

Arch-communalist Modi sworn-in as India's prime minister for second time

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Narendra Modi, the leader of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was officially sworn in to serve a second term as India's Prime Minister Thursday. Indian President Ram Nath Kovind also administered the oath of office to 57 others—all but four of them from the BJP—who will serve under Modi in the cabinet of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government.

The BJP and NDA were returned to power with an increased majority in the elections, held over seven phases in April and May, for the Lok Sabha, the lower but more powerful house of India's bicameral parliament. With a 37.4 percent share of the popular vote, the BJP won 303 of the 545 Lok Sabha seats, giving it an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha for the second consecutive election. The BJP's twenty odd NDA allies picked up a further thirty seats, giving the BJP-led alliance a total of 353.

Indian big business and its media outlets strongly backed the return to power of the BJP/NDA, viewing it as their best means to accelerate the pace of "pro-market" reform and to aggressively pursue their great-power ambitions on the world stage.

They have been quick to hail the election results as a popular endorsement of Modi's "strong" government and the BJP's noxious *Hindutva* ideology. They do so with the aim of intimidating working people—the vast majority of whom either voted for the BJP's opponents or did not vote—and delegitimizing the opposition to the Modi government that will rapidly emerge from India's workers and toilers.

Recent years have witnessed a mounting wave of social struggles. This includes militant strikes by auto and other workers in India's globally-connected manufacturing sector as well as by teachers and other state employees, farmer protests against low-support prices and subsidy cuts, and popular agitations against environmental devastation.

But the opposition of India's workers and toilers to austerity, reaction, and war could find no expression within the Indian political establishment. The BJP's electoral opponents—the Congress Party, the Stalinist parliamentary parties, and a host of smaller regional chauvinist and caste-based parties—are all deeply discredited. This is because of their own decades-long role in implementing neo-liberal policies that have made India one of the world's most socially unequal societies, support for the rapid expansion of India's military, complicity in cementing an Indo-US "global strategic partnership," and corrupt ties to various cliques of crony capitalists.

Both the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—suffered historic electoral debacles. The Congress, which ran a *Hindutva*-lite campaign and competed with the BJP in making bellicose threats against Pakistan and celebrating Indian's military as "heroes," polled just 19.5 percent of the vote. Under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, whose mother, father, grandmother and great-grandfather all preceded him as party president, the Congress won 52 Lok Sabha seats, not enough even to be recognized as the official opposition.

Between them the Stalinist CPM and CPI won only five seats, and of these four were on the coattails of a right-wing electoral bloc in Tamil Nadu, in which they were junior partners of the DMK and the Congress. For decades the Stalinist parties and their trade union affiliates suppressed the class struggle and supported, in the name of blocking the Hindu right's rise to power, a succession of right-wing governments, most of them Congress-led. By politically paralyzing the working class, the Stalinists created conditions in which the BJP could divert popular anxiety and frustration over mounting economic insecurity and social inequality behind communal reaction.

A cabinet of reaction

Modi's restructured cabinet boasts 21 new members. The most prominent and important are the new Home Minister, BJP President Amit Shah, and Subramanyam Jaishankar, a former foreign secretary. The latter has been appointed India's external affairs or foreign minister, although he is not a member of either chamber of parliament.

Jaishankar's predecessor, Sushma Swaraj, did not contest the elections due to her ailing health. Rajya Sabha MP Arun Jaitley, hitherto Modi's most important minister, has also had to step down, at least for the moment, due to ill health. Jaitley was finance minister throughout Modi's first five-year term and doubled as defence minister for two half-year stretches in 2014 and 2017.

The appointment of Shah to head the ministry charged with internal security is a vile provocation and must be taken as a warning that Modi will deploy ruthless state violence against

mounting social opposition.

Considered Modi's right-hand man, Shah has been a close associate of the Indian prime minister since his days as Gujarat's Chief Minister. As BJP president, Shah orchestrated the BJP election campaign, which featured bellicose attacks on Pakistan, the whipping up of animosity toward Muslims and Bangladeshi migrants, and the promotion of an indicted Hindutva terrorist, Pragya Singh Thakur, as a "star" BJP candidate. He also oversaw the five-year campaign to expand the BJP's power and reach that preceded the 2019 polls, plotting out a strategy in which communal provocation and polarization and bribery of political adversaries were key weapons.

