

Indian election campaign enters final phase

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On Wednesday voters in 86 of India's 543 Lok Sabha constituencies will vote in the fifth and final phase of India's month-long national elections. Three days later, the country's election commission will begin tabulating the votes from all five phases as well as from state assembly elections in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh and the eastern state of Orissa.

Exit and opinion polls cannot be published during the elections. But it is a given that the next government—like the current Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government—will be a multi-party coalition. The last time a single party won a majority of the parliamentary seats was in 1984.

Neither of the two purported national parties—both have little support in wide swathes of the country—is expected to win significantly more than 150 seats, meaning that the next government will require the support of a raft of state- and caste-based parties. In the 2004 election, the Congress Party won 145 seats and garnered a 26.7 percent share of the popular vote. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP won 138 seats and a 22.2 percent share of the vote.

Adding to the uncertainty as to the make-up of India's next government is the near-collapse of the respective multi-party alliances led by the Congress and the BJP and the efforts of the Stalinist-led Left Front to stitch together a so-called Third Front comprised of erstwhile Congress and BJP allies.

Anticipating a very fractured election result and seeking to maximize their leverage in the parliamentary horse-trading that will produce India's next government, a host of regional parties have either switched camps or indicated that they could do so depending on the post-vote parliamentary arithmetic and what is on offer.

The Congress Party has been deserted by three allies in the northern Hindi-belt states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These states will play a major role in choosing the next government since they are home to more than 250 million people.

Several rightwing parties previously allied with the BJP—the AIADMK of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh's TDP, and the BJD, which currently forms the government in

Orissa—have accepted the Stalinists' offer to become charter members of the Third Front. They have done so with the calculation that their association with the communalist BJP has become a liability and that the Left's trumpeting of their supposed “pro-people” and “secular” credentials will help them garner votes. Not incidentally, both the TDP and BJD have fought the general elections concurrently with state-wide polls.

Much of the press speculation concerning the election's so-called “sixth phase”—the frantic alliance making and breaking that will begin once the votes are tabulated—revolves around the pivotal role that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] and its Left Front is expected to play. Following the May 2004 election, the Left rallied other parties to support a Congress-led government. Although it chose not to join the UPA itself, preferring to provide “outside” support, the CPM helped author the UPA's ostensible governmental program, the Common Minimum Program.

From May 2004 through June 2008 the Left Front sustained the UPA in office, although the Stalinists had to concede that it implemented rightwing socio-economic and foreign policies little different from those of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance regime that ruled India from 1998 to 2004.

Ultimately the Congress Party chose to break the alliance with the Stalinists, so that it could proceed with implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord, which both New Delhi and Washington have touted as decisive in cementing an Indo-US global, strategic partnership. But the Congress leadership has repeatedly signaled it is open to a post-poll link up with the Stalinists.

Last week Rahul Gandhi, the Congress General Secretary and the heir to the Nehru-Gandhi family's dynastic leadership of the Congress Party, proclaimed that “there is a lot of meeting ground” between his party and the Left. “I am confident,” said Gandhi, “that the left will support [Prime Minister] Manmohan Singh” and the UPA government.

The Congress Party has centered its campaign on the claim that it will deliver “faster and more inclusive” economic growth.

But this appeal has been undercut by the deepening world economic crisis. Initially the government maintained that India would be largely insulated from the economic crisis. However, since October India's exports, which the government has touted as the key to sustaining an 8 percent plus growth rate, have fallen dramatically. On a year to year basis, exports were down 33 percent in March.

The Indian state, in what is a stark indication of the backwardness of Indian capitalism, does not systematically gather employment statistics. In March the government conceded that half a million Indians had lost their jobs due to the economic crisis, but there have been estimates of much larger job losses, ranging in the millions, from economists, business organizations, and unions.

Even before the world financial crisis erupted last September, ordinary Indians were being battered by a sharp spike in the cost of food and energy.

The Congress campaign has also highlighted a series of UPA anti-poverty programs as proof that the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government has the interests of the *aam admi* or the common man at heart. Under conditions of an unprecedented economic expansion and burgeoning tax revenues, the UPA did increase social spending, although not significantly in GDP terms.

Hunger, the Congress's claims of "capitalism with a human face" notwithstanding, continues to stalk India. Three-quarters of the population survives on 20 rupees or less than 50 cents (\$2 in purchasing parity terms) per day. There is a mountain of evidence to show that the economic "reforms" pursued by the Indian bourgeoisie since 1991 and championed by the Congress with its promise of "faster growth"—the diversion of state revenues to support the infrastructure projects favored by big business, reduction in state support for agriculture, the elimination or scaling back of price supports and input subsidies—are at the root of the crisis that is ravaging rural India.

The Congress has sought to answer the BJP's communal-laden charge that it is "soft" on terrorism because it doesn't want to upset its "Muslim vote-bank," with a rightwing barrage of its own. Party President Sonia Gandhi, Manmohan Singh, and other key Congress leaders have repeatedly accused the BJP of consorting with terrorists and "treating them like guests," because in 1999 the then BJP-led government negotiated for the release of a hijacked airplane. As part of this rejoinder, the Congress have pointed to the huge increases in military spending under the UPA and the adoption of a draconian new anti-terrorist law that subverts fundamental civil liberties.

Predictably, the BJP campaign has been replete with rank Hindu chauvinist appeals and menacing threats aimed at India's historic arch-rival Pakistan. The BJP has also sought

to project L.K. Advani, its prime ministerial candidate, as a strong leader, contrasting him to the reputedly "weak" Manmohan Singh.

Advani, a lifelong member of the fascistic RSS, is a demagogue. He spearheaded the reactionary campaign to raze the *Babri Masjid* mosque in Ayodhya—a campaign that culminated in 1992-93 in the worst wave of communal rioting in India since partition.

The BJP, like the Congress, is making some populist proposals, including to provide every poor family with 35 kilograms of wheat or rice monthly at 2 rupees per kg.

The Stalinists routinely denounce the Congress for its pursuit of neo-liberal policies and its abandonment of India's "independent foreign policy" in favor of an alliance with US imperialism.

But its allies in the Third Front are right wing parties that have all been party to the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap labor haven for world capitalism. So too, for that matter, have the Stalinist state governments in West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura. In West Bengal, the Left Front is expected to suffer significant electoral losses as a result of popular opposition to its pro-investor policies as exemplified by its ruthless use of police and goon violence to expropriate land for Indian and foreign capital.

CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat has vowed that the Stalinists will not support a Congress-led government. But other party leaders, particularly from the CPM's West Bengal bastion, have taken a much more ambiguous position. Speaking May 3, CPM Politburo members Sitaram Yechury, declared "People ask me will you support the Congress again? What they must understand is that there is a political war on, where we are fighting Congress and BJP. Now, if you ask what will you do if you lose, then what is the point of fighting." The next day, Yechury was even more explicit, saying, "We do not think the need to support a Congress-led government will arise."

The Stalinists are a pivotal part of the bourgeois political set up in India. They use their influence to suppress the class struggle and divert the opposition of India's toilers behind one or another bourgeois political formation, whether it be the Congress or an unstable alliance of regional and casteist parties that are past and future allies of the BJP and the Congress.



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