

Indian state elections deliver blow to Modi, amid COVID-19 catastrophe

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national government have suffered a major setback in five state assembly elections held in late March and April, but whose results were only tabulated on Sunday.

The Hindu supremacist BJP fell far short of what it had loudly proclaimed to be its principal goal—wresting power in West Bengal, India’s fourth most populous state, from Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress.

Banerjee is a right-wing demagogue, who came to power in 2011 exploiting mass anger over the Stalinist-led Left Front’s implementation of what it itself termed “pro-investor” policies. But the BJP views her as an adversary and calculated that a victory in West Bengal would give it a much needed political boost in the face of mounting opposition to its class war, communalist authoritarian agenda.

Hoping to bank on its strong performance in West Bengal in the 2019 national election, the BJP poured enormous energy and resources into its campaign to defeat Banerjee. Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, held numerous rallies in West Bengal, where they shamelessly sought to polarize the electorate along communal lines, by championing their anti-Muslim Citizenship Amendment Act and denouncing Banerjee for “Muslim appeasement” and abetting “foreign infiltration.”

However, the BJP failed even to match its 2019 vote share, while the TMC’s rose by 4 percentage points to more than 48 percent, enough to win 214 of the 294 state assembly seats.

In Tamil Nadu, the sixth largest state, the BJP’s regional ally, the AIADMK, went down to defeat after 10 years in office. In the neighbouring southern state of Kerala, the BJP lost its sole state assembly seat.

India’s ruling party did retain power in the northeastern state of Assam at the head of a coalition government. Its only other consolation came in Puducherry, a Union Territory and former French colonial enclave with a population of 1.25 million. There it was able to gain a share of power as the junior partner of a local Congress Party splitoff.

The five states that went to the polls this spring have an aggregate population of 255 million, making them home to about 18 percent of all Indians.

The campaign unfolded as COVID-19 cases surged across the country, transforming India into the pandemic’s global epicenter. Nevertheless, until the very final stages of West Bengal’s eight-phase election, Modi and the other party leaders recklessly continued to hold mass election rallies. This was part of a concerted campaign, spearheaded by Modi and his BJP, but supported by the entire political establishment, to systematically downplay the virus’ danger and project an air of normalcy to justify their keeping the “economy open.”

The prioritizing of the profits of India’s venal capitalist elite over saving human lives has led to a human catastrophe. India has been averaging more than 100,000 new COVID-19 infections since April 7; 200,000 since April 17; and 300,000 since April 24. As a consequence, India’s dilapidated health care system has been overwhelmed leading to mass deaths. Officially India has recorded more than 20,000 COVID-19 deaths in just the past seven days. But this is widely acknowledged to be only a fraction of the true death toll. “From all the modeling we’ve done, we believe the true number of deaths is two to five times what is being reported,” University of Michigan epidemiologist Bhramar Mukherjee told the *New York Times*.

There is mounting mass anger against the Modi government. Over its criminal mishandling of the pandemic. Over its attempts to “revive” India’s economy through further austerity, an accelerated privatization drive, a battery of pro-agribusiness laws, and a labour code “reform” that promotes precious contract-labour jobs and outlaws most strikes. And over its moves to further integrate India into US imperialism’s military-strategic offensive against China.

Tens of millions of workers joined a general strike last November 26 to protest the government’s self-avowed “pro-investor policies” and to demand emergency support for the hundreds of millions who lost their livelihood when the Modi government imposed a calamitous, ill-prepared lockdown last spring. Tens, and at times hundreds, of thousands of farmers have been camped on the outskirts of the national capital Delhi since late November to demand repeal of the three pro-agribusiness laws rammed through parliament last September.

However, the anger against the Modi government and against the broader drive of the Indian ruling elite to intensify the

exploitation of India's workers and toilers found only very distorted expression in the election outcome. There are two main reasons for this.

