

# India's election campaign goes into high gear

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12 March 2014

Following last week's announcement of the schedule for elections to the Lok Sabha (the lower, popularly-elected house of India's bi-cameral parliament), India's national election campaign has gone into high gear.

The election is to be held in nine phases. Voting will begin on April 7 and culminate five weeks later on May 12. However, the bulk of the voting (425 of the 545 Lok Sabha seats) will take place over a three-week period, beginning in less than a month: April 9 to 30. The ballots will be counted on May 16, with the expectation that India's new government will be in place by the end of May.

The elections are taking place under conditions of deepening crisis for the Indian bourgeoisie and mounting opposition among workers and toilers to its drive to transform India into a cheap labor manufacturer, back office, and resource producer for world capitalism.

India's economy is mired in stagflation. For the past two-and-a-half years, the economy has grown at less than 5 percent per annum, far below the 8 percent-plus growth rate necessary to absorb new entrants into the labor force. Inflation, meanwhile, has been running at double digit rates, with food prices rising far more quickly, further squeezing the incomes of the three-quarters of India's population that survives on less than US\$2 per day.

The extreme vulnerability of India's economy to volatile world capital flows was demonstrated last summer when the value of the rupee plummeted in response to the US Federal Reserve Board's announcement that it was considering scaling back its infusion of credit into US money markets. While Indian business has long been pressing the country's central bank to slash interest rates so as to boost economic growth, it has been loath to do because it fears stoking inflation and provoking capital flight.

The major international credit rating agencies have served notice that they will slash India's credit rating to junk bond status if the new government does not push through socially explosive "reforms." These include: eliminating energy price subsidies; further opening the economy to foreign investment; gutting restrictions on layoffs and plant closures; implementing a regressive national goods and services tax; and sharply reducing the budget deficit through social spending cuts.

India is also being buffeted by the dramatic rise in world geopolitical tensions. India's outgoing Congress Party Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly said that he considers the 2008 Indo-US nuclear accord and the Indo-US global strategic partnership it was meant to cement were his 10-year-long government's greatest accomplishments. But New Delhi has been disconcerted by Washington's relentless push for India to harness itself ever more tightly to US strategic objectives, against Iran in the Middle East, but above all against India's northern neighbor, China.

Only a few years ago the Indian bourgeoisie was giddy with success as a couple of dozen Indian billionaires had emerged at the head of a clutch of Indian-based companies with global reach.

Now it is gripped by near panic. The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government is viewed by most of corporate India as a dismal failure. They resent the small amounts that the UPA channeled into increased social expenditure during its first term (2004-9), when India's capitalist economy expanded at a record pace. And they are exasperated that the government repeatedly backed off, in the face of mass popular opposition, from long-discussed and oft-promised "reforms."

With the aim of pushing politics sharply right, much of corporate India has shifted its support to the official opposition, the Hindu supremacist BJP and its prime ministerial candidate Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

A self-styled Hindu strongman, Modi has impressed the titans of India Inc. by his steadfast devotion to their profit interests. He has lavished tax concessions, land and other inducements on investors, pushed through business projects over local opposition, and effectively legalized strikes. Modi's corporate backers view his role in instigating and shielding those who directly carried out the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom that killed well over a thousand people and rendered tens of thousands more homeless as at most a small, forgivable blemish on an otherwise exemplary record.

That large sections of India ruling elite are embracing this communalist demagogue as a veritable savior—one of India's most prominent billionaires Anil Ambani has hailed him as a "king among kings"—is a measure both of their acute crisis and readiness to turn towards authoritarian forms of rule to impose their socially incendiary "pro-market" agenda.

Influential voices among the international bourgeois press have for their part expressed trepidation over corporate India's

push for a Modi-led government. This was exemplified by an *Economist* piece that was headlined “Would Modi save or wreck India?” These commentators recognize that large sections of India’s workers and toilers are implacably hostile to the BJP’s toxic communalism and that the BJP is itself an unstable, highly combustible political formation. (While it is India’s second “national party,” the BJP has never won more than a quarter of the popular vote and has little support in wide swathes of the county.) The more perceptive international bourgeois commentators fear that a Modi-led government would be unable to control the social forces it would unleash within India and exacerbate tensions with China and Pakistan with reckless sabre rattling.

