Modi ignores Court request to postpone elections as Omicron surges in India

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Election Commission of India (ECI) have ignored a request by the Allahabad High court in Uttar Pradesh (UP) to postpone UP assembly elections scheduled for early next year. The court cited the imminent threat of an Omicron-led third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India.

With over 200 million inhabitants, UP is India's most populous state. It sends 80 members to the Indian parliament, the most of any state, and winning UP is traditionally seen as crucial to winning national elections.

Modi and saffron-clad UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who is also from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have already organized massive election rallies. Along with UP, Uttarakhand, Goa, Manipur and Punjab are to hold elections. Not only the BJP but also opposition parties including the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional ruling party, are holding election rallies of hundreds of thousands, with criminal disregard for human lives amid the Omicron-led surge of the pandemic.

The court, which issued a directive on December 23, noted that election rallies are being attended by "lakhs [hundreds of thousands] of people where it is impossible to follow Covid protocol." It warned: "If it is not stopped in time, the results will be more devastating than the second wave," as the third wave "is at our doorstep."

The court's warning has a clear precedent. At its peak of the devastating second wave of COVID-19 in May, India saw a staggering 400,000 daily cases and 4,000 daily deaths. It is established that this wave was, to a significant extent, triggered by assembly elections in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Along with these states, UP, where village council elections were held at that time, was among the top four states with the highest caseloads at the time.

Experts showed how these super-spreading election rallies, where most people did not wear masks and ignored social distancing, played a key role to spread the coronavirus, infecting millions.

Fearing an even worse catastrophe in the upcoming elections, Justice Shekhar Kumar said, "The world exists only if you are alive," *Times of India* reported. He then urged Modi and the ECI: "If possible, consider postponing the election, because rallies and meetings can be held later when we all survive."

Instead of listening to the High Court, the Modi government pressed the ECI to proceed with reckless election preparations which will predictably produce tragic consequences. On December 27, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan held a "high-level meeting" with the officials from five poll-bound states to review "the public health response measures for containment and management of Covid-19" and vaccination status in these states.

The central government "advised the poll-bound states to speedily ramp up COVID-19 vaccination of all eligible population for the first dose and ensure that those due for the second dose are administered the same," *TOI* reported. Downplaying the threat from highly infectious COVID-19 variants, the health ministry asked state authorities to "ensure that recommended COVID-19 appropriate behavior is strictly followed and adequate measures are undertaken for their effective enforcement."

The health secretary brazenly told the panel that "Omicron, though highly transmittable, did not have very serious or long-term health effects, and many people infected with it were recovering well," the paper reported. These remarks—echoing similar false claims

by governments around the world to justify keeping the economy open and allowing the virus to spread—misguide millions of unprotected people as the dangerous Omicron variant spreads.

Contrary to government authorities' claims, two doses of the vaccine are inadequate to protect from the Omicron variant.

In a December 25 address to the nation, Modi indirectly made a case for proceeding with elections, while assuring the corporate elite that there will be no lockdowns. After a long delay, he announced vaccination for children aged 15-18 years starting January 3, to "reduce the worry of parents with school-going children." Avoiding the words "booster dose," he also announced a "precaution dose" for frontline workers and health care workers to "strengthen (their) confidence."

He added that the same vaccine will be given "for senior citizens above 60 years of age with comorbidities on the advice of their doctors from 10 January 2022."

All Modi's measures have one purpose: to signal the financial oligarchy that his government will not impose a national-level lockdown to curb the spread of the pandemic, and that it will rely almost exclusively on vaccination against COVID-19. However, the United States and many European countries have reported many reinfections among people who received two doses. This is irrefutable proof that a vaccine-only policy cannot stop the pandemic.

The Modi government's entire response to the pandemic over nearly two years underscores the Indian ruling elite's indifference to human life as it instead maximizes corporate profits. Now, as a third wave emerges, the government is taking no serious measures to stop the contagion.

On Thursday December 30, India reported 13,154 new COVID-19 cases in 24 hours—a 76.6 percent increase over the last week—bringing India's tally to 34.82 million cases. Several major urban centres are reporting massive increases in infections: Mumbai 400 percent, Delhi 600 percent and Chennai 100 percent. With 268 new fatalities, the official death toll increased to 480,860. For over two weeks, India's daily fatalities have remained steady at around 300.

"The recent rise in infections is due to the Omicron variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus," *The Hindu*

concluded on December 29. Citing data from GISAID, an open-access portal for genomic data on viruses, it noted: "Omicron has become the dominant variant in India. … In the last few days of December, the Omicron variant was found in about 60 percent of the samples sequenced in India."

India's Omicron cases went up to 781 on Thursday with the most cases reported from Delhi at 263, followed by Maharashtra with 252 cases. Omicron cases in Delhi shot up from 2-3 percent to 25-30 percent of COVID-19 cases in two weeks, a genome sequencing lab in Delhi said on December 28.

About 38 percent of the total samples analyzed at genome sequencing laboratories in Delhi over the last week detected the Omicron variant, which has now overtaken the Delta variant (31 percent of total samples), the *Indian Express* reported on December 30. Alarmingly, these states became epicenters of the pandemic in India, witnessing massive losses of life in the two earlier waves of COVID-19.

So far, 19 of India's 36 states and Union Territories (UTs) are reporting Omicron cases. Evidence of community spread is mounting. As many as 52 of the 63 cases of Omicron infections detected in Delhi on Monday are in individuals who did not report a history of international travel or contact with international travelers, the *Indian Express* reported on December 28.

While the Modi government has made clear there will be no nationwide lockdown or restriction measures to stop the rapidly-spreading pandemic, a number of states and UTs have begun to implement state-wise restrictions, including "night curfews." These measures are not sufficient to halt COVID-19, and particularly the surging Omicron variant. They aim to prevent any impact on profit margins of major industries and businesses.