

Indian elections:

BJP combines rank communal appeals with populist posturing

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The official opposition in the outgoing Indian parliament and the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), is plumping for votes in India's national elections by combining rank communal appeals and bellicose "anti-terrorist" rhetoric with a smattering of populist promises.

Voting in India's 15th post-independence election begins today and will continue over the next four weeks, culminating in a fifth and final phase of voting on May 13.

The BJP, in keeping with the aggressive posture it has assumed since falling from power in May 2004, has placed at the center of its campaign the communally loaded accusation that the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government lacks the "will to fight terrorism" because it fears alienating its "Muslim vote-bank."

The BJP is demanding the re-imposition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). Adopted in 2002, POTA was used by the Union and various state governments to mount dragnets against impoverished Muslims and to target political opponents. It was repealed shortly after the UPA came to power. But most of its draconian provisions were either included in the UPA-authored law that replaced it or in the anti-terrorist law rushed through parliament following the November 2008 terrorist atrocity in Mumbai.

Speaking Monday, BJP President Rajnath Singh said a BJP government would be prepared to invade Pakistan. Said Singh, "If voted to power, the BJP government will ask Pakistan if it needs support of the Indian army to crush terrorism. If Islamabad is agreeable, it is all right. If not, our government will approach the global community for its endorsement to send the Indian Army to Pakistan."

For 10 months in 2001-2002, the BJP-led NDA government mobilised a million troops along Pakistan's border and threatened war if Islamabad did not abandon logistical and political support for the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir. Under pressure from Washington, which saw Indian aggression as a threat to the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, the NDA government was ultimately forced to back down.

The BJP is also vowing to execute Mohammed Afzal. A Kashmiri Muslim, he was found guilty of conspiracy in the

December 2001 assault on India's parliament buildings in an expedited trial that has been condemned by numerous human rights groups for violating basic democratic judicial principles. (See: India: Stop the state murder of Mohammed Afzal)

In its election manifesto, the BJP reiterates long-standing Hindu-supremacist shibboleths, including a pledge to build a Hindu temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya and repeal of Article 370 of India's constitution, which grants Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, special status within the Indian Union.

In 1991-1992, the BJP's current prime ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, spearheaded a national agitation to build a temple on the site of the reputed "birthplace" of the mythical Hindu god Ram—an agitation that resulted in the razing of the Babri Masjid, in defiance of a supreme court order, and the biggest wave of communal bloodletting since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

To the consternation of sections of the Hindu nationalist right, the BJP did not issue a manifesto in the run-up to the 1999 and 2004 elections, so as not to anger those of its NDA allies who do not adhere to its Hindutva ideology.

In a further attempt to shore up its Hindu-supremacist base in the current election, the BJP has vehemently resisted calls from its political opponents and India's Election Commission for it to withdraw the candidacy of Varun Gandhi. Gandhi was caught on videotape preaching hatred against Muslims, including vows to cut off their hands should they threaten Hindus.

There is good reason to believe that the BJP leadership encouraged Gandhi to make such statements, knowing that they would capture national attention given Gandhi's pedigree. (The grandson of Indira Gandhi, he is an estranged member of the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty that dominates the Congress Party leadership.) In any event, Advani and other BJP leaders have sought to portray Gandhi as a martyr, following his jailing for stoking communal tensions. Advani went so far as to compare Varun Gandhi with J.P. Narayan, a celebrated leader of the 1942 Quit India movement and self-avowed socialist who spearheaded opposition to Indira Gandhi in 1974-1975 and was then jailed under the Emergency.

In 2004, the BJP famously went to the electorate with the campaign slogan, "India Shining," only to be rebuked at the polls

by India's toilers, for whom the pro-investor reforms pursued by the NDA had meant increased hardship and economic insecurity.

In this campaign, the BJP is making some populist promises in an attempt to counter its justly deserved image as a party of big business and the rich.

