

India's Congress Party makes populist promises while courting big business

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The Congress Party, India's principal opposition party, is stumping for votes in India's multi-phase general election by casting itself and its allies in the India National Development Inclusive Alliance as the only means of preventing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) from trashing the constitution; and by making a calibrated appeal to popular discontent over mass joblessness, chronic poverty, and burgeoning social inequality.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly attacked Modi and the BJP for their close ties to India and Asia's two wealthiest billionaires, Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

On Tuesday, Gandhi mocked the would-be Hindu strongman Modi for his recent claims that "God has sent me for a purpose" and would decide when his work as prime minister "will be done." "God sent Modi to help Adani and not the poor," the Congress Party leader told an election rally in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, while campaigning for the seventh and final phase of the general election, which is to be held this Saturday.

The votes from all phases will be tabulated Tuesday June 4.

In his speech, Gandhi returned to a number of the key populist promises the Congress Party has made throughout the campaign in an attempt to tap into mass anger and frustration over acute socioeconomic distress. These promises include: ceding to farmers' longstanding demand for a minimum agricultural support price for their crops; a "new right" to an apprenticeship for all graduates under the age of 25; reviewing and amending the BJP's anti-worker labour "reform" laws; providing free public health care; doubling the amount of free grain available to the poor; and increasing by more than 25 percent to 400 rupees (US \$4.80) the daily wage paid for menial work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee program.

All this is a hypocritical fraud.

Were the big business Congress Party and its India National Development Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) partners to take office they would form a right-wing capitalist government committed, like that led by Modi and his BJP, to continuing "pro-investor" reform—privatization, deregulation, and fiscal consolidation (austerity)—and to New Delhi's anti-China war alliance with US imperialism.

While the Congress campaign has focused on phony appeals to the grievances of India's workers and toilers, the Congress manifesto, *Nyay Patra* (Pledge for Justice), makes a whole series of promises to big business.

It touts the Congress' role under the 1991-96 Namasimha Rao Congress government in inaugurating anti-worker neo-liberal reform; denounces the Modi regime for stifling business with excessive regulations and "crony capitalism"; and proclaims that "the most immediate objective" of a Congress Party-led government "will be to restore a healthy, fearless and trustworthy climate for businesses." Continuing in this vein, it declares, "We will conduct a comprehensive review of the current rules and regulations and repeal or amend them in order to restore freedom to

industry, business and trade."

Calls for a more bellicose anti-China stance and increased military spending

In a silence that bespeaks consent, the Congress manifesto makes no mention of the Indo-US Global Strategic Partnership under which India has been transformed into a frontline state in Washington's incendiary military-strategic offensive against nuclear-armed China.

It does, however, emphasize the need for continuity in India's foreign policy. It was the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance government that joined with the George W. Bush administration, as it was waging illegal neo-colonial wars against Afghanistan and Iraq and was threatening Iran, to forge the Indo-US strategic partnership. Since then, it has colluded with the BJP—behind the backs of the Indian people—to integrate New Delhi ever more completely into a web of bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral military-security ties with the US and its closest Asia-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

Tellingly, in their election manifesto and on the campaign trail, Gandhi and other Congress Party leaders have repeatedly attacked Modi for being "soft" on China. This under conditions where the Modi government has for the past four years forward deployed tens of thousands of troops, tanks and warplanes along India's disputed Himalayan border with China and authorized them to take military action that could trigger an all-out war.

Although India has the fourth-largest military budget in the world, spending more than \$83 billion in 2023, the Congress Party decries "the decline in defence expenditure as a proportion of total expenditure." In addition to increased arms expenditures, it is pledging to introduce a new National Security Strategy and a new Operational Directive to deal with the "challenge" of a "two-front" war with China and Pakistan.

Modi and the BJP have responded to the Congress' bellicose claims that they have failed to stand up to China by boasting about the "surgical strikes"—illegal cross-border attacks—their government ordered against Pakistan, which brought South Asia's rival nuclear powers to the brink of war in 2016 and 2019. On both occasions, the Congress and the ethno-chauvinist, caste-ist and Stalinist parties with which it is now allied in the INDIA electoral coalition rallied around the BJP government.

As for the Congress Party and India's claims to be a "democratic" and secular "bulwark" against the fascist BJP and its Hindu supremacist allies, they are no less fraudulent than its "pro-people" posturing.

While Gandhi decries the most brazen instances of BJP communal incitement, the Congress Party has long connived with the Hindu right. Even sections of the corporate media have described its posture as one of "Hindutva lite." It joined in the celebrations of January's inauguration of a Ram Temple on the site of the Babri Masjid (mosque), which was razed

in 1992 as the result of a BJP-RSS conspiracy and in open defiance of the Supreme Court. Its only quibble was that the BJP made it into a “partisan” political affair by placing Modi at the centre of the ceremony.

