

Seeking re-election, Modi and his BJP wage far-right, communalist campaign

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Seeking a third five-year term at the head of India's government, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are waging a vile, fascistic campaign, punctuated by communalist slurs and dog-whistling appeals to religious bigotry and accusations that the opposition parties are pro-Pakistan and intent on stealing people's wealth.

Modi has repeatedly flailed the Congress Party-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) for "appeasing" India's Muslim minority. Stoking prejudice, he has referred to Muslims as "infiltrators," "jihadis," and those who have "large numbers of children."

Willfully distorting a more than decade-old comment by Congress ex-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Modi and the BJP have accused the opposition of plotting to take away government jobs and university places that are set aside for Dalits and other lower caste groups under India's reservation (affirmative action) system and give them to Muslims.

Modi has also charged the INDIA bloc with a "Naxhalite" (Maoist) plan to confiscate people's wealth, although Congress, in keeping with its staunch "pro-investor" stance, has ruled out any tax increases. Speaking at an election rally in Rajasthan, Modi asserted the opposition parties "will calculate the gold of the mothers and sisters, get information about it and then distribute it ... to the infiltrators." With the aim of further inflaming the crowd, India's prime minister then thundered, "Should your hard-earned money go to the infiltrators? Do you approve of this?"

The BJP has a long history of communalist incitement and, in connivance with its Hindu far-right allies, of communal violence. Modi himself came to national prominence for his role, when chief minister of the western state of Gujarat, in instigating and presiding over the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom, in which some 2,000 people, most of them poor Muslims, were killed and hundreds of thousands rendered homeless.

Still, the current BJP election campaign stands out for the stridency of the ruling party's communalist and fascistic appeals and the aggressiveness and mendacity with which it has attacked its bourgeois political opponents. As would be expected, the Modi government has also continued to use its control of the state apparatus to ensnare its opponents, including the Chief Minister of the Delhi National Capital Territory, Arvind Kejriwal, in trumped-up and manipulated criminal cases, and to intimidate and silence press and left-wing critics.

The unofficial kick-off of the BJP election campaign was

Modi's inauguration last January of a temple to the mythical Hindu god Lord Ram on the site of the razed Babri Masjid mosque. In a nationally-televised spectacle, Modi celebrated the supposed "rebirth" of India as a "Hindu nation" after more than a millennium of "Muslim domination" and British colonial rule. In December 1992, Hindu fundamentalist activists mobilized by the BJP and under the watch of its leaders tore the almost 500-year-old Babri Masjid to the ground, in express defiance of the orders of India's highest court.

Still, it had been widely anticipated that the BJP—having taken a major step toward realizing its goal of transforming India into a de facto, if not yet a constitutionally-declared, Hindu *rashtra* (state) in which the minorities live on sufferance—would focus its election campaign on promises of economic development. A constant BJP refrain in recent years had been that the Modi-led BJP government has delivered world-beating economic growth, making India a magnet for international investment, and that under their rule India is rapidly emerging as a world power.

That may indeed have been the BJP leaders' plan. However, even the Indian and international press have noted that following the first phase of India's seven-phase election, held on April 19, there was a pronounced shift in the BJP's campaign rhetoric, with communalist and other far-right appeals being given much greater prominence.

This includes, in keeping with the BJP campaign's fascist overtones, the promotion of Modi as an authoritarian leader, part Hindu strongman and part Hindu guru or holy man.

BJP campaigners insist only Modi can provide India with "strong government," while they decry the opposition parties for purportedly currying the favour of arch-rival Pakistan. Modi, for his part, claims to lead a "*dhakad sarkar*" (strong government) that makes "the enemy thinks 100 times before doing anything."

Apart from Modi, only his chief henchman, Home Minister Amit Shah, and to a lesser extent Yogi Adityanath—the Hindu high-priest and criminally-indicted inciter of anti-Muslim violence whom Modi named the chief minister of India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh—are given any prominence in the BJP's national campaign. Shah and Yogi Adityanath are, if anything, even more menacing and venomous in their attacks than Modi.

Campaigning in West Bengal earlier this month, Shah told a BJP rally that since the Trinamool Congress, an INDIA election bloc ally, had come to power in the state, "Mullahs have been given full freedom, madrasas are given our wealth and the mafia are openly

allowed to loot the poor population.” Shah has previously boasted that under the BJP-promoted National Register of Citizens, Muslims who can’t prove their citizenship—a common occurrence in a country where the vast majority of rural births are unregistered—will be dropped like “termites” into the Bay of Bengal.

