

Modi takes the reins of India's government

Keith Jones
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Narendra Modi was sworn in as India's fifteenth prime minister at a lavish ceremony Monday that many in the corporate media described as akin to a coronation.

A large section of India's business elite was on hand to applaud the new government, which is led by the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Big business strongly supported the BJP in India's just-completed national election with the expectation that a Modi-led government will ram through pro-market "reforms"—including the slashing of energy and fertilizer price subsidies, sweeping social spending cuts, and the privatization of public infrastructure, insurance and banking—in the face of mass opposition.

To intimidate the working class, the media has gone into overdrive to depict Modi as a uniquely popular politician whom the electorate has armed with a massive mandate for neoliberal reform. In reality, the BJP secured a majority in India's parliament with the lowest-ever share of the popular vote, barely 31 percent. Moreover, it was the utterly unwarranted beneficiary of popular anger with the ten-year-old Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government (UPA), which presided over skyrocketing food prices, mass unemployment, endemic poverty and rampant corruption.

The Congress Party, which has spearheaded the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a cheap-labor hub for world capitalism, failed to win even the one-tenth share of the seats in the lower house of India's parliament needed to be recognized as the Official Opposition. The Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—also suffered their worst ever electoral defeat. That they should share the Congress's fate was not coincidental. The Stalinists propped up the Congress-led UPA during its first four years in office and have implemented what they themselves describe as "pro-investor" policies in those states where they have formed the government.

In a first for an Indian prime minister, Modi invited to his swearing-in ceremony the heads of government of the seven other states that comprise the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—Pakistan, Bangladesh,

Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had invited Manmohan Singh, Modi's predecessor, to attend his own inauguration last June, but Singh declined the invitation, largely out of fear of the BJP's virulent opposition.

After hurried consultations with Pakistan's military, with which he is currently locked in a very public power struggle, Sharif accepted Modi's invitation.

So did all the other SAARC leaders, with the exception of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. As she was in the midst of a previously scheduled trip to Japan, Hasina sent the speaker of Bangladesh's parliament in her stead.

During the election campaign Modi antagonized Bangladesh's government by making highly provocative, communally laced denunciations of Bangladeshi Muslim "migrants" to India. (See: India: Modi reiterates pledge to expel "Bangladeshi" Muslims in wake of communal massacre)

Much of the media has presented Modi's invitation to the SAARC leaders, particularly Sharif, as a conciliatory gesture, prompted by his desire to assuage fears that his government will pursue an aggressive foreign policy, especially against Pakistan, India's historic rival, and China.

This is poppycock. The invitation was the opening gambit in a drive to assert Indian leadership over South Asia. India's ruling elite is perturbed by growing Chinese influence in the region and determined to push back. Securing Indian economic and strategic dominance in South Asia and establishing a strong Indian presence in the Indian Ocean are considered by the country's military-national security establishment to be crucial to realizing the Indian bourgeoisie's great power ambitions.

In this regard, it is important to take note of the only other foreign "heads" of government invited to Modi's inauguration—the prime minister of Mauritius, Navin Ramgoolam, and the head of Tibet's "government-in-exile," Lobsang Sangay.

Along with South Korea, China, the US and the European Union, Mauritius is one of nine states granted "observer" status by SAARC. If India's incoming government is paying

special attention to Mauritius, it is because the island state is an important gateway for foreign investment to India and because New Delhi is eager to expand military ties with it. Situated in the southwestern Indian Ocean off Madagascar, Mauritius is coveted by India as a potential base for Indian navy operations.

India has long allowed the Dalai Lama and his supporters, including the Tibetan “government-in-exile,” to reside in India. It is unprecedented, however, for an Indian government to extend any form of official political recognition to the Tibetan opponents of the Chinese state. While Sangay was not accorded the same courtesies accorded the internationally recognized heads of government, his invitation was clearly meant to send a signal to Beijing that the new government intends to more aggressively counter China.

The Indian press—much of which favors India strengthening its strategic alliance with Washington—has been highly supportive of the new government’s first foray into international affairs. The media has particularly commended Modi for not ceding to objections from various regional parties, declaring it high time that the central government reasserted full control over India’s foreign policy.

The Tamil Nadu state government and virtually the entire political establishment in Tamil Nadu, including parties that had contested the elections as part of the BJP’s National Democratic Alliance, vigorously objected to the presence of Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse at Monday’s inauguration. There is great sympathy in Tamil Nadu for the plight of the Sri Lankan Tamils who were the target of a three-decade-long civil war mounted by the Sri Lankan state and who continue to be subjected to discrimination and state repression and, consequently, the Tamil Nadu regional bourgeoisie and its political representatives routinely posture as their defenders.

Only after being goaded by the Congress Party did the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena, the second largest party in the BJP-led NDA, issue a statement in support of Modi’s invitation to Sharif and in doing so it casually threatened Pakistan with nuclear war. “If Pakistan does not mend its ways,” declared Shiv Sena President Uddhav Thackeray, “Modi will have to press the nuclear button.”

This chilling statement speaks volumes about the bellicose communalist elements in and around India’s new government. Modi himself will forever be notorious for his role as the instigator of the 2002 anti-Muslim Gujarat pogrom.

On Tuesday, the process of cabinet formation was completed with the government announcing the specific cabinet responsibilities of those who had been sworn in

alongside Modi the day before.

The BJP has kept all the important cabinet portfolios for itself, allotting Shiv Sena and the other major NDA allies a single minister each.

As expected, Arun Jaitley, a former corporate lawyer with close ties to both domestic and international big business, has been named Finance Minister. Speaking to reporters yesterday, Jaitley said “fiscal consolidation”—i.e. slashing social spending—and other measures to promote “growth” will be the government’s top priority.

In a surprise move, Jaitley has also been given the Defence portfolio. The *Hindu* linked this decision to the BJP government’s determination to quickly raise military spending so as to push forward with the purchase and deployment of a vast array of new weapons and weapons systems.

BJP President Rajnath Singh, who strongly supported Modi’s bid to seize the national leadership of the BJP, has been rewarded with the Home Ministry, while veteran BJP parliamentarian Sushma Swaraj has been named Foreign Minister.

Also noteworthy are the cabinet appointments of Uma Bharti, retired Indian Army Chief V.K. Singh and Sanjeev Baliyan.

Bharti, the new Minister for Water Resources and Rivers Development, is a Hindu communalist firebrand who helped incite the mob that razed the Babri Masjid in 1992.

Last year an Indian military inquiry found that V.K. Singh had set up a secret army intelligence unit that under his direction carried out illegal activities, including eavesdropping on Defence Ministry officials and seeking to oust the elected government of Jammu and Kashmir. He has been named a Minister of State with “independent charge” for the Development of the North Eastern Region. The northeast is a highly sensitive region because it is the focus of the border dispute with China, is the site of a series of ethno-separatist insurgencies, and is pivotal to New Delhi’s plans to develop extensive trade ties with the states of southeast Asia.

Sanjeev Baliyan, the new Minister of State for Agriculture, is under criminal indictment for his role in instigating communal violence last year in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh that led to the deaths of dozens of Muslim villagers.



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