

Opposition INDIA electoral bloc in shambles after key partner defects to Modi-led alliance

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Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and his Janata Dal (United) party ditched the Congress Party-led INDIA electoral bloc last Sunday and immediately re-entered the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The partnership between the JD (U) and the BJP was cemented by a change in government Sunday in Bihar, India's third most populous state.

First, Nitish Kumar resigned as Bihar Chief Minister, precipitating the fall of the state's Grand Alliance (*Mahagathbandhan*) coalition government, which was made up of or supported by INDIA bloc members, including the three Stalinist parliamentary parties. Then, in a piece of theatre previously agreed upon with the state's BJP-appointed governor, Kumar had himself sworn in as the head of a new coalition government—this one formed by the JD (U) and the BJP and its Bihar-based allies. As part of the new arrangement, Nitish Kumar now has two BJP Deputy Chief Ministers.

Nitish Kumar and the JD (U) have been on-again, off-again allies of the far-right BJP for more than a quarter century. So notorious are Kumar's switches of allegiance—Sunday's was the fourth time in a decade he has jumped horses between the BJP-dominated NDA and the opposition—he has come to be known as *Paltu Ram* (turncoat or somersault expert). However, it need be emphasized that for most of the past 25 years the JD (U) and BJP have been partners in Bihar's government and nationally in the NDA.

In 2013, Kumar feigned outrage over the BJP's selection of Modi, who as Gujarat chief minister had instigated the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, as its prime ministerial candidate and withdrew his JD (U) from the NDA. A decade later, just days after Modi inaugurated a Hindu nationalist shrine on the site of the former *Babi Masjid* mosque as a major step toward establishing a Hindu supremacist state, Kumar once again renewed his partnership with the BJP.

Even as the INDIA alliance was crystalizing last summer, the Bihar Chief Minister was sending out signals that he had not closed the door to a renewed alliance with the BJP. This included paying homage to Atal Vajpayee, India's first BJP/NDA prime minister, on his death anniversary.

Nevertheless, the JD (U)'s defection, or more correctly return to the BJP fold, leaves the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) in shambles just weeks before the official launch of the campaign for the 2024 national election. It is also yet another devastating exposure of the reactionary politics of India's two main Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, and the older, smaller Communist Party of India (CPI)—and of the Maoist

Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation.

The JD (U)'s leading role in the INDIA alliance

Nitish Kumar and his JD (U) were among the key architects of the INDIA alliance, and until it became evident late last week that they were preparing to switch horses, were promoted as such by their erstwhile INDIA allies, including the fake “communist” parties, the CPM, CPI, and the CPI (M-L) Liberation.

Some prominent INDIA leaders had lobbied for Kumar to be named the alliance's convenor, a position that remains unfilled to this day at least in part because it is widely believed that the occupant will be poised to become the alliance's prime ministerial candidate.

Kumar and the policies of the now defunct *Mahagathbandhan* coalition government, especially its efforts to expand caste-based reservation or affirmative action measures, were also projected as emblematic of the INDIA alliance's “social justice” agenda.

The Congress Party has been in decline for decades. But until 2014, it remained the Indian bourgeoisie's preferred party of national government, including in serving as the spearhead of India's full, post-1991 integration into the US-led world capitalist economic order and as the principal architect of the Indo-US military-strategic alliance.

However, since 2014 the Congress has suffered one electoral debacle after another, due to two intertwined processes. Because of its corruption and decades-long implementation of right-wing pro-investor policies, the Congress faces mass popular disaffection. Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie has rallied round the Hindu strongman Modi and the BJP as their best vehicle for ruthlessly implementing their agenda of austerity, privatization, and deregulation and for pursuing their great-power ambitions on the world stage. Currently, the Congress forms the government in just three of India's 28 states.

In a manifest admission of its own political weakness, the Congress Party allowed Kumar to take the first step in establishing an anti-BJP alliance for the 2024 elections to the Lok Sabha (the lower, popularly elected house of India's parliament). Last June, he convened a meeting of opposition party leaders in Patna, Bihar's capital, out of which the INDIA alliance soon evolved.

Bihar's *Mahagathbandhan* was held up as a model for the INDIA alliance because of the ostensible breadth of the political forces it brought together on an “anti-BJP” platform. It included two powerful

regional caste-based parties, one of which had previously dallied with the BJP/NDA—the JD (U) and Rashtriya Janata Dal—as well as the Congress Party, and the traditional “left” parties, the CPM and CPI. It also included the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, a Maoist grouping that won 12 seats in the Bihar assembly in the 2020 state elections running as an ally of the RJD and the Congress.

