Indian elections: Congress combines populist rhetoric with jingoism and communalism

Wasantha Rupasingha
16 May 2019

The Congress Party has combined nebulous populist promises of increased social spending with militarist and communalist appeals that echo those of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in its campaign for India's multiphase national election, which will culminate with the tabulation of votes Thursday, May 23.

Till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, the Congress entered the election campaign in an unprecedentedly weak position. In 2014, after ten years heading a United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government, the Congress suffered far and away its biggest ever electoral defeat, winning just 44 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats and only a 19.5 percent share of the popular vote.

Further humiliating reversals followed in a long series of state assembly elections, despite growing popular disaffection with the BJP. Last December, Congress did wrest control of three Hindi heartland states from the BJP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh. But even so, the Congress currently governs, whether solely or in a coalition, just 5 of India's 29 states, whilst the BJP holds power in 15.

The withering of the Congress' popular support—it has been reduced to minor party status in much of north India—has been protracted, but nevertheless a defining feature of Indian politics for decades. It is rooted in the failure of the Nehruvian post-independence state-led capitalist development project, which was fraudulently promoted as "Congress socialism," and in Congress' role in spearheading the Indian bourgeoisie's post-1991 drive to forge a new partnership with imperialism.

It was the Narasimha Rao-led minority Congress government (1991–96) that initiated the drive to transform India into a cheap-labour hub for global capital; and it was the Congress-led UPA government (2004–2014) that forged a "global strategic" partnership with US imperialism, while pressing forward with privatization, deregulation and other pro-investor "reforms."

In 2014, Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP exploited mass anger over the outcome of the UPA's promise of "reform with a human face"—that is, mass joblessness and crushing poverty for working people, even as the bourgeoisie and its upper middle-class hangers gorged on the fruits of capitalist development

For their part, India's business houses and corporate media swung four-square behind Narendra Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP as the best vehicle to ram through further neo-liberal "big bang reforms" and more aggressively pursue their great-power ambitions on the world stage. Five years on, big business, as demonstrated by its lavish funding of the BJP election campaign, continues to see a Modi-led BJP government as their best bet for a "strong government," i.e., a government ready to employ authoritarian methods to impose the dictates of capital.

However, should the BJP falter or its social incendiary communalist and neo-liberal agenda reap a whirlwind of social opposition, the Congress remains far and away the bourgeoisie's preferred leader of an alternate right-wing government. A *Times of India* editorial, published as the election campaign was beginning, appealed to the Congress Party to recognize that it could again become the best instrument for implementing big business' neo-liberal agenda.

Hoping to repeat its "shock" 2004 election victory over Atal Bihari Vajpayee's BJP-led government, the Congress is making a calibrated appeal to the palpable mass discontent over unemployment, rural distress and rampant social inequality, with promises of increased social spending.

Not surprisingly, these proposals prove on closer inspection to be largely smoke and mirrors.

Thus the Congress election manifesto headlines that a Congress-led government will create 3.4 million public sector jobs. But in fact the Congress is only committing to fill 400,000 existing central government job vacancies. Most of the remaining 3 million jobs will supposedly be created by the state governments, whom Congress will simply ask to fill their current 2 million job vacancies.

Congress is also pledging to launch a "minimum income scheme" that it claims will eventually provide up to 72,000 rupees (about US $1,025) annually to the poorest 20 percent of households, to double state health care spending to 3 percent of GDP by 2023–24, and to raise the allocation for education to 6 percent of the GDP.

However, Congress has scrupulously avoided saying how it will pay for any of this, while trotting out former UPA Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Finance Minister P. Chidambaram—key architects, since 1991, of the Indian ruling

elite's economic "reform" programme—to reassure big business that a Congress government will not raise corporate taxes or taxes on the "middle class" and will be fiscally "responsible."

When asked by the *Hindu* where Congress would find the money to fund its promises, Rahul Gandhi, the latest member of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty to serve as Congress Party president, claimed that it would come from the pockets of corrupt business tycoons.