First, balloting was completed in all the states other than West Bengal by April 6. That is before the mounting wave of COVID-19 infections had become a veritable tsunami, and under conditions where the political establishment and corporate media were still insisting in unison that India was beating the coronavirus.

Second, and more importantly, the BJP's electoral opponents are themselves deeply discredited among India's workers and toilers, because of their own role in implementing the ruling class' socially incendiary agenda. This is above all true of the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, and the two major Stalinist parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The state election results delivered yet another body blow to the Congress, which in 2019 failed to win even 10 percent of the seats in India's lower house of parliament for the second straight national election. The Congress failed in its much ballyhooed attempt to unseat the incumbent governments in Kerala and Assam, lost all 23 seats it held in the West Bengal assembly and fell from power in Puducherry.

In Tamil Nadu, where it stood as part of the victorious DMK-led electoral alliance it may be given a few cabinet posts. But with 133 of the 234 seats state assembly seats, the DMK has a clear majority on its own.

The Stalinists are making much of the reelection of Kerala's Left Democratic Front (LDF) government, the only state government they now lead. The LDF won 99 seats in the 140-member assembly, with the CPM capturing 62, the CPI 17, and the remaining 20 split between a renegade Congress faction, the Kerala Congress (M), and the communal Indian Union Muslim League, until recently a Congress ally.

This was the first time in 40 years that a Kerala state election did not result in the rotation of power between the LDF and the Congress-led United Democratic Front. The Congress had great hopes of returning to power in Kerala. In the 2019 national election, its alliance won 19 of the state's 20 seats. But its campaign, which invariably attacked the LDF from the right, fizzled. Meanwhile, much of the corporate media praised the LDF government and in particular the Kerala Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member "Captain" Pinarayi Vijayan, for their purported "competent" administration—that is, their combination of capitalist development with meagre social welfare schemes.

Outside of Kerala, the CPM and CPI were electoral allies of the Congress Party and very much shared its fate. In Tamil Nadu, the CPM and CPI helped boost the fatuous claims of the DMK-Congress alliance to stand for "social justice," and as its junior allies each won two assembly seats.

In West Bengal, the Stalinists stood in an electoral alliance

with the Congress Party and the recently founded Indian Secular Front and suffered a debacle even more humiliating than did the Congress. The CPM polled just 4.68 percent of the vote, the CPI 0.2 percent, and they and their Left Front allies failed to win a single seat—this in a state where the Left Front ruled for 34 consecutive years, from 1977 through 2011.

While the Stalinists are trying to blame their wipeout in West Bengal on the electoral polarization between the BJP and the TMC, it is in reality the outcome of their decades-long suppression of the class struggle, integration into the capitalist establishment, and support for and pivotal role in implementing the bourgeoisie's post-1991 "new economic policy."

Having cheered on Gorbachev and the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy's restoration of capitalism in the former Soviet Union, the CPM and CPI propped up a succession of Indian Union governments, most of them Congress led, that fully integrated India into the US-led capitalist order and pursued ever closer relations with Washington. Meanwhile, in West Bengal, their Left Front government pursued capitalist investment by seizing farmers' land, outlawing strikes in the IT-enabled sector, privatizing businesses and slashing corporate taxes.

For decades, the Stalinists have justified their relentless efforts to politically subordinate the working class to the big business Congress Party and a host of right-wing caste and regional-ethnic parties in the name of fighting the BJP and the Hindu supremacist right. The end result has been that the BJP and reaction have only grown stronger, as they have been able to exploit the popular anger and frustration over the bitter fruits of "Left" and "Left"-supported governments, like the Congress-led UPA which governed India from 2004 to 2014—endemic poverty, ever-deepening social inequality, ramshackle public services and rampant corruption.

There is no question that the BJP and the fascist goons in its sister organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), constitute a mortal threat to the working class and the rural toilers. But they can be defeated only through the independent mobilization of the working class, rallying the oppressed masses under its leadership, against Indian capitalism and all its political representatives and in the fight for international socialism.



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