectors the BJP's Hindu supremacist ideology has become an impediment, if not an embarrassment.

Stalinists promote a “third front” of capitalist parties

The Stalinist-led Left Front was effectively booted out of the government last July. The Communist party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner in the Left Front, repeatedly proclaimed that it would support the UPA government for a full five-year term, so long as it put the Indo-US nuclear treaty in abeyance until after the elections.

But the Congress-led UPA, to rapturous applause from India’s corporate elite, brushed aside the Stalinists and their entreaties, believing that the nuclear deal will serve to cement a close alliance with Washington.

The Stalinists responded to the collapse of their alliance with the Congress by calling for a Third Front, that is a non-BJP, non-Congress electoral and potentially governmental alliance comprised of the Left and an assortment of regional and caste-based bourgeois parties. Toward this end, they have forged an electoral bloc with the AIADMK and TDP, parties that previously were partners of the BJP and have pursued vicious anti-working class policies when in office at the state level.

The Stalinists hope to poach further BJP allies. According to CPM politburo member S. Ramachandran Pillai, “There is a possibility (of getting new allies from the NDA). There are rifts in the NDA. We are keen to join hands with all the non-BJP, non-Congress parties.”

The CPM has reportedly already approached the Biju Janatha Dal (BJD), which rules Orissa in a coalition with the BJP, and the Janata Dal (Secular), which previously formed a coalition government with the BJP in Karnataka.

The Stalinists were particularly keen on securing the support of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which rules India’s largest state, Uttar Pradesh. The BSP postures as the voice of the Dalits (the former untouchables) and other oppressed layers, but is in fact a rightwing, casteist party that has repeatedly collaborated with the BJP. Chief Minister and BSP supremo Mayawati has made no secret of her ambition to be India’s prime minister. If she has refused the Left’s offer of a leading role in the Third Front, it is because she wants to keep her hands free for maneuvering with the BJP and Congress in the post-poll period.

The Stalinists have been widely discredited, not only because of their role in propping up a government led by the Congress that has steered India into a closer partnership with the US imperialism while pursuing neoliberal reform, but also because in the three states where they hold office, West Bengal, Kerala, and Manipur, the Stalinist have pursued pro-investor policies. Most infamously, the Left Front government in West Bengal unleashed police and party goons to brutally suppress a popular protest in Nandigram against the expropriation of peasants’ land for a Special Economic Zone for big business.

Since being ejected from the government, the Stalinists have bitterly denounced the UPA. But they have also signaled that they do not exclude a future tie-up with the Congress in the name of preventing the BJP’s return to power.

The CPM’s initial slogan for the coming elections was “Defeat the BJP, reject the Congress.” But according to the *rediff.com*, the party leadership

was forced to revise this to “Defeat the BJP, defeat the Congress,” due to opposition from party cadres in West Bengal and Kerala, where the Congress Party is the Left’s main electoral rival.

In a February 8 television interview CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat said he could not exclude the Left supporting a “secular government” that included the Congress. “I cannot rule it out, but it seems unlikely,” said Karat.

The Congress, meanwhile, has indicated that it would be ready to revive its alliance with Stalinists—if not now, then after the elections. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and other Congress leaders have repeatedly lauded the Left for its central role in elaborating the ostensible program of the UPA government, the so-called Common Minimum Programme (CMP), and for providing the government with judicious advice. On February 3, All India Congress Committee (AICC) General Secretary Digvijay Singh said, “We have no problem with Left parties. They had a problem. They left us, we did not leave them.”

In recent weeks, such Congress allies as the Rastriya Janatha Dal (RJD), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Lok Janasakthi Party (LJP) and Samajwadi Party have approached the Stalinists for discussions and the Stalinists have agreed to talks. The RJD says its aim is to reduce the differences between the Congress and the Left, so as not to divide the “secular” opposition to the BJP. The Stalinists, for their part, are trying to project these meetings as part of their moves to develop a Third Front, but they clearly are meant to lay the groundwork for a post-election anti-BJP alliance, as well as possible electoral understandings with some of the UPA partners.

The Congress’ attitude towards the Stalinists is governed not only, or even principally, by the complex parliamentary arithmetic. The leadership of the Indian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government recognizes the crucial role the Left Front has played in containing the social opposition towards the UPA government and diverting it into safe channels. Indeed, the Stalinists are regarded by most sections of Indian ruling elite as more “responsible” and dependable than many of the Congress’ regional and caste-based allies, for these parties, while utterly subservient to big business, often act on the most narrow parochial, factional, and even criminal motivations.

Through their open and covert dealings and alliances with various bourgeois parties, the Stalinists, under conditions of an unprecedented world economic crisis, are working to tie India’s toilers to the political establishment and suppress any independent political action by the working class. While the Stalinists justify this course by claiming that it is the only way to oppose the right and especially the Hindu supremacist BJP, it will further strengthen social reaction, including communalism and casteism.



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