The Congress Party has responded to Modi’s emergence at the head of the BJP by redoubling its efforts to promote itself as the party of “inclusive growth” and “secularism.”

These appeals are understandably finding little traction with the mass of the population. The Congress spearhead India’s post-1991 turn to neo-liberal “reform” and has led India’s government for 15 of the past 23 years. Today after almost a quarter-century of “reform”-led capitalist growth the mass of the population continues to live in dire poverty—almost half of all Indian children are stunted due to lack of proper food. And India’s public education and health programs are largely in ruins.

As for the Congress’ commitment to secularism, it is hollow. When it is electorally convenient, it will blurt out ugly truths about the communalist BJP, even labelling it fascistic. But the Congress itself connives with the Hindu right. It welcomed into the leadership of the Gujarat Congress Party ex-members of Modi’s cabinet who were themselves complicit in the 2002 pogrom. And it loyally collaborates with the BJP in upholding the interests of the Indian elite against the toiling masses and against their foreign rivals. So in 2008, it joined hands with the BJP to use the Mumbai terrorist atrocity to step up efforts to destabilize Pakistan, adopt new anti-democratic “anti-terrorism” laws, and to push from public view the exposure of a Hindu nationalist terrorist cell with connections to the military.

The key to the Congress’ victory in the last two elections was its ability to ally with a large number of regionally based ethnic and caste-ist parties. However, so popularly discredited is the Congress, it has been deserted by most of its allies, reducing the UPA to a rump.

While the corporate media is working to portray a wave of popular support for Modi and the BJP, outside of the corporate boardrooms and a narrow layer of the middle class there is no real enthusiasm for either. An indication of the popular disaffection from both of the Indian elite’s major parties was last December’s stunning electoral debut of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP—Party of the Common Man). Casting itself as an opponent of the corrupt political establishment, the AAP won almost a third of the vote in the Delhi Assembly election and went on to briefly form a minority government in India’s

capital territory and largest urban center.

Believing that it has a good shot at emerging as a major player in national politics, the AAP leadership has rushed to reassure big business of its loyalty, declaring that it is opposed to “crony capitalism,” not capitalism, and that if it forms the government it will work to “free” business from state interference.

The AAP’s ability to win support from broad layers of Delhi’s workers and poor is not only emblematic of popular anger and alienation with the Congress and BJP. It is also an indictment of the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and their Left Front.

For decades the Stalinist parties have served as the principal political props of the bourgeoisie, working systematically to subordinate the working class to one or another party of the Indian ruling class on the grounds that it can be pressured into carrying out “pro-people policies” or is the only means of blocking the BJP from taking office. The Stalinists propped up the minority Congress government in the first half of the 1990s that launched “neo-liberal” reform and in 2004 they were instrumental in putting together the UPA coalition. For the next four years they sustained the minority UPA in power and did so even as they conceded it was carrying out right-wing policies akin to those of the previous BJP-led government.

Moreover, in those states where they have formed the government, the Stalinists have carried out what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies, including banning strikes in the IT sector and suppressing peasant opposition to land expropriations for big business projects.

The Stalinists have responded to the intensification of the class struggle signaled by the embrace of Modi by broad layers of the bourgeoisie by shifting still further to the right. Last month they announced the formation of an ostensible anti-BJP, anti-Congress “alternative” composed of right-wing caste-ist and regionalist parties that have a long history of allying with the BJP or the Congress. The “alternative” is an entirely makeshift affair involving no common program or even undertakings. This is because all of its constituents—and this includes the Stalinists—want to keep their hands free for right-wing, post-election maneuvers with one or both of the Indian bourgeoisie’s principal parties.



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