

BJP and Congress Party stoke reaction in Gujarat state election

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The second and final phase of state assembly elections in the western Indian state of Gujarat is being held today, with votes from both phases to be counted Monday, Dec. 18.

With a population of 64 million, Gujarat is India's ninth largest state. Nevertheless, the elections are being touted by the corporate media and the political parties themselves as a crucial test for both Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose BJP has formed Gujarat's state government for the past 19 years including 13 years during which Modi was himself Gujarat chief minister, and for the Congress Party, which has suffered a series of election debacles since falling from office in the 2014 national election.

Modi has personally led the BJP campaign, appearing at election rallies in every one of the state's 32 districts. The Congress campaign, meanwhile, has been fronted by Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty. Earlier this month Rahul Gandhi became Congress Party president, succeeding his mother, Sonia Gandhi, who had held the post since 1998.

At the campaign's outset, the BJP boasted of winning 150 of Gujarat's 182 state assembly seats. But opinion polls show a dramatic narrowing of the gap between the BJP and Congress, with one poll from the beginning of December showing the two parties tied in the state that has served as Modi's political bastion, each with 43 percent support.

Predictably, Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP have responded to the tightening of the electoral race by resorting to shrill communalist appeals. Last weekend Modi accused the Congress leadership of colluding with Pakistan to unseat the BJP in Gujarat, after several Congress leaders, including former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, held a routine meeting with

Pakistan's high commissioner or ambassador to India.

The Congress is benefiting from popular dismay and anger over unemployment and under-employment and the hardship and economic dislocation caused by two of the Modi government's premier policies—the November 2016 demonetisation of most of the country's money supply and last summer's introduction of a regressive, national Goods and Services Tax.

But the Congress, which over the past quarter-century has spearheaded both the drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for world capitalism and a junior partner of US imperialism, is incapable and unwilling of making anything but the most muted appeals to social discontent.

Instead it has mounted a foul campaign, in which it has competed with the BJP to prove its Hindu bonafides and is making reactionary casteist appeals.

Throughout the campaign, the Congress has conspicuously ignored the plight of the state's Muslim minority, who have been ghettoized since a 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, in which 2,000 people died and tens of thousands were made homeless. Modi, as Gujarat's chief minister, played a key role in instigating the 2002 events. He labelled Muslims as responsible for a train fire in which Hindu fundamentalist activists died, then effectively ordered police to stand down as violence erupted across the state.

Congress head Rahul Gandhi has visited Hindu temples and shrines as part of his electioneering, reportedly at the urging of party "elders" who argue that the BJP has successfully "cornered" the Congress into defending an "idealistic secularism." Gandhi's itinerary included a high-profile visit to the Somnath Temple, whose reconstruction in the immediate aftermath of the 1947 communal partition of South

Asia into an expressly Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, had been opposed by Gandhi's great-grandfather, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, as a political project of the Hindu communalist right.

Congress has also forged electoral alliances with three Gujarat caste-based leaders, principally by promising to champion their demands for enforcing and expanding reservations, India's caste-based affirmative action policies. Under reservation some university places and government jobs are set aside or "reserved" for Dalits (the former untouchables) and other groups traditionally discriminated against as "low-caste."

The most important of these alliances is with the Patidar Anamat Andolan Samiti (PAAS), led by 24-year-old Hardik Patel. The PAAS erupted onto the scene in the summer of 2015 when it mobilized hundreds of thousands of youth in Ahmedabad and other major Gujarat cities to demand that reservations be extended to members of the Patel caste "community", or Patidars.

The PAAS protests shook the BJP governments in Gujarat and New Delhi, which have held up the Gujarat "development-model" of deregulation, low corporate taxation and brutal suppression of worker unrest as an example for the entire country. They responded with violence and repression, with the Modi government ultimately deploying military units to the state. In suppressing the PAAS agitation, police killed 14 people and savagely beat demonstrators, including women and children. Hardik Patel was arrested and held in jail for nine months on sedition charges. Subsequently, the BJP state government issued an ordinance setting aside 10 percent of government jobs and university places for "economically disadvantaged" members of the "high castes," but it was struck down in the courts, because it would have raised the total of reserved places beyond 50 percent.

Various purported leftists have decried the PAAS agitation as a revolt of the "privileged," pointing to the fact that there have long been wealthy and politically prominent Patels. In fact, the vast majority of Patidars, like Indians as a whole, are either poor or struggling to make a living. That said, the demand for reservations is a reactionary blind alley, which only serves to split the working class and divert opposition to the social crisis produced by capitalism into a fratricidal struggle to

"equitably" ration out misery on caste lines.

Hardik Patel is himself a hardened casteist and right-winger. Before agreeing to support the Congress in exchange for a pledge to enact a Patidar-specific reservation, Hardik Patel flirted with the Shiv Sena, a fascist, Hindu supremacist party that is a partner in India's ruling, BJP-led NDA coalition.

The Congress has also struck election deals with Alpesh Thakor, the self-appointed head of the Gujarat Kshatriya Thakor Sena, and Jignesh Mevani, a lawyer who in 2016 led protests against Hindu cow-vigilante attacks on Dalits, although they have previously expressed vehement opposition to any reservation quota for Patidars. This is particularly true of Thakor, whose father was once a close friend of Modi.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) of CPM is only contesting a handful of seats in Gujarat. While the CPM is ostensibly committed to opposing both the "neo-liberal" Congress and the authoritarian Hindu communalist BJP, the party's Gujarat state unit has signaled its support for a Congress victory, including by declining to stand candidates in two working-class constituencies where it has traditionally had high levels of support.



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