

India's election ends, horse-trading begins

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The fifth and final round of India's month-long general election was held yesterday.

Preliminary estimates place the overall turnout at 60 percent, which would be slightly higher than the 2004 election participation rate of 58.1 percent.

Ballot-counting is to begin Saturday morning and by the end of the day the makeup of the 15th Lok Sabha (House of the People) will have been largely, if not entirely, determined.

It will, however, take days, conceivably even weeks for the new government to be formed.

Neither of the two major parties—the Congress Party, the dominant partner in the outgoing United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, or the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—is expected to win more than a third of the 543 Lok Sabha seats.

Both the Congress and the BJP have seat-sharing arrangements with smaller, state- and caste-based parties, but these alliances are largely marriages of convenience, some of which will likely be severed in the post-poll scramble to cobble together a parliamentary majority. “Every party, every group is negotiating, and everybody is in everybody's strategy,” declared a leader of the currently NDA-aligned, Bihar-based, Janata Dal (United) Tuesday.

As presently constituted neither the UPA, nor the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance is given much chance of electing enough MPs to be able to form a government without finding several additional partners.

For four years the Stalinist-led Left Front, the third largest grouping in the last parliament, sustained the minority Congress Party-led UPA in office. Since being ditched by the Congress so that it could press forward with the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal and the forging of an Indo-US “global, strategic partnership,” the Stalinists have stitched together a Third Front comprised of “regional parties,” all of them former allies of the Congress or BJP, with inglorious right-wing records.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, the principal components of the Left Front, claim that in the post-poll political realignment the Third Front will attract current BJP and Congress allies in sufficient number to form a “non-BJP, non-Congress,” “secular,” “pro-people” government. Previously the Stalinists justified their support for the UPA on similar grounds—it was the only “secular” alternative to a BJP-led government and could be pressured into implementing “pro-people” policies.

The Stalinists' claims notwithstanding, indications are that the Third Front will shrivel, not grow. The Telangana Rashtra Samiti, which advocates the creation of a separate state government for the Telagana region of Andhra Pradesh, announced this week that it is jumping from the Third Front to the BJP-led NDA. Yesterday H.D. Kumaraswamy, the former chief minister of Karnataka and a principal

leader of another Third Front component, the Janata Dal (Secular), was caught on film trying to sneak into the New Delhi residence of Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi. J. Jayalalitha, the head of the Tamilnadu-based AIADMK, another charter member of the Third Front, has let it be known that she is being wooed by both the BJP and Congress and will decide her course of action once the ballots are tallied.

With the completion of voting Wednesday evening, a publication ban on the results of exit-polling was lifted and various television stations rushed to broadcast their survey results. All the polls indicate a fractured result, with the Congress winning a handful more seats than the BJP, the UPA narrowly emerging as the largest parliamentary bloc but falling well short of a majority, and the Third and Left Fronts together capturing about a fifth of the seats.

Such polls, it need be noted, have a poor track record. In 2004, the exit polls forecast the re-election of the BJP-led NDA. Instead it was the Congress that emerged as the largest party, having, with its slogan of “reforms but with a human face,” made a calibrated appeal to popular anger over the increased economic insecurity and social inequality that have resulted from the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a magnet for private investment and a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism.

Dramatic drop in exports

The current election campaign has unfolded amid a deepening economic slowdown that has dashed initial government claims that India was largely insulated from the world financial crisis and economic slump. Beginning last October, Indian exports fell precipitously. In March, the last month for which figures are available, exports were down 33.3 percent from a year earlier, falling from \$17.25 billion to \$11.5 billion.

Between April and September 2008, exports grew by 30 percent, but as a result of the subsequent export free fall, the total increase in the dollar value of exports in the fiscal year that ended March 31, 2009 was just 3.4 percent.

Official data released Tuesday revealed that industrial production contracted for the second month in a row in March and by 2.3 percent, the largest drop in 16 years. The capital goods sector, that is the production of new machinery and other equipment used in production, contracted by more than 8 percent. Economists warned such a sharp fall in business investment indicates the slump will persist.

The Indian state does not regularly collect employment data—itsself a sign of Indian capitalism's colossal backwardness—but the slump in exports and industrial production strongly suggest that unemployment

has swelled over the past six months far more than the half-million or so conceded by the government.

What impact the economic crisis will have on the election is difficult to determine. Among large sections of the population the BJP is rightly recognized to be a party beholden to big business and indifferent to the concerns and suffering of India's toilers. The Left Front is projected to lose seats in its West Bengal and Kerala bastions. This is because its own ruthless pursuit of pro-investor policies—including banning strikes in the IT sector and using police and goon violence to dispossess peasants of their land so it can be turned over to big business in the form of special economic zones—has alienated many of its traditional working class and peasant supporters.

But whatever the crisis' immediate electoral impact, it constitutes a body blow to ambitions of the Indian elite, which has staked its future on being able to enrich itself and transform India into a world power through export-led growth and massive infusions of foreign capital.

Congress posturing as the party of the *aam admi*

As would be expected, the incumbent Congress has been desperately trying to downplay the economic crisis' impact, while trumpeting the preceding four years of its rule as constituting the greatest economic expansion in Indian history.

The Congress has been careful, however, not to too openly celebrate the growth in the wealth and international reach of Indian big business. It well remembers and reaped much of the electoral benefit from the popular reaction against the BJP's 2004 "India Shining" election campaign.

The Congress has tried to project itself as the protagonist of "inclusive" economic growth and as the party of all Indians, especially of the *aam admi* or common man. "The common man is marching ahead," proclaims the title page of the Congress manifesto, "his every step makes India stronger."

In keeping with this posture the Congress campaign has highlighted the UPA's very limited poverty alleviation and rural development programs and an election promise to provide 25 kg. of rice or wheat monthly to every poor family at a cost of 3 Rupees (less than 10 cents) per month.

These programs—as exemplified by the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREG) under which one member of every rural household is guaranteed 100 days of menial labor annually at about \$1.25 per day and a debt waiver scheme that was precipitated by the phenomenon of mass peasant suicides—are themselves testament to the depth of the social crisis that stalks rural India. According to a recent government survey, 77 percent of all Indians survive on 20 rupees (the purchasing-power parity equivalent of about \$2) per day.

While professing its devotion to the "common man," the Congress-led UPA government has ruthlessly pursued the agenda of Indian big business, presiding over a vast proliferation of Special Economic Zones, opening up new sectors of the economy like retail to foreign investment, deploying the army this January to break strikes by oil workers and truck drivers, and vastly increasing military expenditure (including a 33 percent increase in the most recent budget). India's big business elite was especially gratified by the UPA government's cementing of closer ties with Washington, which it calculates will

enable it to rapidly advance in its ambitions to secure a major role on the world stage.

In stumping for votes and projecting itself as a supra-class party of all Indians, the Congress finds it useful to denounce the poisonous rhetoric and communal atrocities committed by the BJP and its allies, but the Congress has a long history of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right. In the aftermath of last November's terrorist atrocity in Mumbai, the Congress-led UPA government quickly joined hands with the BJP and adopted draconian new anti-terrorist legislation that subverts fundamental civil liberties. During the election campaign, Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and other Congress leaders repeatedly accused the BJP of consorting with terrorists (because in 1999 the NDA government negotiated the release of a hijacked airliner), while promoting Indira Gandhi, who as prime minister ordered the 1984 storming of the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar, as proof of the Congress' anti-terrorist bona fides.

A "Sunday ET [*Economic Times*]-Synovate poll" of 198 Indian CEOs conducted in late March found a majority of 68 percent favored the re-election of the UPA government.

The traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie, the Congress Party has proven adept at binding India's toilers to the program of the bourgeoisie, and in doing this has frequently courted and made use of the Stalinists.

During the course of the current election campaign, the Congress leadership has repeatedly praised the Left Front for the contributions it made to the formation and governance of the UPA. It is by no means excluded that the Congress will seek the support of the Stalinists in staking its claim to office once the ballots are counted.

The Stalinists have denounced the Congress for pursuing neoliberal policies and bringing India into a junior partnership with US imperialism. But the leadership of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has far from conclusively shut the door to an alliance with Congress. Indeed, its stratagem for a Left-Third Front government is dependent on the Congress providing the votes to secure from such a formation its parliamentary majority.

In preparation for deal-making if not with the Congress itself, then with a host of regional bourgeois parties, the CPM had modified its stand on the Indo-US nuclear treaty. Whereas previously it called for the deal to be scrapped, arguing that it was calculated to ensnare India in a dependent relationship, it now says it favors renegotiating the treaty.

Appearing on a television interview program Tuesday night, CPM General-Secretary Prakash Karat indicated that the CPM draws a stark and completely unjustified contrast between the US under Barack Obama and George W. Bush. Said Karat, "I see that India-US relations can be developed at a new level now. I think the Obama presidency will help India to reset our relationship ... I think we would engage with the US and the new administration on a range of issues ... [W]ith a Democratic administration, the Obama administration, we can talk about reworking this deal."



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