Many of the Congress’ INDIA alliance partners are themselves erstwhile BJP allies. These include the Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray-led wing of the Maharashtra-based Shiv Sena, a fascistic Hindutva-espousing party with a long history of inciting communal and ethnic violence.

While the Congress declaims against the authoritarian actions of the Modi government, when in office it has frequently run roughshod over democratic rights. And while it has taken to demagogically criticizing the immense chasm between a tiny handful of Indian rich and super-rich and the hundreds of millions who go to bed hungry every night, it is responsible for the “pro-investor” policies that have produced this social polarization, which is at the root of the breakdown of democracy.

One of Congress’ and INDIA’s principal election promises, dressed up as a blow for “social justice,” is to expand India’s reservation (affirmative action) system, under which some government jobs and university places are designated for Dalits and other historically oppressed lower caste groups, to the private sector. Initiated by the British colonial regime as part of its “divide and rule” strategy, reservation was adopted by the rulers of independent capitalist India as a means of cultivating a privileged petty bourgeois layer among the Dalits to suppress dissent, and of channeling social opposition away from anti-capitalist class struggle into inter-caste conflicts among workers and the rural poor.

In India as around the world, the democratic rights of working people cannot be defended by clutching to the discredited right-wing parties of the bourgeoisie and to the capitalist state. Rather, it is bound up with the development of the class struggle, with the independent political mobilization of the working class rallying all the toilers and rural poor behind it in opposition to capitalism and all the political representatives of the ruling class.

Essential to Congress’ attempts to posture as a “progressive” and “pro-people” alternative to Modi and his BJP is the support it is once again receiving from the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI)—and their affiliated unions. Long part of the Indian political establishment, the CPM and CPI serve as left-window dressing for the Congress and its INDIA alliance. They wave red flags and carry posters bearing the hammer and sickle while stumping for votes for what till recently was the Indian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of national government.

In this they have been joined by India’s principal Maoist grouping, the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation. The CPI (M-L) has been incorporated into the INDIA bloc as yet another left fig leaf. It is standing four candidates under the INDIA banner, three in Bihar and one in neighbouring Jharkhand. Everywhere else, it is striving to rally the rural poor, workers, and students behind the likes of the Congress Party, Shiv Sena, and in West Bengal, the Trinamul Congress, led by the anti-communist firebrand Mamata Banerjee.

Twenty years ago this month, in May 2004, the Congress Party and its allies were, to their own surprise, swept to power in a political earthquake as India’s workers and toilers emphatically rejected the claims of the six-year-old BJP-led government that India was “shining.” At that time, the Congress Party, buoyed by the support given it by the CPM-led Left Front, claimed they would deliver “reforms, but with a human face.” Inevitably the claim that the interests of the masses could be reconciled with the rapacious profit imperatives of capital—that pro-investor reform could be coupled with increased social support for India’s workers and toilers—proved to be a cruel hoax.

In the years after the 2008-9 global financial crisis, as capitalist growth in India slowed, support for the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government eroded. Working people were angered by growing economic distress and the manifest cash nexus between UPA leaders and big business. The capitalist elite, meanwhile, turned to the Modi-led BJP as a means to more aggressively push through pro-market reforms and pursue their great-power ambitions on the world stage.

Since 2014, the Congress Party has suffered one electoral debacle after another. In the past two national elections, Congress has won less than 20 percent of the vote and captured respectively 44 and 52 seats. Its previous worst-ever total—114 in 1999—was more than double that.

In large swathes of the country, including much of north India, West Bengal and Odisha, Congress has been reduced to a bit player. Currently, India’s so-called Grand Old Party leads the government in just three of India’s 28 states, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh and Telangana.

Desperate to avoid another electoral thumping, Congress has conceded to its allies a far larger number of seats than ever before. Congress has never contested fewer than 400 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, yet in this election it is standing just 328 candidates.

Modi and his BJP have responded to Rahul Gandhi’s charge that they are in thick with Ambani and Adani by pointing to the dynastic character of the Congress Party. For more than half a century, the Congress Party has functioned as a dynastic party whose fortunes have been inseparable from that of the Nehru-Gandhi family. The son, grandson and great-grandson of Indian prime ministers, Rahul Gandhi owes his position at the head of the Congress Party, as does the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee, his sister, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, to their family ties.

At the outset of the election campaign, the domestic and international media loudly proclaimed that Modi and his BJP would be returned to power in a romp. However, in recent weeks they have observed that the Modi “wave” appears to have fallen flat and that the BJP has responded with communal incitement and a torrent of lies.

Whether a discredited, corrupt Congress Party, till recently visibly clinging to life support, and its INDIA allies will have proved able to tap into popular anger remains to be seen. But whatever the outcome of the 2024 election, the working class will rapidly come into conflict with India’s next government, as world capitalism, mired in a systemic global crisis, veers to barbarism.



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A dynastic party reduced to life support