

## Indian Elections:

# Stalinists woo Congress Party and BJP allies

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**1 April 2009**

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and its Left Front allies are frantically wooing pro-big business, state- and caste-based parties—many of them currently participants in India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government or allied with the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—in a bid to stitch together a "Third Front" electoral/governmental bloc and reclaim an important role in India's government.

For four years, from May 2004 through last June, the four-party Left Front sustained the minority UPA coalition in office even as it pursued a socioeconomic and foreign policy agenda little different from that of the BJP-led government that preceded it. But the Congress Party, far and away the UPA's principal constituent, ditched the Left Front in July 2008, when it chose to implement the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty, an agreement touted by Washington and New Delhi as cementing an Indo-US "global, strategic" partnership.

Smarting from the Congress's "betrayal," the Stalinists' have revived the idea of forming a non-BJP, non-Congress governmental coalition, a so-called Third Front. Toward that end, they have been seeking to form electoral alliances with a host of right-wing parties in the run-up to India's elections (which are to be held in five phases between April 16 and May 13). Such a block, they claim, can provide India "an alternative secular government that will pursue pro-people policies."

In fact, the Third Front is a ramshackle coalition of parties pursuing the electoral main chance. Although voting is due to begin in less than three weeks, it has issued no manifesto nor made any substantive policy declaration—and this under conditions where India is being roiled by the world economic crisis.

The Third Front was officially launched at a rally near Bangalore March 12 presided over by former Indian Prime Minister and Janata Dal (Secular) leader H.D. Deve Gowda, and addressed by leaders of the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the Tamil Nadu-based All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), several smaller regional parties, and the principal leaders of the Left Front.

Both the TDP and AIADMK are former coalition partners of the BJP, and when in power in their respective states, have pursued ferociously anti-working class policies. TDP leader Chandrababu Naidu became a "poster boy" for the World Bank because of his relentless pursuit of neo-liberal policies during his nine-year stint as Andhra Pradesh's chief minister (1995 to 2004). (See India: Behind the rout of the Telugu Desam Party—a portrait of World Bank social engineering.)

The AIADMK broke a strike by 200,000 state government employees in 2003 by firing them en masse, arresting thousands, and hiring strikebreakers. Its leader, the former movie star Jayalalitha, is notorious for her corruption and insistence on sycophantic reverence from party underlings. Her toadies refer to her as Amma (mother).

Up until a few months ago, the BJP was actively pursuing an alliance

with the AIADMK, but the latter calculates that it will be better able to capitalize on the popular dissatisfaction with its principal rival in Tamil Nadu politics, the Congress-allied DMK, if it has the Stalinists in its corner touting its purported "pro-people" credentials.

As for the Janata Dal (Secular), it formed, between 2004 and 2008, coalition governments in the south Indian state of Karnataka first with the Congress, then with the BJP.

A representative of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which governs Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, also attended the inaugural Third Front rally March 12. The BSP postures as the representative of the Dalits, the former untouchables, and more generally of the oppressed. In reality, it is a right-wing, caste-ist party that has repeatedly allied with the Hindu-supremacist BJP and opposes radical land reform or any challenge to the socioeconomic order responsible for the extreme deprivation of the vast majority of Dalits. It champions "reservations"—i.e., affirmative action programs—aimed at nurturing a Dalit elite and sharing out more "equitably" the misery of Indian capitalism.

The BSP's politics are personified by its leader Mayawati. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati has ordered statues of herself to be built across the state—as supposed symbols of Dalit assertion—and amassed a large personal fortune, purportedly from the "gifts" given her by party supporters. For the fiscal year 2007-2008, she is reported to have paid 260 million rupees in tax (about US\$5.2 million) on an income of between 700 and 800 million rupees (US\$14-\$16 million).

Soon after the March 12 rally, Mayawati, who has made no secret of her ambitions to become Indian prime minister, hosted a dinner for Third Front-Left Front leaders. But she has spurned the Left's appeals for a formal alliance, claiming that the BSP has a policy of never entering into electoral alliances. In truth, Mayawati and the BSP want to keep their hands free, so as to increase their post-election bargaining power with all three aspiring governmental coalitions, the Congress-led UPA, the BJP's National Democratic Alliance, and the Third Front.

On no fewer than four occasions, the BSP has entered into coalition governments with the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, the state from which it derives the bulk of its support. Yet, Communist Party of India (CPI) leader A.B. Bardhan, who has been promoting Mayawati as the Third Front's prime ministerial candidate, declared last month that he is certain she will "never" join hands with the BJP.

Bardhan and top leaders of the more politically powerful CPM have publicly declared that they are in contact with other parties currently aligned with both the NDA and UPA and hope to convince them to join the Third Front, if not now, then after the elections. These include the Janata Dal (United), which currently governs Bihar and has been a major NDA constituent for more than a decade, and the National Congress Party, a Maharashtra-based split-off from the Congress that is currently part of the UPA government, but in the run-up to the elections was playing footsie with the communalist Shiv Sena.

