

Australian Labor government rolls out red carpet for fascistic Indian PM Modi

Oscar Grenfell
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A state visit to Australia last week by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi provided a graphic display of imperialist hypocrisy. The Australian Labor government, which together with US administrations frequently denounces China as “autocratic,” fawned over the Indian leader, whose rule is based on far-right Hindu communalism and conducts increasingly authoritarian attacks on basic democratic rights.

Modi was to participate in a meeting of the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) in Sydney last Wednesday. That gathering was cancelled after President Joe Biden declared that he could not attend, purportedly due to US debt ceiling negotiations.

Modi nevertheless proceeded with his trip and the Labor government spared no expense. The visit served to deepen a series of bilateral relationships between members of the Quad, a de facto alliance of the four largest military powers in the Indo-Pacific—the US, Australia, India and Japan—directed against China.

As part of its commitment to this US-led war drive, the Labor government has intensified military and political ties with other Quad members. Late last year, it struck the furthest-reaching defence agreement Australia has ever had with Japan. The deal provides for a substantial increase in military collaboration, with the stated aim of “interoperability” between the armed forces of the two countries.

While in India last March, Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese proclaimed that India was now a “top tier strategic partner” of Australia. Modi and Albanese announced that Malabar naval exercises, which initially involved only India and the US, will be held in Australia later this year. Japan will also participate.

India is considered particularly crucial to the US offensive against China, which is viewed as the chief

threat to American imperialist hegemony. India has overtaken China as the most populous country in the world. It has historic disputes along its 3,500-kilometre border with China, which have been inflamed as potential flashpoints of war.

Amid a developing trade war, the substantial Indian economy is also viewed by the Australian capitalist class as a potential offset to any loss of exports to China, its largest market. Modi is overseeing an industrial build-up, based on the intensified exploitation of Indian workers.

At the same time, the tightening of ties with India is viewed as critical, under conditions where the country has substantial economic relations with Russia. India has largely avoided direct comment on the war in Ukraine. The US-NATO proxy war against Russia is one prong of a global strategy of American imperialism, the other being confrontation with China.

Albanese and his Labor government are going to great lengths to align India more directly with Washington’s plans. That was the general context and purpose of Modi’s visit.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the trip was that Modi and his Australian hosts did not seek to conceal the Indian leader’s autocratic character. Instead, they sought to reproduce, in Australia, the authoritarian cult of personality that has come to characterise Modi’s rule.

The centrepiece of Modi’s visit was a stadium event in Sydney last week. Albanese flattered Modi, declaring: “The last time I saw someone on this stage was Bruce Springsteen and he did not get the welcome that Prime Minister Modi has got. Prime Minister Modi is the boss.” The two warmly embraced.

The event was effectively a political campaign rally for Modi and his far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

While there are almost 800,000 people of Indian descent in Australia, the event was attended by 20,000. They were clearly supporters of the BJP, together with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a fascistic paramilitary organisation with which Modi is associated.

The RSS has historically glorified the racialism of the Nazi regime. Its adherents murdered Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi because of his limited criticisms of Hindu communal violence.

The Sydney event mirrored Albanese's visit to India in March. There he had closely identified himself with Modi, including riding around a cricket stadium in a car decked out as a Hindu chariot.

In such engagements, India is invariably described as "the world's largest democracy," a country with which Australia and the US have "shared values." These "values" are counter-posed to the "authoritarianism" of China. But what is Modi's record?

- As chief minister of the state of Gujarat, Modi stands accused of encouraging Hindu communal riots in 2002 that resulted in the killing of at least 790 Muslim citizens.

- This February, Modi ordered a raid on the Indian office of the British Broadcasting Corporation over a documentary outlining his role in the Gujarat massacre.

- In 2019, as prime minister, Modi carried out an effective constitutional coup, unilaterally revoking the semi-autonomous status of the Muslim-majority provinces of Jammu and Kashmir. Modi instituted a reign of terror in Kashmir, with a massive police deployment, roundups of opponents and, at one point, a complete shutdown of electronic communications.

- Modi presides over attacks on workers' leaders, such as the 13 Maruti Suzuki workers sentenced to life in prison, on frame-up charges, for launching a struggle against workplace exploitation.

The list could go on. In 2021, the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute downgraded its assessment of India under Modi from a democracy to an "electoral autocracy." The report said the "diminishing of freedom of expression, the media, and civil society have gone the furthest" of any Indian administration.

The response of the US and its allies, including Australia, is a shrug of the shoulders. While they routinely invoke the plight of Uygher Muslims in China's Xinjiang Province, they ignore the far more

widely documented persecution of Muslims in Kashmir.

Albanese said he would not comment "on some of the internal politics in India which, as a democracy, has a range of views."

Matthew Knott, of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is among the most hawkish anti-China voices in the Australian media. In March, he co-authored the "Red Alert" series calling for Australia to prepare for war with China within three years, including by stationing US nuclear weapons and introducing conscription. He invariably presents this militarist program as a defence of "democracy."

While ostensibly concerned with democratic rights in China, Knott is not troubled about civil liberties in India. In a comment dripping with cynicism, Knott wrote: "While foreign policy requires a delicate balancing of principle and pragmatism, Albanese's primary job is to advance Australia's national interests, not to 'call out' his fellow world leaders for their failings."

Knott continued: "It's in Australia's interest for Albanese to have a good relationship with Modi given the latter leads the world's most populous country, a rising economic powerhouse that serves as an important counterweight to China's rapid rise."

During the visit, Albanese signed a trade and migration deal with Modi, further increasing the collaboration between the two countries. But the most significant aspect of the trip was the close alignment between the two leaders, which can be understood only in the context of the advanced preparations for a US-led war against China.

Albanese's identification with Modi is a warning to the working class. If the Australian ruling elite is happy with autocracy in India, to further its geostrategic interests, it will support authoritarian rule at home to suppress workers' struggles as living conditions continue to deteriorate and a catastrophic war looms.



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