The BJP has topped a Congress promise of providing poor families 25 kilograms of rice or wheat at the heavily subsidised price of 3 rupees per kilogram, by promising 35 kilograms at 2 rupees per kilogram.

The manifesto also promises tax cuts for the middle class and to open the country's retail sector, which employs ten of millions in small and/or family-owned businesses, to foreign investment. Entry of transnational retailers would spell ruin for many pavement hawkers and small traders and imperil the position of many large Indian retailers.

Prior to its coming to power in 1998, the BJP, or at least a section of it, raised the call for "swadeshi" (nationalist) economics. But the BJP-led NDA government, which ruled India from March 1998 to May 2004, accelerated implementation of the Indian bourgeoisie's programme of dismantling the vestiges of India's nationally regulated economy and transforming India into a cheap-labour producer for world capitalism. This was accompanied by aggressive pursuit of a strategic partnership with the US and a semi-realised attempt to create a US-Israeli-Indian axis.

Opinion polls (which in India have, admittedly, frequently been well off the mark) indicate that despite the growing economic crisis and the so-called "anti-incumbency" factor, the BJP campaign is failing to gain popular traction.

Since the 2004 elections, a long list of regional parties have quit the NDA, including the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference, the Tamil Nadu-based AIADMK, the West Bengal-based Trinamul Congress, and the Andhra Pradesh-based Telugu Desam Party or TDP.

In early March, the Biju Janata Dal, which had governed the east Indian state of Orissa in a coalition with the BJP for the past 11 years, withdrew from the NDA and promptly struck an electoral bloc with the Nationalist Congress Party, a UPA partner, and the twin Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

These defections have left the BJP without significant allies or presence in most of southern and eastern India.

The NDA defectors have frequently sought to justify their departure by pointing to the BJP's Hindu chauvinism. To be sure, for some their alliance with the BJP has proven a liability in winning votes, particularly from Muslims and other minorities. But the NDA renegades were quite prepared to remain allied with the BJP even after the BJP government in Gujarat presided over a horrific anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002.

If they have broken with the BJP, it is for the basest electoral and political reasons—their calculation that the BJP and its NDA will not soon be returning to power in New Delhi.

One further point must be added: If some of these right-wing regional and caste-based parties have been willing to break with the NDA, it is because they can rest assured that the Stalinists and their Left Front will be ready to partner with them, blessing them

as "secular" parties and vehicles for implementing "pro-people" policies.

More than half a dozen parties remained allied with the BJP and the NDA. The most important of these are Assam Gana Parishad, the Maharashtra- and Hindu-chauvinist Shiv Sena, the Sikh communal Shiromani Akali Dal, and the Janata Dal (United), whose origins lie in India's moribund social-democratic party.

In the 2004 elections, big business was solidly behind the re-election of the NDA. Today, however, corporate India generally favours the return to power of a Congress-led government, calculating that because of residual illusions in its claims to be a party of all Indians and its ability to work with the Left Front, it will be best able to defend the interests of capital under conditions of mounting economic crisis and social unrest.

There are also concerns within the ruling elite over the volatile character of the BJP's Hindu-chauvinist base, though this has not stopped a coterie of leading Indian CEOs from hailing the leadership of the arch-communalist chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi.

Especially perturbing for corporate India was the BJP's refusal to act as a loyal opposition to the Congress-led UPA over the past five years. Instead, the BJP repeatedly sought to destabilise the government by mounting right-wing provocations, even when it was pursuing policies deemed by the most powerful sections of big business to be vital to their class interests. The most prominent example of this was the BJP's steadfast opposition to the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord, although the BJP itself had proposed such a deal with Washington when in office and has traditionally been the most enthusiastic supporter of close relations with the US.

Whatever the outcome of the current elections, the fact that such a reactionary and unstable political formation as the Hindu-supremacist BJP rose to lead India's government for six years and remains India's second national party speaks volumes about the extreme crisis of Indian capitalism and the deformed and degenerate character of Indian democracy.



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