

Indian state elections show mounting social anger against ruling Hindu-supremacist BJP

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India's ruling party, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), suffered a major reversal in five state elections whose results were tabulated Tuesday.

The BJP lost power to the Congress Party in three states that are part of the "Hindi heartland," its traditional power-base—Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The first two are respectively India's fifth and sixth largest states. With Chhattisgarh, they have a combined population of more than 185 million people.

In all three states there was a sharp swing against the BJP from the previous state assembly polls, with the BJP suffering statewide drops in its popular-vote share of from roughly five to ten percentage-points. The drop was even greater when compared with the BJP's share of the vote in the 2014 national election, when it won 62 of the 65 seats from Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh.

The other two state elections were won by ethnic-regional parties. In the tiny northeastern state of Mizoram, the sitting Congress government was ousted by the Mizoram National Front. In Telangana, India's twelfth most populous state, the Congress placed a poor second to the Telangana Rashtra Simiti (TRS), the party that spearheaded the campaign for Telangana's separation from Andhra Pradesh in 2014.

Nevertheless, overall the election results represented a desperately needed shot-in-the-arm for the Congress, which until a few weeks ago appeared to be nearing its death-rattle.

These were the last state elections before India's April-May 2019 national election. Consequently, their results are expected to have an inordinate impact on national politics, helping shape the rival multi-party alliances and their respective campaigns.

Held in late November and early December, the state elections were an extremely distorted expression of mounting social anger and growing opposition to the BJP, due to mass joblessness, rural distress and rampant social inequality.

Led by the would-be Hindu "strongman" Narendra Modi, the BJP was propelled to power in New Delhi in 2014 by the Indian bourgeoisie to intensify neoliberal "reform" and more aggressively assert its great-power ambitions on the world stage.

In winning India's first parliamentary majority since the 1984 election, the BJP exploited mass disaffection with both the

Congress Party, which during the previous quarter-century had spearheaded the bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a cheap labor haven for global capital, and the Stalinists. Beginning in 1989, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front had repeatedly propped up rightwing national governments, most of them Congress-led, while implementing what the Stalinists themselves termed "pro-investor" policies in the states where they held office.

Modi's government has driven forward the bourgeoisie's socially incendiary "reform" agenda, slashing social spending, selling off public sector enterprises, and gutting environmental regulations and restrictions on layoffs; while integrating India every more fully into Washington's military-strategic offensive against China.

As for Modi's promises of jobs and development, they have predictably proven to be a cruel hoax. According to a recent International Labour Organization (ILO) report, although there are more than 10 million annual entrants into India's labour force, between May 2014, when the BJP took office, and October 2017, less than a million additional jobs had been created, and most of these were in "vulnerable employment."

Undoubtedly, the BJP will respond to growing popular opposition by further stoking communal reaction. This could well include increased belligerence against Pakistan. Front-and-center in the BJP's promotion of Modi is the claim that the cross-border raids or "surgical strikes" he ordered on Pakistan in September 2016, precipitating a months-long war crisis, constituted a bold reversal of decades of Indian self-abnegation before "Pakistani terrorism."

A second tack will likely involve the BJP providing a short-term boost to the economy in the run-up to next spring's national election, through a loosening of credit and possibly increased government spending. For months the government has been embroiled in a bitter dispute with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) over its demands that the central bank lower interest rates, ease restrictions on lending by the country's many troubled banks, and hand over "surplus" funds. On the eve of Tuesday's vote-count, the RBI governor announced he was stepping down effective immediately. While Urjit Patel cited "personal reasons" for his departure, it has been all but universally concluded that he was pushed out.

Needless to say, for the Congress—which has been reduced to third and even fourth party status in much of India, including Uttar Pradesh, the “Hindi heartland” state that is home to one in every six Indians—this week’s election results have come as a godsend.

Rahul Gandhi, the latest member of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty to lead the Congress Party, boasted his party would bring “change,” including a “vision for overall development” to Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. In fact, the big business Congress’ “vision” of investor-driven “development” through intensified exploitation of working people is a carbon copy of that of the BJP. Moreover, in a further marked shift to the right, the Congress sought to counter the BJP’s crude communal attacks on it for “favoring Muslims” and opposing “Hindu India,” by mounting a campaign that even much of the corporate media dubbed “Hindutva lite.”

Rahul Gandhi toured Hindu temples, while the Madhya Pradesh Congress election manifesto pledged to bolster the BJP state government’s ban on cow-slaughter and provide \$150 million for developing temples and other religious sites along a river, the Narmada, considered holy by orthodox Hindus. This in a state where due to destitution a desperate peasant commits suicide every 7 hours.

The Stalinists have responded to the intensification of class struggle—the bourgeoisie’s embrace of Modi and social reaction and the growth of popular opposition to poverty and precarious employment—by redoubling their efforts to chain the working class to the Congress Party; a host of caste-based and regional parties, many of them erstwhile BJP allies; and the “democratic,” “secular” Indian state.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM warmly welcomed the Congress victories in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh and joined Rahul Gandhi in suggesting they opened the door to alternate policies. In a December 11 statement, the CPM called on the incoming Congress governments to “respect the people’s verdicts and adopt policies aimed at improving people’s livelihoods and reducing miseries.”

The CPM and their close ally, the smaller, older Communist Party of India (CPI), are working assiduously to use their “left” credentials to corral a myriad of social struggles and above all a growing movement of the working class, behind the reactionary drive for an “alternate” bourgeois government in New Delhi.

In Tamil Nadu, the CPM-aligned Center of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) sabotaged a recent series of militant strikes at auto-sector plants, while using them to promote and deepen its prospective electoral alliance with the DMK, one of the most important regional partners of the Congress.

The CPM has also invited Congress leaders, including Rahul Gandhi, and other rightwing politicians onto the platforms of various farmer protests.

CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury played a role

second only to Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, whose TDP was until recently a member of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, in organizing a meeting last Monday at which the Congress and twenty other parties discussed a coordinated campaign to defeat the BJP at the polls next spring.

At present, the Stalinists are promoting an “Anybody But BJP” approach, in which its Left Front would rally behind whichever party or coalition of parties has the best chance of defeating the BJP-NDA in a given state.

There are multiple reasons for the CPM opposing a pre-poll “grand alliance.” Among them, it fears it will be further discredited if it is in a formal coalition with the Congress Party and it does not want to have to ally with its arch-rival in West Bengal, the Trinamul Congress.

But the Stalinists are emphatic that post-election they will once again lend their support to any right-wing political combination that, in the name of defending “secular India,” prevents the BJP from returning to power.

There is no question that the BJP is a vile enemy of working people. But it is the Stalinists’ policy of systematically suppressing the class struggle and politically subordinating the working class to the Congress and other bourgeois parties—thereby preventing the working class from advancing its own, socialist solution to the social crisis—that has battered communal reaction and led working people into a political impasse.

After a quarter-century of the Stalinists’ ruinous policy of “opposing” the BJP, by supporting the rightwing parties of the bourgeoisie and themselves implementing pro-investor policies, the working class must blaze a new path. It must mobilize its independent class strength and rally the oppressed toilers behind it in the fight for a workers’ government committed to the socialist reorganization of socio-economic life in alliance with workers around the world.

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