

Indian big business propels Modi and his Hindu supremacist BJP to a second term

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have emerged strengthened from the country's national election.

While final results are still being tabulated, the BJP has increased its share of the popular vote, surpassing 37 percent, and captured more than 300 Lok Sabha seats. This gives it an absolute majority in the lower house of India's parliament, even without taking into account the 40 or more seats won by its partners in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

India's stock markets, which had soared after exit polls were released last Sunday announcing a BJP victory, again set record highs Thursday as the scale of the BJP/NDA election victory became apparent.

Big business is salivating at the prospect of Modi's government accelerating pro-investor "reforms" and aggressively asserting India's great power ambitions amid trade war and surging global geo-political tensions.

So eager was Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to solidarize himself with Modi, he congratulated his Indian counterpart on his reelection even before India's Election Commission had completed tallying the votes in just one of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies.

In his congratulatory message, US President Donald Trump said Modi's return to the "helm" means "great things are in store for the US-India partnership." Continuing down the path blazed by previous Congress Party-led governments, the Modi-led BJP government has transformed India into a veritable frontline state in Washington's strategic confrontation with China.

In the run up to the election there were numerous signs of mounting social anger and growing working class opposition to the BJP government and, more generally, to the ruinous outcome of three decades of neo-liberal capitalist restructuring. India has become one of the world's most socially polarized countries. A tiny voracious ruling elite appropriates the fruits of capitalist expansion and condemns more than 800 million people to eke out an existence on the equivalent of little more than US \$3 per day.

But the palpable opposition to chronic poverty, agrarian distress, mass joblessness (India's unemployment rate is at a 45-year high) and the Hindu right's abuse of Muslims and other minorities could find no positive expression in the politics and parties of the Indian bourgeoisie.

In this there are striking parallels with developments around the world. The working class is moving to the left and as attested in the worldwide upsurge in class struggle—from last December's plantation workers strike in Sri Lanka and the "Yellow Vest" movement in France, to the worker revolt in the Mexican maquiladora center of Matamoros, the wave of teachers' strikes in the US, and the mass anti-government protests in Algeria—seeking to assert its interests. But in so far as this opposition has yet to take the form of an independent political movement of the working class striving for workers' power, extreme right forces in country after country, including Trump in the US, the *Lega* in Italy, and Brazil's Bolsonaro, have been able to exploit the mass disaffection with the pro-

austerity, pro-war establishment "left" and liberal parties.

Faced with a vile and politically incendiary BJP election campaign, laden with militarist, anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim rhetoric, the opposition parties cowered and connived, "answering" Modi and BJP President Amit Shah with their own reactionary appeals. When Modi seized on a terrorist attack in disputed Kashmir to foment a war crisis, ordering air strikes deep inside Pakistan and bringing South Asia's nuclear-armed rivals closer to war than at any time since 1971, the opposition parties fell over one another in proclaiming their support and hailing India's military.

An historic collapse of the Congress Party and the Stalinist CPM and CPI

The Indian elections are an historic repudiation of the Congress Party—the Indian bourgeoisie's first, and till recently only, "national" party—and of the two Stalinist parliamentary parties, their Left Front electoral bloc, and affiliated trade union apparatuses that have dominated "left" politics in India since independence.

The Congress has won or is leading in 52 seats, which would represent a gain of just eight seats from 2014 when it suffered its worst-ever electoral defeat. The Congress gains were entirely at the expense of the Left Front—principally in Kerala where the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) leads the government—and the AIADMK, a right-wing regional party that governs Tamil Nadu.

The Congress actually lost seats to the BJP, as the ruling party and its NDA allies swept or won the lion's share of seats across western and northern India, including in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Haryana—states with a combined population of almost 800 million—and in the national capital territory, Delhi.

Among the losers was Rahul Gandhi, the Congress Party's dynastic president. He failed to hold the Nehru-Gandhi family "pocket borough" of Amethi in Uttar Pradesh. But Gandhi will have a seat in the incoming Lok Sabha because he successfully contested a second constituency in Kerala.

The Congress made a calibrated appeal to social discontent, promising to increase the derisory sums India spends on health care and education, and to phase in a "guaranteed annual income" scheme, under which the poorest 20 percent of households would receive 72,000 rupees (about \$1,025) annually.

India's workers and toilers rightly deemed these promises to be simply not credible. The Congress has been issuing pledges to "banish poverty" since long before most Indians were born, while ruthlessly defending the interests of the Indian bourgeoisie. With the shipwreck in 1991 of its state-led capitalist development project—which it cynically had labelled

“Congress socialism”—the Congress Party spearheaded the Indian bourgeoisie’s drive to forge a new partnership with imperialism, based on transforming India into a cheap-labour production hub for global capital.

Most of the heavy lifting in initiating and implementing “big bang” reforms—deregulation, privatization, the slashing of corporate taxes, the casualization of work, establishment of Special Economic Zones, etc.—and in forging a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism was carried out by Congress-led governments from 1991 to 1996 and 2004 to 2014.

The Stalinists have suffered an even more ignominious electoral and political collapse. Their popular support among India’s workers and toilers has hemorrhaged. For decades they politically suppressed the working class—containing and defusing the mass opposition to the economic “reform agenda,” and propping up a succession of right-wing governments at the Centre, most of them Congress-led, that implemented “pro-market” policies and sought closer ties to Washington.

