Congress Party humiliated in Indian state elections

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The Congress Party—the dominant force in India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government—has suffered a stunning defeat in a series of state elections, throwing the party and government into grave crisis just five months before India's national election.

On Sunday and Monday, legislative elections results were tabulated for four states—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Mizoram—and for the National Capital Territory, Delhi, that are home to more than 180 million.

In Rajasthan and Delhi, Congress governments were driven from power. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the Congress failed to unseat governments formed by its main rival, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Across the four legislatures, the Congress saw its parliamentary representation almost halved, falling from 246 to 126 seats. Only in Mizoram, which with a population of one million is India's second smallest state, did the Congress make a strong showing, winning re-election.

The BJP will now form the government in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh—respectively India's sixth, eighth, and sixteenth largest states—and in Delhi. But in the national capital territory, the BJP failed to win a parliamentary majority, meaning its hold on power may prove tenuous. This was due to the surprise showing of the newly-formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP—Party of the Common Man). Launched by leaders of the 2012 anti-corruption protests, the AAP won 28 of the 70 seats in the Delhi legislature—just three less than the BJP—by appealing to popular anger with the entire political establishment and making limited promises of increased social spending.

Congress spokesmen have been quick to deny that the state election results constitute a popular repudiation of the record of the UPA, which has held office since 2004. But there is no doubt that they reflect, albeit in a distorted fashion, mass anger with the government and its big business program.

The Congress-led UPA has responded to the sharp fall in India's economic growth rate to less than 5 percent by slashing social spending and accelerating the implementation of pro-market reforms. These include privatization and disinvestment, the opening up of multi-brand retail and other sectors of the economy to foreign investment, and cuts to energy- and fertilizer-price subsidies. In recent months, even as retail price inflation has risen at 10 percent or more, the government has imposed further energy price increases.

During the past three years, the UPA government has also been shaken by a series of corruption scandals that have exposed not only the Congress' total subservience to big business, but how the rapid growth of India's corporate houses has been fueled by the looting of public assets. Under the watch of the supposedly "incorruptible" Prime Minister Manmoham Singh, the UPA government has repeatedly gifted or sold off at fire-sale prices public resources, from coal reserves and telecom spectrum to land, to India's corporate titans.

Under conditions where the Stalinist-led Left Front has suppressed the struggles of the working class and supported India's elite in its two-decade long drive to transform India into a cheap labor producer for world capitalism, right-wing forces are exploiting the anger against the government and its big business agenda.

Over the past year, much of corporate India has rallied round the BJP, leading a push for it to name the Gujarat Chief Minister and self-styled Hindu "strongman" Narendra Modi as its candidate for national prime minister. Big business is enthused by Modi's candidacy because they deem the Congress to have been insufficiently ruthless in pushing through

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socially incendiary pro-business reforms and because they expect him to run roughshod over parliamentary and procedural norms and popular opposition in implementing their agenda.

In the run up to the state elections, the corporate media lavished attention on Modi. In doing so, it continued to cover up and excuse his role in instigating the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat and ignored the mass poverty and gross social inequality that belie Modi's claims to have presided over Gujarat's rapid socio-economic "development."

India's principal stock indexes rose sharply Monday in response to the BJP's strong showing in the state elections. "The business community has taken a very negative view about the performance of the current government," a top executive in a Mumbai financial firm told the *New York Times*. "The market perception is that Narendra Modi is extremely business-friendly, as reflected in what he has achieved in Gujarat." Welcoming the election results, the Indian industry mouthpiece ASSOCHAM (the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry) said: "The election results in the [state] assembly elections have thrown a clear message: It is the quality of governance which matters at the end of the day."

Their public claims notwithstanding, the Congress leadership has clearly been rattled by the state election results. Its plan had been for the 81-year-old technocrat Manmohan Singh, who serves as prime minster at the pleasure of Congress President Sonia Gandhi, to step aside, either immediately before or after the national elections. This would allow Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family and direct descendant of three Indian prime ministers, to take over the reins of government. But Rahul Gandhi was the public face of the Congress' disastrous state election campaign, raising a serious question mark over his "readiness" to assume the Congress helm.

The Congress has responded to the challenge of the Modi-led BJP by trumpeting its claims to be the party of "inclusive growth." But after a decade in office and under conditions where social inequality has grown apace and working people are being squeezed by rising prices and unemployment, the cynical claims of what has traditionally been the Indian bourgeoisie's premier party have clearly lost their luster.

In Rajasthan the Congress won just 22 of the 199 assembly seats, ending a five-year term in government. In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress hoped to make big gains by appointing as its chief minster candidate a scion of the former ruling family of the princely state of Gwalior. In fact the Congress lost seats. In Chhattisgarh the Congress sought to garner public sympathy by casting itself as a victim of Maoist violence. (Several of the party's leaders were killed in a Maoist attack earlier this year.) But it gained only two additional seats.

While Delhi, with a population of 18 million, is much smaller than either Madhya Pradesh or Rajashtan, it has special political significance because it is home to the national capital.

In Delhi, the Congress government went down to a crushing defeat, winning just 8 of the 70 assembly seats. While the BJP poached seats from the Congress, most its losses came to the AAP and this was true in both middle-class enclaves and in Delhi's poor inner-city areas. Sheila Dikshit, Congress Chief Minister of Delhi for the past 15 years, was unable to retain her own seat, losing to AAP head Arvind Kerjiwal.

Dikshit has long been a corporate media darling for ramming through unpopular economic "reforms," including water and electricity privatization.

The AAP has promised to act as a "loyal opposition" to Delhi's incoming BJP government, spurning the suggestion that they join hands with the BJP made by Kiran Bedi, the retired Indian Police Service official the AAP leadership wanted as the party's chief ministerial candidate.

Undoubtedly large sections of Delhi's working class and poor turned to the AAP as a means of voicing their opposition to the Congress and the BJP, the national parties of the Indian bourgeoisie. It represents, however, no progressive alternative to them. A key feature of the anti-corruption protests from which the AAP sprung was their leaders' exclusive focus on political corruption and steadfast refusal to draw the connection between political corruption and the government's subservience to corporate interests and steadfast defence of capitalism.

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