

Voting begins in India's multi-phase election

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India's month long, five-phase election began Thursday, with voters in 124 Lok Sabha constituencies, many of them in the country's impoverished tribal belt, casting their ballots.

Three ramshackle, multi-party alliances are vying for office.

For the past five years, the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, has led a minority, coalition government. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) has pressed forward with the Indian bourgeoisie's program of transforming India into a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism and forged a "global, strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

In a political power play that may ultimately backfire, the Congress Party has refused to fight the elections under the banner of the UPA. To affirm its "national" character and hegemony within the UPA, the Congress has instead insisted on a series of individual, statewide electoral alliances with the various regional and caste-based parties that have been its UPA partners.

Several UPA constituents and allies have rebelled against this arrangement. They have formed their own electoral alliance with the aim of further diminishing the Congress' influence in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, Gangetic Plain states that are home to 250 million people, thereby throwing the UPA's future into question.

The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the official opposition in India's parliament and the only party apart from the Congress with more than fifty seats in the 543-member lower house of India's parliament, anchors the second aspiring governmental coalition, the National Democratic Alliance.

In May 2004, the BJP-led NDA was ousted from power as the result of a popular backlash against the increased economic insecurity and social inequality that has resulted from the ruling elite's pursuit of export-led growth. Since then, the NDA has suffered a long series of defections. As a result, the BJP enters the elections without a major partner or significant presence in much of south and eastern India, including the large states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal.

In the run-up to the current elections, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its Left Front have played the decisive role in stitching together a "non-Congress," "non-BJP" alliance of regional and caste-based political formations, a so-called Third Front.

For four years beginning in May 2004, the Stalinist CPM provided the minority UPA with the parliamentary votes it needed to cling to office, claiming that support for a Congress-led coalition was the only way to prevent the return to power of the Hindu nationalist right and that the Congress could be pressured into pursuing "pro-people" policies. But last July, the Congress effectively booted the Left Front out of the government, when it announced that it would proceed, over the Left's vehement objections, with the implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty—a pact designed by the Bush administration

to cement the Indo-US strategic partnership.

In an attempt to regain influence in the corridors of power and in the hopes of obscuring the manifest failure of its alliance with the Congress, the Stalinists promptly revived the idea of a Third Front organized from defectors from the UPA and NDA. In early March, such an alliance was formally launched. Its most important constituents—the Tamil Nadu-based AIDMK, Andhra Pradesh's Telugu Desam Party, the Orissa-based BJD, and the Janata Dal (Secular)—have foul political records. All are one-time allies of the Hindu supremacist BJP and all, when in power in the respective states in which they are based, have ruthlessly implemented the dictates of Indian and international capital. Yet the Stalinists are claiming a Left-supported Third Front government would provide India with a "secular" and "pro-people" government that would pursue an "independent" foreign policy.

The Stalinists were anxious to bring the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which currently rules Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, into the Third Front, but it declined their overtures. Instead, BSP boss and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati hosted a dinner for the leaders of the Third and Left Fronts. If Mayawati, who has made no secret of her ambition to become India's prime minister, has spurned the Left's pleas for a formal alliance, it is because she wants to keep her hands free to bargain with all comers once the votes are tabulated starting May 16.

The BSP postures as the spokesman of the oppressed and especially of the Dalits, who six decades after the formal abolition of untouchability continue to constitute a vastly disproportionate share of India's landless, poor, and uneducated. Yet the BSP has not been associated with any significant social struggles and has not advocated for, let alone sought to implement, any important social reforms. In pursuit of office, it has repeatedly made common cause with the BJP, and like a whole series of other caste-based parties has championed reservations, i.e. affirmative action programs, that seek to measure out the misery of Indian capitalism more "equitably," while promoting reactionary caste identities and stoking caste conflict.

Opinion polls suggest that the Congress Party will once again emerge from the elections as the largest party in the Lok Sabha. But opinion polls in India are notoriously inaccurate. And should the Congress retain power it will do so only as the leader of an unwieldy, multiparty coalition.

Moreover, the world economic crisis is having a major and electorally unpredictable impact on India.

When the financial tsunami struck last September, the UPA government and much of the Indian elite claimed that India would be largely insulated from the crisis. But this illusion was soon dashed. Exports have fallen dramatically and manufacturing output has contracted. In February, industrial production fell 1.2 percent and manufacturing 1.4 percent.