## How the BJD became a "secular" party

The Stalinists' readiness to embrace the most foul and politically comprised parties is underlined by their newly minted alliance with the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a longtime partner of the BJP in national and Orissa state politics. For 10 years, ending only on March 7, the BJD governed the poverty-stricken east Indian state of Orissa in coalition with the BJP. Indeed, BJD leader and Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patniak split from the Janata Dal and created his own party in 1997 with the express purpose of forming an alliance with the BJP, precisely because the national Janata Dal leadership opposed allying with the Hindu communalist right.

Yet no sooner did seat-sharing negotiations between the BJD and BJP for the 2009 national and Orissa state elections (which are to be held simultaneously) come a cropper and the BJD announce that it was parting ways with the BJP, than the Stalinists proclaimed it a "secular party" and lent the BJD their support.

The CPM dispatched Politburo member Sitaram Yechury to the Orissan capital Bhubaneswar to meet with Patniak and offer the BJD a leading role in the Third Front, and the CPM and CPI ordered their members in the Orissa assembly to help prop up the BJD government in a March 11 confidence vote.

It subsequently emerged that the CPM had expended a great deal of political energy trying to exploit a growing rift between the BJD and BJP. The initial groundwork for the BJD's "conversion" from BJP ally to partner of the Left Front was apparently laid by West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee during a private meeting he held with Patniak on the sidelines of a chief ministers' conference in January.

Last Saturday, an electoral alliance between the BJD and the Stalinists was officially consummated. At a press conference held at his home and attended by leaders of the CPM, CPI, and the UPA-aligned National Congress Party (NCP), Patniak announced that the four parties have formed an alliance for the national and state elections. The BJD will contest 18 of Orissa's 21 seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the national parliament), leaving one seat each to the other three parties. The BJD will contest 130 of the 147 Orissa state assembly seats, the NCP eight, the CPI five, and the CPM four.

The BJD has an odious record that will not be effaced by the Stalinists' bestowing on them their secular blessings.

The BJD-BJP state government has given over vast tracts of land to Indian and foreign mining companies, forcibly displacing large numbers of tribal villagers. Dozens of villagers have been killed by police while resisting land expropriation.

Orissa's mineral wealth is vast. It accounts for one third of India's iron ore reserves, a quarter of its coal deposits, virtually all its chromite, and 60 percent of its bauxite. Yet it is one of India's poorest states, with fully 40 percent of the state's population living below the subsistence-level official poverty line.

Asked how the CPM could justify aligning with BJD, Yechury cynically declared that the Left will now be in a position to dialogue with the BJD over its policies. "For instance," said Yechury, "there is a glaring mismatch between the wealth Orissa has of minerals and poverty, and [let's now] see if the government addresses it."

In explaining the BJD's abrupt split with the BJP, India's corporate media has said that the BJD became embarrassed by the brutal communal attacks the BJP's Hindu-supremacist allies in the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal have carried out against poor Christian tribal groups. Last summer, Hindu communalists run amuck in the central highland district of Kandamahal, killing several dozen people and forcing tens of thousands from their homes after a prominent Hindu-

extremist sadhu or holy man was killed. (See: India: Hindu communalists target Christian minority in Orissa and other states.)

Undoubtedly, the BJP used its power as a partner in Orissa's state government to block efforts to suppress the Hindu communalist outrages. But the BJD, having been a coalition partner of the BJP for a decade—a decade during which the BJP government in Gujarat presided over a horrific pogrom and Hindu supremacists became increasingly belligerent in Orissa—is itself wholly culpable for the anti-Christian violence.

Patniak has provided no explanation for his break with the BJP. But it is clearly attributable to calculations of the basest kind. The anti-Christian violence was damaging Orissa's reputation and the government's attempts to drum up investment. Prospects for the BJP and the NDA returning to power in New Delhi appear dim. A third factor appears to have been a falling out between the BJD and BJP over a deal the Orissa government has signed with the Korean conglomerate POSCO to develop a massive iron ore complex. The deal, which the BJP now opposes, has been fiercely opposed by thousands of villagers who will lose their land and livelihood, but also by sections of the Indian elite who resent such a lucrative development project being awarded to a foreign rival.

Even bourgeois commentators have noted the utterly unprincipled political foundations of the Third Front. It is a combination born of short-term electoral calculations and may very well disintegrate in the immediate aftermath of the elections as the various partners reassess their options and calculate if there is an opening for them to again do business with the BJP or Congress.

For their part, the Stalinists have been careful not to close the door on a possible patch-up with the Congress, the India bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and its UPA. Initially, the CPM politburo wanted the party's electoral slogan to be "Defeat the BJP, Reject the Congress," thereby strongly suggesting the party only wanted to register a protest against the Congress-led government, not necessarily defeat it. But after protests from its cadres in West Bengal and Kerala, the party's two electoral bastions and states in which the BJP is a non-factor, the slogan was changed to "Defeat the BJP, Defeat the Congress." CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat has said that a prospective Third Front government would not hesitate to seek the support of the Congress Party to secure a parliamentary majority. Yechury, for his part, has affirmed, "We are fighting a battle and no soldier will entertain questions about losing it" till it's concluded. In other words, the Stalinists are waiting to evaluate the post-election lay of the political landscape.



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