

# India: Stalinist-backed “common opposition” candidate crashes out in presidential election

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India's governing party, the right-wing Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has tightened its grip on power with the victory last Thursday of its nominee for president.

Ram Nath Kovind will be the first Indian president with roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the shadowy Hindu supremacist organization that founded the BJP. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is himself a lifelong RSS acolyte, as is Venkaiah Naidu, the BJP cabinet minister tipped to be elected India's vice-president next month.

India's presidency is largely a ceremonial post, but the president does wield significant powers, especially in a political crisis. The president nominates the prime minister in the event of a hung parliament; can compel a re-vote on most state and national legislation before signing it into law; sanctions ordinances (temporary, government-imposed legislative changes when parliament is not in session); and can impose “president's rule” (that is emergency central-government control) on states where he deems constitutional government or law and order have broken down.

India's president is chosen by an electoral college comprised of the members of India's national parliament and state and territorial legislatures, with the votes weighted to account for the legislatures' varying constituency size. As the BJP currently holds a majority of the seats in the lower house of parliament and forms the government in states containing almost two-thirds of India's population, the victory of its presidential nominee was from the outset highly probable.

Granting that, the outcome of last week's election was nonetheless a debacle for the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, and for the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The Congress and the Stalinists were the prime movers behind the fielding of a “common opposition” presidential candidate. They claimed that even if the BJP candidate ultimately proved victorious, the presidential campaign would serve to rally the “secular, democratic” forces against the Hindu right and serve as a springboard for challenging the BJP in the 2019 national election.

But the “common opposition” campaign quickly fizzled. Many of the regional and caste-based parties the Congress and Stalinists touted as prospective members of their “secular” front opted to support the BJP nominee. Moreover, the election itself saw significant cross-party voting, with legislators defying their respective parties' instructions to vote for Kovind.

In the end, the common opposition candidate—Meira Kumar, a former Congress cabinet minister and Speaker of the lower house of India's parliament—got just 34.35 percent of the “weighted” vote, to

Kovind's 65.65 percent.

In the name of blocking the rise of the communalist BJP to power, the Stalinist CPM and CPI have systematically subordinated the working class to the Congress and an array of right-wing regional and caste-ist parties for the past quarter-century. From 1991 through 2008, the Stalinists propped up a succession of Indian governments, most of them Congress-led, that implemented the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda to transform India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and that forged closer relations, and ultimately a “strategic partnership,” with Washington.

The end result of these political maneuvers and of the Stalinists' systematic suppression of the class struggle, of which they are a part, is that the BJP is stronger than ever.

In the 2014 elections, Modi and his BJP were able to cynically exploit the mass opposition to a decade-old Congress-led government whose promises of “economic reform with a human face” had proven to be a cruel hoax. Under Congress-rule, the bourgeoisie gorged on an investment boom, with the number of billionaires rising more than ten-fold, while three-quarters of India's population continued to eke out their existence on less than \$2 per day.

Because the Stalinists are so identified with the big business Congress Party and because they have pursued what they themselves term “pro-investor” policies in the states where they have formed the government, the CPM and CPI shared the Congress' fate in the 2014 elections. For the second national election in a row, the Stalinist-led Left Front lost more than half of its seats, leaving it with less than a dozen in the 545-member Lok Sabha.

The bourgeoisie brought Modi and the BJP to power to pursue a more aggressive policy against the working class and more boldly assert their great-power ambitions on the world stage. This the Modi government has done with a vengeance. It has slashed social spending, accelerated privatization, and gutted India's already minimal work standards; dramatically expanded India's military-security ties with the US, Japan and Australia, transforming India into a veritable frontline state in Washington's military-strategic offensive against China; and promoted authoritarianism, routinely denouncing even its bourgeois opponents as “anti-national,” while whipping up a communally-incendiary “anti-cow slaughter” campaign. In March, Modi named Yogi Adityanath, a BJP legislator and Hindu high-priest notorious for his inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric and promotion of a fascistic youth militia, as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state.

The Modi government exemplifies the failure and putrefaction of bourgeois rule. Seven decades after Indian independence, the masses remain mired in want and squalor, while the bourgeoisie offers India

up as a satrap for US imperialism and promotes communal reaction as a means of splitting the working class.

Nothing could more conclusively demonstrate the urgency of the working class advancing its own socialist solution to the crisis and rallying all the toilers behind it in the fight for a workers' and peasants' government.

