# Modi and his far-right BJP suffer a major reversal in Karnataka state election

**Deepal Jayasekera, Keith Jones**
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India's ruling, Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was defeated in last week's state assembly election in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, after mounting a vile communalist campaign fronted by its national leader and the country's prime minister, the would-be autocrat Narendra Modi.

In 2019, some 14 months after the previous state election, the BJP wrested power in Karnataka from a Congress Party-backed minority government led by the Janata Dal (Secular), after organizing pelf-and-power-induced defections from its rivals.

When votes were tabulated last Saturday, the BJP saw its seat tally slashed from 118 to just 66. The Congress, which last led Karnataka's government from 2013 to 2018, took 136 seats. This was a 56-seat increase from the 2018 elections, and more than enough to form a comfortable majority in the 224-seat state assembly.

The Congress saw its share in the popular vote swell by almost 5 percentage points from 2018, rising from 38 percent to 42.9 percent. The share of the vote garnered by the Janata Dal (Secular), which captured 18 seats as compared to 37 in 2018, fell by an almost identical 5.1 percentage point drop, to 13.3 percent. This was principally because Muslims, who constitute 13 percent of Karnataka's 65 million-plus population, rallied behind the Congress in the hopes of ousting a BJP government that had mounted one communal provocation after another.

The BJP, which in 2018 won two-dozen more seats than Congress despite winning 750,000 fewer votes, saw its share of the popular vote dented in the 2023 state election. It fell 0.25 percentage points to 35.97 percent.

The BJP poured enormous resources into retaining power in Karnataka, India's eighth-largest state and the only state in southern India in which it has ever formed a government. Karnataka's capital and major urban agglomeration, Bengaluru (Bangalore), is home to India's globally significant IT sector.

The loss of Karnataka is a significant blow to the BJP in a vote that was widely viewed as among the two or three most important state election dress-rehearsals before the India-wide general election to be held in April–May 2024. The Karnataka state election results are also a desperately-needed shot in the arm for the Congress Party, which has been on life-support since the 2019 national election and currently leads the government in just four of India's 28 states—Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and now Karnataka.

Modi and his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, campaigned aggressively in Karnataka. As in other recent elections, they combined promises of "development"—by which they mean the infrastructure projects demanded by wealthy investors—with fatuous boasts about India's "world-leading" growth rate and growing global power, and rank communalist appeals.

But this demagogy, which is amplified by much of the corporate media, cannot drown out reality. Conditions of life for the vast majority have continued to deteriorate, with BJP governments at both the national and state level ruthlessly attacking the social and democratic rights of India's workers and toilers, so as to make them bear the full burden of the global capitalist breakdown, which has been greatly intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war on Russia.

Much of the Congress campaign focused on the manifest corruption of the BJP government. On April 12, a 40-year-old building contractor, Santosh Patil, was found dead in his hotel room, shortly after publicly alleging that K.S. Eshwarappa, a senior BJP leader and Karnataka's rural development minister, had harassed him for 40 percent "commissions," i.e., kickbacks, on government projects.

However, the Congress Party did make a calibrated appeal to growing anger over mass joblessness and skyrocketing prices for basic food items and other essentials like cooking gas petrol and diesel, for which subsidies have been slashed. The Congress Party's Karnataka state unit chief, D.K. Shivakumar, urged voters to cast their votes after "looking at their gas cylinders"—a pointed reference to the fact that the price of a non-subsidised cooking gas cylinder has risen to 1,100 rupees, a 70 percent increase since 2018.

As polling day approached, the BJP, sensing the mounting anger over the social crisis and rampant corruption, sought to double down on its promotion of Hindu chauvinism and anti-Muslim bigotry with the aim of polarizing the electorate on communal lines. It accused the Congress of "disregarding Hindu values" and "appeasing" minorities, particularly Muslims.

