

India: BJP loses Delhi election as voters reject communalism

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Rattled by the eruption of mass protests against its anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), India's governing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sought to use the assembly elections in Delhi, the country's National Capital Territory, to mount a political counter-offensive.

However, its efforts to polarize the electorate through an incendiary communalist campaign largely failed.

When the votes were counted last Tuesday, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP—Common Man's Party), which captured power in Delhi in Dec. 2013 just 13 months after its formation, remained firmly ensconced in office.

The undeserving beneficiary of mass popular anger against the BJP's vile communalist agenda and pro-investor socio-economic policies, the AAP won 62 of the 70 seats in the Delhi assembly. With support surging among Muslim voters who were determined to prevent a BJP victory, the AAP captured 53.57 percent of the vote, 0.73 percent less than the previous election in 2015.

The BJP did increase its share of the vote from with the 2015 Delhi assembly election. But its 38.9 percent vote-share was down sharply from last May's national election, when it won 56.5 percent of the vote in the National Capital Territory and all seven of Delhi's Lok Sabha seats.

The Congress Party, the historic party of the Indian bourgeoisie and till recently its preferred party of national government, saw its vote-share almost halved, from 9.7 percent to a derisory 5.44 percent.

An ethnically and culturally diverse Union Territory of 18.5 million people, Delhi has been a focal point of the nationwide protests against the CAA. While students from Jamia Millia Islamia University and Muslim housewives in the working-class Shaheen Bagh neighbourhood initiated the anti-CAA protests in Delhi, they have been joined by students, workers, and professionals of all faiths and religious backgrounds.

Because it is India's national capital and the center of its largest urban agglomeration, Delhi plays an outsized role in the politics of India. But this year's state assembly elections took on added political significance, as the BJP in the hopes

of seizing back the political initiative choose to fight the campaign on so-called "national issues"—that is, by championing its noxious Hindu supremacist agenda, which includes placing Indian-held Jammu Kashmir under permanent central government trusteeship, and pressing forward with the building of a Hindu temple on the site of the razed Babri Masjid (mosque) in Ayodhya.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi twice spoke at election rallies. But with the BJP declining to nominate its choice for Delhi's chief minister, the dominant figure in the BJP campaign was Modi's chief henchman, the central government Home Minister Amit Shah. Shah spoke at some 52 BJP meetings and rallies.

Invariably, he used them to denounce opponents of the BJP's Hindu chauvinist policies as "anti-national" and for being in league with India's arch-enemy Pakistan. Shah accused the Congress and AAP of creating "mini-Pakistans like Shaheen Bagh," a reference to the continuous all-day, all-night sit-in Muslim women have mounted on a major through road in that south Delhi neighbourhood since the CAA was adopted in mid-December.

Yogi Adityanath, the BJP chief minister from Uttar Pradesh and an infamous Hindu chauvinist, was also a star election campaigner, appearing at a dozen rallies. Adityanath who ordered a violent crackdown on anti-CAA protests in his state in December that left 20 people dead, insinuated that the Shaheen Bagh protesters were "terrorists" who should be fed with "bullets not biryani."

Two other examples will suffice to give the fascistic tenor of the BJP campaign. BJP MP Parvesh Verma "warned" that the anti-CAA protesters at Shaheen Bagh would enter Delhi residents' houses and "abduct your sisters and mothers, rape them, kill them—that's why today is the moment."

Modi's junior finance minister, Anurag Thakur, was caught on video leading BJP supporters in chants of "shoot them down"—a Hindu right war-cry that gained currency after the head of the West Bengal BJP, Dilip Ghosh, boasted that the BJP state governments in Uttar Pradesh, Assam, and Karnataka had shot anti-CAA protesters "like dogs."

Seeking to act on these criminal incitements, three Hindu supremacists opened fire at or near Shaheen Bagh in the days immediately following Thakur's provocation.

In a further attempt to whip up reaction, stoke communalism, and incite fear in the run-up to the Feb. 8 election, the Delhi Police—who are directly under the control of Shah's Home Ministry—repeatedly launched violent attacks on anti-CAA protests. And when thugs from the ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad), the student movement of the RSS, the BJP's ally and ideological mentor, savagely attacked students at Jawaharlal Nehru University on January 5, the Delhi police stood down, failing to intervene till the pre-planned assault was finished.

The BJP's defeat in Delhi is the latest in series of state election setbacks for India's ruling party since it won re-election last May. The state election results are a distorted reflection of the mounting social anger among India's workers and toilers that has animated the anti-CAA protests and a wave of social struggles, including a general strike against the Modi government's neo-liberal policies on January 8 in which tens of millions of workers participated.

BJP governments were unseated after elections in October in Maharashtra and in Jharkhand in December. In Haryana, which borders Delhi, the BJP lost its majority in last October's state election, but was able to cling to power with the support of smaller parties.

Although the Congress Party won the Jharkhand election and now has a share of power in Maharashtra because it has agreed to serve in a government led by the BJP's erstwhile ally, the fascistic Shiv Sena, it has failed to gain significant traction nationally from the mounting anger against the BJP.

Its election result in Delhi, where it formed the government under Sheila Dikshit for 15 consecutive years, from December of 1998 to December 2013, was nothing short of disastrous. Predictably the Congress is trying to explain away its debacle in Delhi, saying it was due to voters' determination to thwart the BJP. But the reality is the Congress is deeply discredited, having for decades spearheaded the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a cheap-labor hub for global capital and a strategic partner of US imperialism.

The AAP was able to suddenly come to political prominence in 2013 by exploiting the growing anger against the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance national government, which during its 10 years in office presided over a massive growth in social inequality.

The AAP undoubtedly benefited in the 2020 election from the determination of much of Delhi's population, Hindu and Muslim alike, to strike a blow against the BJP and its rabid Hindu chauvinist politics.

But the AAP, like the rest of the Indian political

establishment, is steeped in communalism.

During the election campaign, AAP leader and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal conspicuously failed to speak out against the BJP's Hindu chauvinist policies. Nor did he visit the centers of popular opposition to the BJP, from the Shaheen Bagh sit-in to JNU and Jamia Millia Islamia University, or even publicly campaign in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. Kejriwal did, however, have time to visit a Bajrang Bali Hindu temple and to publicly recite a Hindu hymn, the Hanuman Chalisa.

The AAP supported the BJP's "surgical strikes" inside Pakistan in Feb. 2019, which brought the nuclear-armed countries to the brink of war, and backs the building of a temple in Ayodha where Hindu chauvinists tore a 16th century mosque to the ground at the instigation of the BJP leadership.

Speaking to the News18 channel on December 18, Kejriwal attacked the BJP's CAA not because it discriminates against Muslims, but for purportedly opening the door to mass migration to India of non-Muslims from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. Echoing the BJP's vile anti-immigrant campaign, Kejriwal demagogically proclaimed, "Who will give them jobs, where will you make them stay? Will you give them housing in Delhi, Mumbai, Assam, Tripura?"

The AAP uses populist phrases in an attempt to mask that it is a bourgeois party, no less beholden to India's billionaires and multi-millionaires than the BJP and Congress. During its seven-year-rule, social conditions in Delhi have worsened.

Delhi is one of the most air-polluted cities in the world, with air pollution last year surpassing the WHO limit by as much as 40 times.

Together with the BJP central government, the AAP provides employers free rein to use Delhi as a cheap-labor sweatshop. The Global March Against Child Labor noted in 2017 that around 100,000 children work for more than 14 hours a day in the illegal sweatshops in and around Delhi. In December a fire in a four-storey building housing more than a dozen illegal factories making garments, toys and other consumer goods killed more than 40 workers.



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