

BJP gains in Indian state elections leave opposition Congress reeling

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India's ruling party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has won a major electoral victory, winning a majority in the state assembly of Uttar Pradesh, the north Indian state that is home to one-sixth of India's population.

The BJP is also likely to lead the government in three of the four other states where state assembly elections were held in February and early March—Uttarakhand, Goa, and Manipur. Only in Punjab, where the BJP had been the junior partner in a decade-old coalition government, did it suffer a serious reversal.

By contrast, the five state elections whose results were tabulated last Saturday constituted a debacle for the Congress Party. The Congress, which until only recently was the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, is no longer a significant force in wide swathes of India, including Uttar Pradesh. Depending on the outcome of the post-election maneuvering in Manipur, it will hold office in only 5 or 6 of India's 29 states. The BJP, meanwhile, will hold power in at least 15 states, representing about 60 percent of the country's total population, as well as forming India's national government.

The BJP has been quick to proclaim the state election results a ringing endorsement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rightwing agenda of accelerated pro-investor "reform" (that is privatization and austerity) and a more assertive foreign policy (integration into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China and increased belligerence against Pakistan.)

In reality, the BJP was the utterly undeserving beneficiary of popular anger and disaffection with the Congress and various caste-based and regional parties that have themselves implemented neo-liberal reforms, presiding over mass poverty, intensifying economic insecurity and ever-widening social inequality. For their part, the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Communist Party of India, have responded to the BJP's rise and the intensification of class conflict by redoubling their efforts to subordinate the working class to

the Indian state, the Congress and other rightwing opposition parties. This has only helped further boost the BJP.

There is no question Modi and his BJP will use their strengthened political hand to attack the working class. Already government sources have told the *Times of India* that changes will soon be made to facilitate and grow foreign direct investment in the multi-brand retail sector, thereby opening the door for the likes of Walmart and Carrefour to aggressively expand into India.

Modi was himself the "star" BJP campaigner in the just concluded state elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the party did not even project a chief minister candidate.

If Modi and the national BJP leadership invested so heavily in the state elections, it is not only because control of the UP government is a major political prize. The party strength in the various state legislatures will directly impact on the election of India's president in July and will, over time, result in changes in the composition of the upper house of the national parliament, the Rajya Sabha. Because the BJP currently lacks a working majority in the Rajya Sabha, it has been unable to push through some of the "reforms" most eagerly sought by its big business backers. These include changes to labour laws to make it easier to lay off workers and close plants in the so-called organized sector and the gutting of restrictions on the expropriation of agricultural land for big business projects.

As in the 2014 national election, the BJP cast itself as the party of economic "development," promising growth and modernization and pointing to the manifest failure of its opponents to raise the mass of the population out of poverty and squalor. It also played up Modi's humble origins, contrasting them with the pedigree of Rahul Gandhi, the principal Congress Party spokesman, who is the son, grandson, and great-grandson of Congress prime ministers.

At the same time, the BJP made unmistakable anti-Muslim communal appeals. BJP President Amit Shah touted the Hindu right's demands for the building of a Hindu temple on the site of the razed Babri Majsid mosque in Ayodhya

and the banning of cow-slaughter. In the first weeks of the campaign, the BJP also made much of the illegal and reckless Special Forces' raids it had ordered inside Pakistan, claiming that under Modi and the BJP India is a rising military and great power.

But the focus of its appeal in UP was to mass anger over the failure of the incumbent, caste-based Samajwadi Party government to create jobs, provide electricity, and reduce poverty.

The Samajwadi Party responded by forming an alliance with the Congress Party. The Congress postures as the protagonist of "inclusive growth," but in fact has done much of the heavy-lifting over the past quarter-century in pushing through socially regressive, pro-investor reforms and forging a strategic partnership between India and US imperialism.

Socio-economic conditions in UP are among the worst in India, a country blighted by mass hunger and social degradation. According to World Bank estimates, 70 percent of UP's population lives on less than US \$1 a day. A recent report from the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) estimated more than ten million young people in UP (those in the 15-35 age-group) are unemployed.

Repeating its success in UP in the 2014 national elections, the BJP captured 312 of UP's 403 assembly seats with just under 40 percent of the popular vote. The Samajwadi Party (SP) saw its assembly representation slashed from 224 to 47, while the Congress' seat tally fell from 28 to just 7.

Another significant development was the poor showing of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which postures as the representative of the Dalits (former Untouchables) and other disproportionately impoverished lower-caste groups. The BSP and SP have dominated state politics in UP since 2002, but the BSP won just 19 seats, down from 80 in the previous election.

To undercut both the SP and BSP, the BJP exploited caste divisions, nominating as candidates local notables who claimed to represent lower caste groups that had not received their "fair share" of electoral nominations and government patronage from SP and BSP governments in Lucknow.

In neighboring Uttarakhand, the Congress was ousted from power by the BJP. With 46 percent of the vote, the BJP won 57 seats, up from 26 in the previous states election. The Congress saw its seat tally, plunge by 21 to just 11. Even the sitting Congress Chief Minister, Harish Rawat, failed to win re-election.

In the small northeastern seat of Manipur, the Congress seat tally was slashed by 19 to 28. The BJP, which won no seats in the previous Manipur state election, captured 21 and now claims to have rallied sufficient support from other parties, including a Congress defector, to wield a parliamentary majority.

In the small former Portuguese colony of Goa, the Congress was able to emerge as the largest single party. Capitalizing on disaffection with the five year-old BJP state government, it won 17 seats in the 40-member state assembly, almost double its 2012 tally. But the BJP quickly filled the breach, no doubt using the ample patronage powers of the central government and its own war-chest. The BJP rallied support from smaller parties and told Manohar Parrikar to give up his post as Defense Minister and take back the Chief Ministership of Goa, a position he held from 2000 to 2005 and from March 2012 to November 2014.

Only in Punjab, which, with a population of some 30 million was the second largest of the five states to go the polls, was the Congress able to upend the BJP. The Congress won 77 seats in the 117-member state assembly, ending ten years of rule by a coalition government of the Sikh communalist Shrimonai Akali Dal (SAD) and the BJP. The SAD lost 41 seats, leaving it with 15, while the BJP won just 3 seats and only 5.4 percent of the popular vote.

Despite the employment crisis and the economic dislocation caused by the Modi government's demonetization measure, the Stalinist Left Front failed to win a single seat in any of the five states, repeating its miserable 2012 performance.

The Stalinists were once a significant political force in the industrial cities of UP and in the Punjab. But as elsewhere in India their support has hemorrhaged as a result of their promotion of caste-based politics, including alliances with various rightwing caste-ist and regional parties, and their role in implementing big business' "reform" agenda. Since 1991, the Stalinists have supported a succession of central Indian governments, most of them Congress-led, that have pursued the ruling elite's agenda of making India a cheap-labour haven for global capital. Moreover, in those states where the Left has formed the government it has implemented what the Stalinists themselves describe as "pro-investor" policies.



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