Together, the CPM and the older, smaller Communist Party of India (CPI) have won just five Lok Sabha seats. Moreover, in four of the five they were elected on the coattails of a DMK-Congress electoral alliance in Tamil Nadu.

In the three states traditionally considered the electoral bastions of the Left Front and where the Stalinists have repeatedly led governments—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tripura—they won just 1 seat. In West Bengal, whose state government the CPM led for 34 years ending in 2011, its share of the popular vote fell to single digits. The BJP made a breakthrough in a state where it was till recently a minor player.

One development exemplified the corruption and political rot that prevails in the CPM after decades in which it administered the capitalist state apparatus in West Bengal, and after 1991, implemented what it itself labeled “pro-investor” policies. Much of the CPM apparatus defected to either the state’s current ruling party, the right-wing Trinamool Congress, or the Hindu supremacist BJP. Among the BJP’s 18 victorious candidates in West Bengal was a former CPM state legislator, Khagen Murmu.

In the national election held 15 years ago, the CPM-Left Front, buoyed by a wave of popular opposition to the BJP/NDA’s first-ever full-term national government, emerged as the third largest bloc in parliament, with more than 60 MPs. The CPM promptly put its new-found influence to work corralling various regional and casteist parties behind the Congress, serving as the midwife of the right-wing Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and its principal parliamentary prop for the first four years of its decade in office.

In 2019, the Stalinists aspired to play the same criminal role. Their response to the dramatic intensification of class struggle, as epitomized by the bourgeoisie’s embrace of Modi and the recent wave of strikes and peasant protests, has been to redouble their efforts to chain the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie and its state. They waged an “Anybody but BJP” campaign, calling for support to whichever party or alliance in a given state had the best chance of defeating the BJP/NDA. They proclaimed their backing for a faction of the bourgeoisie to form an “alternative secular” government—i.e. another big business government committed to pro-investor reform, the Indo-US alliance, and the rearmament program that has given India the world’s fourth largest military budget.

In the days before the vote count, CPM general secretary Sitaram Yechury was one of a handful of “trusted” leaders who met with Gandhi and his mother and former Congress president Sonia Gandhi, to discuss, if the parliamentary arithmetic permitted, how they would stake their claim to government.

For decades the Stalinist have justified their support for right-wing governments with the claim that this was the only way to block the BJP’s path to power. The end result is that the BJP and Hindu right are a greater menace than ever.

With the working class politically smothered by the Stalinists and prevented from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis, the BJP has been able to exploit popular anger and frustration over rampant social inequality and ever-deepening economic insecurity.

A government of crisis and reaction

A mood of apprehension, at least among the more perceptive sections of the ruling elite, overhangs the corporate media and stock market’s celebrations of Modi’s electoral triumph.

Indian and world capitalism are mired in systemic crisis. The Indian press is full of warnings about the multiple problems that beset India’s economy—a banking system weighed down by corporate debts, causing the credit system to seize up; a drop in consumer demand, rooted in a protracted agrarian crisis, years of government austerity and mounting unemployment; and the threat posed by the development of trade war.

The Indian bourgeoisie is playing an especially foul role on the world stage. Through its strategic integration with Washington, New Delhi is encouraging US imperialism’s reckless offensive against Beijing, while leaning on the US to bully and threaten Pakistan and build up India’s nuclear-armed military.

The extreme dangers this poses for the people of India, the region and the world have been starkly demonstrated by the three war crises India has passed through since 2016—two with Pakistan and one with China.

Moreover, as India becomes sucked into the maelstrom of great power conflict, it is facing a host of escalating demands from its ostensible US ally that gravely threaten the Indian bourgeoisie’s economic and strategic interests. These demands include cutting off oil imports from Iran and Venezuela, eliminating what remains of India’s barriers on American trade and investment, and ending or at least dramatically curtailing New Delhi’s strategic partnership with Russia.

As everywhere, the ruling class’ response to the cascade of economic and strategic threats is more aggression—against the working class and rural poor, and against its capitalist rivals.

Modi’s stoking of Hindu communalist reaction has prompted handwringing complaints from sections of the elite who fear he is destabilising and discrediting the Indian state, and could reap a whirlwind. But the demand emanating from corporate boardrooms in India, London and New York is that the BJP government must dramatically accelerate structural changes aimed at intensifying the exploitation of the working class.

“Not only has economic momentum slowed,” declared a *Times of India* editorial this week, “there are incipient signs of stress on the price front, while global trade wars (perhaps even real wars) are breaking out. Consequently, the next government will have no option but to press the accelerator on reforms.”

The working class—whose specific weight has vastly increased as a result of India’s capitalist development and integration with global capitalism—will come into headlong conflict with the Modi government, and sooner rather than later. The crucial question is to arm it with a socialist internationalist program. The Indian working class must constitute itself as an independent political force in opposition to all factions of the Indian bourgeoisie and its parties, rally the rural poor and all the oppressed behind it in the fight for a workers’ government and socialism, and unify its struggles against austerity, social inequality, and the threat of war with the international working class in a global offensive against capitalism.



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