The shift in the BJP campaign has been attributed by the opposition and, more significantly, much of the media to increasing concern within the governing party that the anticipated “Modi wave” has failed to materialize. Turnout in the election’s first phase was down by around 3 percent, and a similar drop in voter participation was recorded in the next two phases. These first three phases together accounted for more than half of all the seats at stake in India’s general election, which is to conclude June 1, with the votes tabulated on Tuesday, June 4. In the most recent phase, the fifth, held on May 20, preliminary reports indicate a 1.9 percent decline in voter turnout.

Speaking to *The Diplomat* late last month, a “senior editor at the national bureau of one of India’s dailies” said that the “BJP has reasons to feel nervous, even if a little, as the election looks closer than the BJP would like people to believe.”

A social powder keg

India is a social powder keg with an already lit fuse. There is mass, but as yet inchoate, social anger and frustration over chronic joblessness and under-employment, chronic poverty, dilapidated and non-existent public services and the ever-increasing chasm between a tiny capitalist elite, their hangers-on in the upper middle class and India’s workers and toilers. India’s top 1 percent own 40 percent of all India’s wealth and gorge on 20 percent of the national income. While hundreds of millions of Indians are malnourished, suffering from stunting and other afflictions, the country, according to the Hurun Research Institute’s 2024 global rich list, boasts 271 billionaires, with 94 of them newly minted in 2022. India is now second only to the US among all countries in the numbers of its billionaires.

India’s ruling elite, led by Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani, respectively India’s richest and second-richest billionaires, have rallied round Modi and the Hindu supremacist BJP, because they see them as their best political instrument for ruthlessly pushing forward with their agenda and suppressing mass discontent through state violence and the deployment of communalism as a means to confuse and split the working class.

At the outset of the election campaign, the BJP boasted that it would win 370 of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower but more powerful chamber of India’s bicameral legislature. Were it to capture a more than two-thirds share of the Lok Sabha seats, the BJP would be better positioned to push through constitutional changes. But the 370 seat target is also meant to invoke the Modi government’s arbitrary August 2019 rewriting of the constitution to abolish its Article 370 which gave Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir unique autonomous status. Late last year, India’s

Supreme Court brazenly reinterpreted the law to provide a legal justification for the overnight abrogation of Article 370, which tightened the Indian state’s grip over disputed Kashmir and sent a bellicose message to both China and Pakistan.

Preelection polls showed that the top-most concerns of voters were unemployment and rising prices. They also indicated that the majority of Indians reject the exclusivist Hindu nationalist politics of the BJP.

To what extent the latent opposition to the BJP and its agenda will find any expression in the elections remains to be seen.

The INDIA bloc is a ramshackle electoral bloc comprised of various right-wing parties that have come together with the aim of providing the ruling class an alternative government to the BJP—one that would be no less committed to attracting investment through privatization, deregulation and austerity and to the Indo-US global strategic partnership, under which India has been transformed into a frontline state in Washington’s military-strategic offensive against China.

INDIA is led by the Congress Party, until recently the Indian ruling class’s preferred party of a government, with Rahul Gandhi, the son, grandson, and great-grandson of prime ministers, serving as its dynastic leader. For much of the past three decades, Congress Party-led national governments spearheaded implementation of the Indian bourgeoisie’s “pro-market reform” program. They also initiated the turn to Washington and the anti-China Indo-US alliance. While the Congress Party postures as a defender of “secularism,” it has long connived with the Hindu right. In recent years, it has forged a close partnership with the Shiv Sena, an erstwhile BJP ally and a fervent proponent of Hindutva, the Hindu-supremacist ideology that holds that Muslims and Christians are not true Indians.

The INDIA alliance also includes various right-wing ethno-regionalist and caste-ist parties and the Stalinist parliamentary parties. For decades the Stalinists have suppressed the class struggle in the name of fighting the Hindu right and supported what they frankly describe as “pro-investor”—that is, anti-working class—policies, while dismissing socialism, in the words of the late Communist Party of India (Marxist) Chief Minister of West Bengal, as “a far off cry.”

In an attempt to win votes, INDIA has decried mass joblessness and made various populist promises. But given the right-wing record of its constituent parties, none of this is, to say the least, credible and masses of Indian workers and toilers correctly dismiss it as a pretense.



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