For class struggle, not “caste struggle”

In the weeks immediately preceding the June 23, 2023 opposition conclave in Patna, Nitish Kumar and his *Mahagathbandhan* coalition government had focussed their energies on touting their completion of the first comprehensive “caste census” undertaken by any state since India gained political independence in 1947. The census, which allotted the population into scores of *jati* or sub-castes and then aggregated the data from an accompanying socioeconomic survey on caste-*jati* lines has been widely hailed, including by the Stalinists, as a master counter-stroke to the BJP’s proclamations of “Hindu unity.”

Calls for a caste-based “social justice” agenda have been central to the INDIA alliance’s political rhetoric since its inception. By this they mean a push for a further expansion of India’s reservation (affirmative action) policy under which government jobs and university places are “reserved” for certain historically oppressed or disfavoured *jati* and tribal groups.

Originally developed by the British colonial regime as part of its “divide and rule” policy, “reservation” has nothing to do with the fight for genuine social equality. Rather it is a mechanism for propping up Indian capitalism. It serves to channel explosive social anger and frustration over mass unemployment and poverty into a divisive struggle among the oppressed for a more “equitable” distribution of social misery, and is a means for the ruling class to cultivate privileged petty bourgeois layers who can serve as the “leaders” of the rival caste groups and ideologues of caste-based politics.

The reality is India today is as socially polarized as it was at the height of the British Raj. The richest 1 percent of Indians own more than 40 percent of all the country’s wealth, while the bottom 50 percent, more than 700 million people, own just 3 percent. Only by forging the fighting unity of the working class, in opposition to all the caste, religio-communal and ethnic divisions incited by the Indian bourgeoisie, and rallying the rural toilers behind it in the struggle for socialism, will it be possible to lift the masses out of poverty and secure their basic social and democratic rights.

It is highly significant that in the five months since the official launch of the INDIA alliance the only common platform plank it has advanced in opposition to Modi and his BJP is its phony, caste-based appeal for “social justice.” Significant but hardly surprising, since the constituents of the INDIA alliance have no disagreement with the BJP’s pro-investor socioeconomic agenda, and are as committed as it is to the anti-China Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership remaining the cornerstone of India’s foreign policy.

With the return of the JD (U) to the BJP/NDA fold, the INDIA alliance’s reactionary scheme to counterpose “caste struggle” to the BJP’s Hindu supremacist appeals lies in tatters, and not for the first time. In recent years, the BJP has itself frequently proven adept at

playing the caste-ist card against its rivals within the political establishment, exploiting the resentments and divisions fostered between various Dalit and “Other Backward Caste” groups by casteism, caste-based political appeals and the reservation system.

The response of the Stalinists

Predictably, the Stalinists have responded to the JD (U)’s defection to the BJP-led NDA with angry denunciations of its “betrayal” and “opportunism.” In an admission of their own political blindness, the CPM observes in the latest issue of *People’s Democracy*, “In hindsight, the INDIA grouping is lucky to have not made (Nitish Kumar) the convenor.” An editorial on the CPI (M-L) Liberation’s website intoned “Nitish Kumar’s desertion ... can only be seen as an act of great betrayal to the cause of democracy and social justice.”

All of this is a transparent attempt to cover their own tracks. To accuse Nitish Kumar of “betrayal” is like denouncing a wolf for eating sheep.

The truth is that for decades the CPM, CPI and more recently the CPI (M-L) Liberation have been willing to hail as a “secular democratic” force any party, no matter how right-wing, that temporarily was on the outs with the BJP. Thus they have repeatedly found themselves “betrayed” by Nitish Kumar and his JD (U), and are currently allied in the INDIA electoral bloc with all manner of right-wing parties, including the fascistic Shiv Sena.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten, that the CPI (M-L) Liberation played an important role in preparing the political terrain for the JD (U) to assume a leading role in creating the INDIA, and thereby provide the Indian bourgeoisie with an alternative right-wing government should the BJP falter. At its 11th party conference, held in Patna last February, it held a public rally in the name of uniting all opposition forces to defeat the BJP at which Nitish Kumar, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, and senior Congress leader Salman Khurshid appeared alongside CPI (M-L) Liberation General Secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya.

Foul as all this is, it is but the latest bitter fruit of the reactionary politics of Indian Stalinism, including its Maoist variant. For decades the Stalinists have functioned as an integral part of the bourgeoisie establishment, suppressing the class struggle, while harnessing the working class in the name of opposing the BJP Hindutva fascists to the parties of the bourgeoisie, beginning with the Congress Party.

In India as around the world, fascism cannot be defeated by trying to prop up a capitalist order that is rotting on its feet, but only through the independent political mobilization of the working class in the fight against austerity and imperialist war and for social equality.



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