In March, the BJP state government issued a decree

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unilaterally scrapping a 4 percent affirmative action-style "reservation" of government jobs and university education places for impoverished Muslims, and redistributed the quota to two Hindu groups, Lingayat and Vokkaliga, whose elite have traditionally played an outsized role in the state's politics. In its election manifesto, the BJP pledged to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a BJP scheme to harass and stigmatize Muslims in the name of identifying and expelling "illegal" immigrants, and introduce a Uniform Civil Code, another long-term demand of the Hindu right.

Earlier in its mandate, the BJP had whipped up communal animosity by banning devout young Muslim women who wear the hijab from attending public pre-university schools and strengthened existing prohibitions on cow slaughter. It also turned a blind eye, when not openly conniving in, vigilante attacks by the Bajrang Dal and other Hindu supremacist groups.

Modi was front and centre in the BJP's communalist election campaign. This included praising at one of his mass rallies a Hindu-right propaganda film, *The Kerala Story*, which claims large numbers of Hindu women in India are being enticed and coerced into converting to Islam and joining the Islamist terrorist/militia group ISIS.

In the Karnataka elections, the Congress Party was the underserved beneficiary of popular opposition to the BJP's pro-investor economic policies and Hindu supremacist agenda.

It made promises of electricity subsidies, rations to poor families and financial help to unemployed graduates—promises that it will quickly scale back or outright abandon once it takes up the reins of government, citing the deepening economic crisis. The Congress, like the rest of the anti-BJP opposition across India, has no real disagreement with the BJP's pro-investor policies. It initiated and long spearheaded the post-1991 drive to make India a cheap-labour haven for global capital and its transformation into a front-line state in the US military-strategic offensive against China. It made no issue of India's and Karnataka's ruinous profits-before-lives response to the COVID-19 pandemic, because it fully agreed with it.

The Congress' defence of "secularism" is as fraudulent as its claims to be "pro-people." For decades it has connived with the Hindu right, and is currently closely allied with the fascistic Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena, which lionizes the premier Hindutva ideologue of the 20th century, V.D. Savarkar.

In the Karnataka elections, the Congress denounced some of the BJP's communal outrages, while making its own more guarded appeals to Hindu chauvinism, as in its promise to "launch specials schemes in the name of Lord Hanuman," and welcomed a cabal of BJP defectors as Congress candidates.

The Karnataka elections have exposed the sham character of the BJP's claims of electoral invincibility and Modi's supposed unique bond with the Indian people, the so-called "Modi magic."

If until now the BJP has had a run of electoral successes, it is entirely bound up with the character of its bourgeois opponents—a vast array of corrupt right-wing parties, running the gamut from the Gandhi family-controlled Congress Party to various regionally-based ethno-chauvinist and caste-ist parties—and the political suppression of the working class at the hands of the trade unions and the Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its older, smaller ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The Modi government is itself well aware that the Indian economy is wracked by crisis and that it sits atop a social volcano, hence its ever more frenzied promotion of communalism, with the aim of splitting the working class, and its attempts to squeeze out its bourgeois opponents and centralize power in its own hands, including through trumped-up criminal cases against its opponents. Through one such case, Rahul Gandhi, the Congress Party's principal spokesperson and presumptive prime ministerial candidate in 2024, has been stripped of his seat in parliament and is threatened with jail.

Predictably, the CPM Polit Bureau has welcomed the Congress Party victory in Karnataka and will seek to use it to justify intensifying its efforts to consolidate a right-wing, Congress Party-led anti-BJP alliance for the 2023 elections. In the name of fighting the BJP, the Stalinist CPM and CPI have for more than three decades tied the working class to its big business political opponents. As a result, the bourgeoisie has been able to push through its socially incendiary agenda and pursue its great-power ambitions by assisting Washington in its anti-China war drive, and the far-right BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies have become an ever more menacing threat.

The only way for the working class to prevail against the Modi government and defeat the savage assault on its social and democratic rights being mounted by all the various state governments across India, including those led by the Congress, is by mobilizing its independent political strength and rallying the rural poor behind it in the fight for a workers' government committed to socialist policies. This can only develop as part of a broader struggle waged by a united movement of the international working class for socialism in South Asia and around the world.

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