India's Central Bureau of Investigation accused Shah of having played a major role, while serving as Gujarat's Home Minister, in the 2010 extrajudicial killings of Sohrabuddin Sheikh, his wife Kauser Bi and his associate Tulsiran Prajapati. But after Modi came to power in New Delhi, Shah was declared exonerated.

Nirmala Sitaraman, who has served as India's defence minister since late 2017, has been named as Jaitley's replacement at the head of the Finance and Corporate Affairs Ministries.

She will be tasked with aggressively implementing economic "reform" measures long demanded by foreign and domestic big business. These include gutting restrictions on layoffs and plant closures in the so-called formal (large-scale) sector and changing land appropriation laws to make it easier for big business to gain access to large allotments of land for "development."

According to the *Economic Times*, big business wants the government to place itself on a "war footing" in the drive to stimulate "growth" through the implementation of "pro-investor" measures. Whilst stock markets have soared on news of the BJP's re-election, India's corporate elite is shot through with anxieties and fears over the multiple crises that beset India's economy—among them, falling consumer demand, agrarian distress, anemic business investment and export growth, and a financial sector weighed down by massive corporate debts. With the elections over, the government finally released a long suppressed report that shows unemployment in India at a 45-year high.

Although Jaishankar is a lifelong career diplomat, his appointment as foreign minister is an unmistakable sign that the Modi government intends to align India even more closely with the US, especially in its strategic offensive against China. Jaishankar played a leading role in negotiating the 2007 Indo-US nuclear accord, which was seen by both sides as a means of consummating the Indo-US strategic partnership. He later served a two-year stint as India's ambassador to the US, which only ended when he became the Modi government's Foreign Secretary or senior-most diplomat. As such, he was deeply involved in India's adoption of Washington's line on the South China Sea, the opening of India's military bases to US battleships and warplanes, and its pursuit of closer bilateral and trilateral military-security ties with US imperialism's principal Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Jaishankar also has lengthy experience in dealing with China. He was India's ambassador to China for four-and-a-half years ending in 2013, and he was the point-man for the Modi government in the

negotiations with Beijing that led to the end of the seven-week 2017 military stand-off between Indian and Chinese troops over a remote Himalayan plateau. At its height, the Doklam border dispute threatened to trigger clashes between the nuclear-armed rivals.

With Shah replacing him as Home Minister, BJP veteran Rajnath Singh has been named Defence Minister. Singh is a notorious Hindu communalist, who worked to rebuild the BJP after it fell from national office in 2004 by trumpeting its Hindutva ideology.

With Shah in charge of India's internal security forces and Rajnath Singh directing the military, the BJP/NDA government can be expected to intensify its brutal repression in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state and the site of a three decades-old, Pakistan government-supported anti-Indian insurgency. New Delhi currently has more than half-a-million security forces deployed in Indian-held Kashmir, making it one of the most heavily militarized regions in the world.

In their allocation of ministerial berths, Modi and his BJP have shown a contemptuous attitude toward their NDA allies, giving just one cabinet post each to the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Shiv Sena, Loktantrik Janata Party (LJP) and Republican Party of India (RPI). The Janata Dal (United), which won 16 seats from Bihar, declined to join the government after its demand for three cabinet posts was rejected. However, it will remain part of the NDA. Internal disputes over who should be its minister apparently led the Tamil Nadu based AIADMK to decline the offer of a cabinet seat.

In a provocative step, Modi chose to snub Pakistan's prime minister, Imran Khan, by conspicuously leaving him off the list of the region's leaders invited to Thursday's swearing in ceremony.

Modi seized on a February 14 terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir to foment a war crisis with Pakistan that brought South Asia's rival nuclear powers the closest they have been to all-out war since 1971. The corporate media, nonetheless, hailed the BJP government-ordered air strikes deep inside Pakistan as a bold assertion of India's military prowess and a "game changer" in the long fraught relationship between New Delhi and Islamabad.

Buoyed by Washington's downgrading of its ties with Pakistan and embrace of India as a key strategic ally, India's ruling elite is determined to coerce Pakistan into halting all logistical support for the Kashmir insurgency and demonstratively accepting India as South Asia's dominant power.



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