But the Stalinists have responded to the intensification of the class struggle by turning still further right. They have redoubled their efforts to subordinate the working class to the discredited parties of the ruling class, while urging it to look to the judiciary, presidency and other institutions of the capitalist state to act as a "secular" and "democratic" counterweight to Modi and the Hindu right.

### **The Stalinists, the Congress Party, and caste politics**

In last year's elections in West Bengal, India's fourth largest state, the CPM formed its first-ever, publicly-declared electoral bloc with the Congress Party. Due to internal divisions—bound up with the fact that the Congress is the principal opposition to the CPM-led government in Kerala—the CPM subsequently dissolved its "grand alliance" with the Congress in West Bengal.

But this does not stop the Stalinists from collaborating closely with India's traditional party of government in the name of defending secularism. No matter that the Congress has a long history of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right, including in implementing the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, inciting the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, and presiding over the razing of the Babri Masjid in 1992.

So discredited is the Congress, it has to rely on the Stalinists to front many of its maneuvers with other sections of the political establishment.

Thus, Congress President Sonia Gandhi publicly tasked CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury with meeting with the leaders of parties outside the BJP's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to come up with a "common opposition" candidate for last week's presidential election. And Yechury leaped at the opportunity. During May and June, he met with a host of right-wing chief ministers and party leaders to hear out their suggestions as to the nominee and plea for a Congress-led anti-BJP alliance.

But the negotiations stalled as the prospective alliance partners maneuvered for position, including in some cases exploring whether a better deal was to be had from Modi and his BJP.

Ultimately, the BJP decided to strike first, announcing that the little-known Kovind would be its nominee.

This threw the opposition into disarray. Bihar's Chief Minister, Janata Dal (United) head Nitish Kumar, immediately announced his party would be voting for Kovind, ostensibly on the grounds that Kumar had developed a good rapport with Kovind during the two years he had served as Bihar's governor.

Such a turnaround was hardly surprising. For close to two decades, the JD (U) was the most important ally of the BJP. Nonetheless, after it broke with the BJP in the run up to the 2014 elections, the Stalinists rushed to proclaim the JD (U) a secular party and add it to its roster of potential allies.

The JD (U)'s defection proved to be only the beginning of the turmoil in the ostensible opposition camp. Kovind's nomination

caused even greater problems because of his Dalit (former untouchable) caste identity.

Many of the opposition parties declared that they could not vote against a Dalit nominee for president, even if he was a loyal hand-raiser for the BJP, a devotee of the RSS, and had publicly proclaimed Islam, the faith of close to 200 million Indians, "anti-national."

The press was quick to proclaim the BJP's nomination of Kovind a "master stroke." In fact it only served to underline the hypocrisy and bankruptcy of the entire Indian political establishment, which cynically exploits and manipulates caste identities, to advance its interests and divide working people, while condemning the vast majority of the population—Dalit and non-Dalit—to poverty and economic insecurity.

The Stalinists have themselves helped legitimize this divisive caste politics, first and foremost by opposing socialist revolution in theory and in practice, although the entire experience of India over the past century, to say nothing of the Russian Revolution, has demonstrated that in countries of belated capitalist development, genuine democracy including the eradication of caste oppression is only possible through the overthrow of the bourgeoisie.

Moreover, the Stalinists have promoted the "reservation" of public jobs and education places for Dalits and Other Backward Classes—a British-colonial-initiated policy that only serves to more "equitably" divide the misery of capitalism, while nourishing a tiny petty bourgeois elite that has a vested interest in perpetuating caste-ism. And for decades the CPM and CPI have hailed various right-wing caste-based parties as prospective members of a "progressive" (anti-BJP and anti-Congress) "third force."

To prevent the "common opposition" campaign from entirely collapsing, the Congress, with the Stalinists' approval, quickly came up with their own counter Dalit candidate for president, Meira Kumar.

Needless to say, the raising of a Dalit crony of the political establishment to the president, whether from the Congress or BJP, will not make a whit of difference for the impoverished Dalit workers and toilers.

The 2017 presidential elections must serve as a salutary lesson to Indian workers, youth, and socialist-minded intellectuals as to the role of the CPM and CPI. Decades ago, the Stalinists were integrated into the political establishment. They serve as errand-boys for the big business Congress Party and more broadly as political agents of the Indian bourgeoisie as it lurches rightward.



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