Gandhi's promise of an anti-corruption campaign targeting big business only underscores the cynical and fraudulent character of Congress' social spending promises. First, Congress is itself integral to the nexus of India's crony capitalism, having led India's government for 55 of the past 72 years, including much of the time since New Delhi, in the name of privatization and pro-market reform, began effectively gifting state assets and resources to big business. Second, Gandhi's statement only serves to highlight that a Congress government has no intention whatsoever of raising taxes on domestic big business, foreign investors, or the rich.

Alongside these efforts to hoodwink voters, the Congress campaign has been notable for the extent to which it has openly competed with the BJP in making jingoistic and communalist appeals.

The Congress has a long history, dating back to at least its role in implementing the 1947 communal partition of South Asia into a Muslim Pakistan and a predominantly Hindu India, of adapting to and conniving with the Hindu right.

But this has become even more pronounced in recent years. In the run-up to the election, Rahul Gandhi toured temples and Congress conspicuously proclaimed its support for "cow protection" and joined the BJP in mounting a furor over a Supreme Court order opening a prominent Kerala temple to women. Even the corporate media designated this a " *Hindutva* [Hindu supremacist] lite" campaign.

The Congress hailed the Feb. 26 airstrike Modi ordered on Pakistan, which brought South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states the closest to all-out war since 1971, and it subsequently sought to outdo the BJP in singing the praises of India's military. It has sought to counter Modi's attempts to use the airstrikes to burnish his "strongman" image and castigate Congress for undermining India's national security, by boasting that the UPA ordered six "surgical strikes" on Pakistan between 2008 and 2014.

Indeed, just as in its pro-investor economic agenda, so too in its foreign policy, the BJP has only continued down the path blazed by the Congress-led UPA government. This is true of India's ever deeper integration into the US military-strategic offensive against China and its massive armaments program, which has now given India the fourth largest military budget in the world. It was also the Congress-led UPA that effectively scuttled the 2004 "comprehensive peace process" with Pakistan following the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack.

To underscore its commitment to "national security", i.e., to the aggressive assertion of the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie against its foreign rivals—principally Pakistan and China—and the working class and rural toilers, the Congress has issued its own "plan on national security." The plan is based on a report, prepared at the Congress' request, by a retired Northern Army Commander, Lt. Gen D.S. Hooda, who reputedly directed a 2016 cross-border raid on Pakistan that Modi proclaimed had freed India from the shackles of its "strategic restraint" policy vis-à-vis Islamabad.

Hooda's report identifies China as India's principal strategic threat, emphasizes the significance of the Indo-US alliance, cautions against excluding *any* possibility of dialogue with Pakistan, and urges a gamut of changes aimed at transforming "the army, navy and air force into an integrated warfighting force."

Underscoring the Congress' national security policy's dependence on, and similarity to, Hooda's report, Congress leader P. Chidambaram appeared alongside the general when his report was publicly released last month, declaring: "This is the broad outline of the Congress's approach to the issue of national security and what we will do when we are in government."

India's "Grand Old Party" is a decrepit, dynastic and largely discredited party. But it remains a mortal enemy of the working class and a ruthless enforcer of the interests of domestic and global capital. In so far as its claims to be a party of the "common man" or at least a "lesser evil" retain any popular resonance, this is due primarily to the support it has received from the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front. For decades, the Stalinists have promoted the Congress as amenable to popular pressure and a secular bulwark against the BJP, and on this basis justified their parliamentary support for the Rao Congress government for a full five years and the UPA government from 2004 to 2008.

Today, under conditions of growing class struggle in India and internationally, the Stalinists are once again trying to muster votes for the Congress. In the name of bringing to power "an alternate secular government," they are working to bring to power a right-wing government, most likely Congress-led, that would come into headlong conflict with the working class, while assisting US imperialism in dragging humanity toward a catastrophic world war.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact