India’s ruling far-right BJP secures narrow overall state election win, as Congress Party suffers further debacle

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India’s opposition Congress Party suffered a major debacle while the far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has formed India’s national government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the past decade, secured a narrow overall victory in the five-state assembly elections whose results were announced earlier this month.

Held in states with a combined population of 230 million, the state elections were widely considered an important testing ground for the national election to be held in the spring of 2024.

The BJP, with the support of much of the corporate media, is pointing to its electoral triumph in the three northern Hindi-belt states that went to the polls in November and December to claim that the state elections showed strong popular support for Modi and his government.

In reality, the BJP’s electoral support is not indicative of any widespread popular enthusiasm for its right-wing, pro-big business policies and incessant promotion of far-right Hindu supremacism. Among workers and the rural poor, there is growing anger over the government’s brutal attacks on their basic social and democratic rights, as it implements pro-investor economic “reforms” and slashes social spending to finance a rapid expansion of India’s military.

However, working people do not see the Congress Party and the other opposition parties—various regional parties and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front allies—as a genuine alternative to the BJP. Congress, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of national government, and its allies have all implemented “pro-investor” policies akin to those of the BJP when in national or state government.

Congress and the regional bourgeois parties also all support India’s ever-expanding anti-China “Global Strategic Partnership” with Washington. While Congress on occasion denounces Modi, his BJP and the RSS-led cabal of Hindu supremacist organizations with which they are closely allied for their most blatant communal outrages, it has increasingly adapted to and connived with the Hindu right.

Buoyed by their state election victories, Modi and his government moved aggressively in the just concluded 18-day-long “winter session” of parliament to ram though a series of repressive laws, violating at will traditional parliamentary norms. This includes a new Telecommunications Act, adopted just days after it was tabled in parliament and while more than 100 opposition parliamentarians had been temporarily expelled for “misbehaviour”. The new law, which has been termed “totalitarian” by some of its critics, gives the government sweeping powers to spy on electronic communications, including encrypted messages, censor online content and in the name of “national security” even take temporary control over the internet.

In Madhya Pradesh, which with a population of 85 million was the largest of the states to go to the polls this fall, the BJP government that came to power three years ago after it succeeded in organizing defections from a minority Congress-led administration, was returned to power with an increased majority. With 48 percent of the vote to Congress’s 40 percent, the BJP won 163 of the 230 state assembly seats.

In two other Hindi-speaking states—Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh—the BJP wrested power from Congress Party-led governments. In Rajasthan, which with a population of 80 million is India’s seventh largest state, the BJP won just 2 percent more of the vote than Congress. However, due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, which generally disproportionately favors the most popular party, the BJP captured 115 seats to the Congress’s 69.

Only in the south Indian state of Telangana was the Congress able to win government. In a state in which the BJP is an also-ran, it defeated the regional Bharat Rashta Samiti (BRS), which had held power in Telangana since it became a separate state in 2014.

In the fifth state to go the polls, Mizoram, the Mizo National Front, till recently an ally of the BJP, fell from power. The Congress, meanwhile, saw its popular vote fall by 9 percentage points and won just 1 of the 40 assembly seats. Mizoram, which lies in India’s northeast and has a population of little more than one million, will now be governed by a recently-formed alliance of six tribal-based parties known as the Zoram People’s Movement.

A significant indication of growing opposition towards all bourgeois parties was the number of votes for NOTA (None of the Above), which is the bottom-most button on the electronic voting machine ballot. It was reported that NOTA polled more votes than the winning margin in 47 seats across four states, most of them in Madhya Pradesh.

The Congress Party dominated Indian politics during the first half-century after independence, and between 1991 and 2014 it did much of the heavy-lifting in dismantling the state-led capitalist development and “non-aligned” policies with which it had previously been associated and falsely touted as “Congress socialism.” This included spearheading the drive to fully integrate India into the imperialist-led world economy and making an Indo-US partnership the cornerstone of India’s foreign policy.

In 2004, after eight years in opposition, the Congress returned to power at the head of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) on the basis of the fraudulent claim that it could intensify the implementation

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of pro-investor policies while providing increased social support to working people—what it called pursuing "reform with a "human face." It was under the Congress-led UPA that New Delhi forged its "global strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

By the time the Congress was swept from power in 2014, its rule was synonymous with high prices and mass joblessness and corrupt ties to big business. Since then, India's so-called Grand Old Party has suffered one electoral defeat after another. It has been eliminated as a major political force in large swaths of India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, respectively the country's largest, third largest and fifth most populous states.

In the 2019 national election, the Congress won its lowest ever share of the popular vote, 19.5 percent, and won just 52 seats in the Lok Sabha, less than the 10 percent required to be formally recognized as the official opposition.

With the outcome of the recent state elections, the Congress holds power outright in just three of India's 28 states, Karnataka, Telangana and Himachal Pradesh, and is a junior partner in coalition governments in three others.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM, and its Left Front allies—including the older but smaller Communist Party of India (CPI)—have similarly suffered a massive hemorrhaging in their electoral support and for like reasons. Since 1991, the Stalinists have supported a succession of right-wing governments at the Centre, most of them Congress-led, in the name of blocking the BJP from power. Indeed, the CPM was instrumental in stitching together the Congress Party-led UPA alliance. Moreover, in those states where they have held office, West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, the Stalinists have implemented what they themselves have termed "pro-investor" policies.

As a result, the supposedly "secular" and "progressive" Congress Party and the Indian "Left" have been discredited among the working class, rural toilers and lower middle class. It is the rotten record of these parties that has created the political opening for the BJP to exploit mass social anger and frustration with a combination of phony promises of development and reactionary communalist appeals.

India's corporate media and big business have provided solid support to Modi and his BJP, which they view as their best bet to ruthlessly pursue their class war agenda at home and great-power aspirations internationally. And they have continued to do so throughout Modi's second term, during which the BJP has been even more brazen in whipping up animosity against Muslims and other minorities and suppressing dissent, even from within the bourgeois establishment.

The Indian ruling class's further turn to the right and towards autocratic and fascist forms of rule, as indicated by its lining up behind Modi and his BJP, is not an isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is part of a global trend, personified by Donald Trump in the US, Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Javier Milei in Argentina and Rishi Sunak in the UK.

The BJP's campaign for the state elections combined Hindu communalism, jingoistic Indian chauvinism and casteism, as well as bare bones populist schemes, often targeting the most desperate of the poor. The party made use of caste divisions for electoral gains, above all, in the selection of its election candidates.

In the wake of Congress's debacle in the state elections, many of its partners in the newly formed anti-BJP electoral bloc, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance or I.N.D.I.A., roundly criticised the Congress leadership for its refusal to agree to seat sharing with other alliance members. The INDIA alliance is a political coalition of 28 opposition parties, formed last July, with the aim of ousting the BJP in the 2024 Indian general elections. The Stalinist CPM is part of the INDIA alliance and promotes it, just as it previously did Congress and the UPA, as a "secular" bulwark against the Hindu supremacist BJP. The Stalinists thus provide political life support for the highly discredited big business Congress.

The Congress and INDIA's alliance "secular" credentials are a fraud. Among its key constituents are the Janata Dal (United), which for most of the past quarter-century has been a major BJP ally, and the fascistic, pro-Hindutva Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray).

As for the Congress, in many of the five states it ran an expressly Hindu chauvinist campaign. In Madhya Pradesh, former Chief Minister Kamal Nath, who led the Congress election campaign in the state, sought to outdo the BJP and the virulently communalist RSS by patronizing chauvinist Hindu priests. Recently he engineered the merger of the Bajrang Sena (a Hindu extremist outfit) with the Congress. In Chhattisgarh, Congress Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel implemented Hindu chauvinist programs, like building the Ram Van Gaman Path.

Congress has been so closely associated with Hindu chauvinism that even the Stalinists have had to admit it. In its statement on the state election results, the CPM lamented that the Congress Party was "pandering to Hindutva sentiments" during the election campaign, blaming Kamal Nath as "the chief practitioner of this soft Hindutva".

These criticisms from the CPM are all the more cynical given that they are made of a party that it has been hailing for decades as a "progressive" alternative to the Hindu supremacist BJP. The Stalinist CPM continues to play an extremely reactionary role by subordinating the working class and the rural poor to the pro-big business, pro-imperialist and "soft" Hindutva Congress party and numerous regional right-wing parties under the guise of fighting the fascistic and communal BJP.

It is thereby preventing the working class from mobilizing its independent social power and rallying the rural toilers behind it in the fight against all factions and political representatives of the bourgeoisie and for social equality and a workers' and peasants' government. This is the only viable means of opposing the Indian bourgeoisie's turn to reaction and its war alliance with US imperialism, and of realizing the social and democratic aspirations of India's workers and toilers.

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