India does not conduct monthly or even annual employment surveys (which is itself an indicator of the country's economic backwardness), but the government concedes half a million workers have lost their jobs in the past five months. Most observers believe the real figure is several times that. In January India's principal exporters' association said ten million jobs would soon be eliminated if there was not a rapid revival of international demand.

For most Indians unemployment means the immediate threat of destitution, since the country has no social safety net. A recent OECD study concluded that nine out of every 10 Indian workers have no formal contract, meaning they can be dismissed at will, and have no social benefits, whether from the state or their employers.

Even before the outbreak of the current economic crisis, hundreds of millions of Indians were living in "extreme poverty," which is defined as lacking sufficient daily caloric intake to do a full day's work.

In what constitutes an admission that food security is an urgent issue for much of the electorate, both the Congress and BJP have made a promise of heavily subsidized wheat and rice a central plank in their election programs. The Congress is promising every poor family 25 kilograms of wheat or rice at 3 rupees a kilogram and the BJP 35 kilograms at 2 rupees per kg.

To contrast its policies from those of the BJP, the Congress has promoted itself as the champion of "inclusive growth" and "capitalism with a human face." Under conditions of an unprecedented economic expansion fuelled by an influx of foreign capital and rapid export growth—India's economy grew by 8.8 per annum in the five years ending in March 2008—the UPA government did modestly increase spending on public services and instituted several programs aimed at relieving the acute distress that has haunted much of rural India over the past decade.

The most important of the relief programs and a centerpiece of the Congress election campaign is the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG). It guarantees one member per rural household 100 days of menial work at the minimum wage (little more than a dollar per day) per year.

At most the NREG has stopped the further deepening of the agrarian distress—a crisis that is largely attributable to the shifting of state investment from agriculture to the infrastructure projects demanded by big business and the elimination of price supports and input subsidies.

Large sections of big business have denounced the NREG as a drain on state resources.

Economic analysts meanwhile are warning that the very limited increases in social spending undertaken by the UPA will be unsustainable if the fall in the rate of economic growth persists.

Due to falling tax revenues and various stimulus measures, the central government's deficit for fiscal 2008-9 is forecast to have more than doubled from 2.5 percent to 6 percent. When the deficits of the state governments are added, the government-budget deficit to GDP ratio is well in excess of 10 percent.

Following the elections, whatever the composition of the next government, it will come under mounting pressure from domestic and international capital to curtail spending at the expense of India's toilers.

The BJP election campaign has largely consisted of rank communal and bellicose anti-Pakistan appeals. The BJP accuses the UPA government of being "soft" on terrorism and ties this to the communally-charged accusation that the Congress won't take firm action to thwart terrorism because it fears alienating its "Muslim vote

bank."

The Congress has responded in kind by pointing to the new draconian antiterrorist laws it rushed through parliament following last November's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai and the international campaign it has mounted to isolate India's historic rival Pakistan until it ends all logistical and political support for "terrorism," most importantly the anti-Indian insurgency in Kashmir.

Congress leaders have repeatedly accused the BJP-led NDA government of "surrendering" to terrorism for having negotiated the release of an Indian airliner hijacked to Afghanistan.

The Indian elections are being held in five stages. But the Indian media has quipped that these will be followed by an all important sixth stage, a reference to the horse-trading and maneuvering that will follow the tabulation of the results as the various parties seek to make and unmake alliances with a view to securing a parliamentary majority. The last time a single party won a majority of the Lok Sabha seats was in 1984. Neither the Congress nor BJP can realistically expect to win much more than a 25 percent share of the national vote and 150 (or about a 28 percent share) of the Lok Sabha seats.

In recent days, both Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee have raised the possibility of a Congress-led coalition government seeking the parliamentary support of the Left Front.

On Wednesday Singh told the Editors Guild of India, "I was quite happy when as a government we were dealing with the Left. An alliance with the Left parties is possible only after the elections. Circumstances will decide if we go with the Left."

Singh's remarks are a recognition of the distinct possibility that parliamentary arithmetic may compel the Congress to again seek the Stalinists' support in forming a viable coalition government. But more fundamentally, they arise from the recognition of the more astute sections of India's elite of the invaluable role that the CPM and Left Front play in suppressing the class struggle and subordinating the working class to the existing social order. The Stalinists have channeled the opposition of India's toilers to the bourgeoisie's socially incendiary drive to make India a cheap-labor haven for world capital into reactionary parliamentary maneuvers and impotent protests. Meanwhile, in those states where they themselves form the government, most importantly West Bengal.

they have ruthlessly pursued pro-investors policies, while dismissing socialism as "a far-off cry."



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