

India stages national election amid mounting social crisis

By Keith Jones
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Polling in India's nine-phase, five-week general election began this week. To date voters in 104 of the 543 electoral districts—including all of Kerala in India's south, the National Capital Territory (Delhi) and Haryana in the north, and parts of several other larger states—have cast their ballots. Electoral officials are claiming that in most places voter turnout is up from 2009.

Whatever combination of parties forms India's national government after the tallying of votes on May 16, India will be beset by political crisis and convulsed by intensifying class struggle in the months and years to come.

India's economy is mired in stagflation. Inflation has long been in the double-digit range. Economic growth began to fall sharply in the 2010-11 fiscal year and has been running at less than 5 percent for well over two years. Moreover, last summer's rapid depreciation of the rupee, which raised fears of an impending current accounts crisis, has exposed India's extreme dependence on, and vulnerability to, international capital flows.

The Indian ruling elite also finds itself on the horns of a strategic dilemma. During the past decade it has tilted toward the US, calculating that it can benefit from Washington's eagerness to build up India as a strategic counterweight to China. But Washington's aggressive drive to reinforce its strategic dominance over Eurasia and the Middle East has led it to make ever greater demands upon India to adhere to its strategic agenda—against Iran, until recently its largest supplier of oil; against China, its powerful northern neighbor and a close ally of its archrival Pakistan; and now against Russia, its most important arms supplier and since the 1960s its “all weather” ally.

Rattled by the world economic crisis, Indian big business and international capital are demanding that India's next government rapidly push through a raft of socially explosive measures. These include: massive social spending cuts; the curtailment and eventual elimination of energy and fertilizer subsidies; the gutting of restrictions on layoffs and plant closures; a fresh round of privatizations of “nonstrategic” public sector units and infrastructure; and the elimination of most limits on foreign investment.

The outgoing Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government repeatedly vowed to implement these measures but lost its nerve in the face of massive popular opposition.

Having lost faith in the Congress, large sections of Indian big

business have thrown their support behind the official opposition in the outgoing parliament, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its prime ministerial candidate, the Gujarat Chief Minister and self-styled Hindu strongman Narendra Modi. The instigator of the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, Modi has won accolades from India's corporate elite for lavishing business with tax and land concessions, pushing through development projects over popular opposition, and effectively illegalizing strikes.

Congress is touting the economic expansion that occurred during the UPA's ten years in office, claiming to be the party of “inclusive growth.”

But the fruits of capitalist growth have been almost entirely appropriated by foreign investors and the Indian elite. In addition to providing cheap-labor production and services for international capitalism, this elite has gorged on tax concessions and the fire sale and outright gifting of government assets, from telecom spectrum to coal fields.

India, according to the Wealth-X UBS report, now has 109 billionaires and the world's third-largest population of Ultra High Net Worth Individuals, 7,730.

This is the same India that is home to the world largest concentration of those living in “absolute poverty”—defined as people not getting sufficient caloric intake to do a full day's work. But squalor, misery, and the threat of being plunged into the social abyss by the loss of a job, an accident, family illness, or other calamity extends far beyond the “absolute poor” in a country where there is no social safety net, however shrunken and eviscerated. Three-quarters of India's population survives on less than two dollars US per day.

And with the economic slowdown and the cost of food rising by 15 percent per annum, living standards are being squeezed harder still. Recently India's National Sample Survey Organization concluded that 16.3 percent of urban male high school graduates 29 or younger are unemployed and almost 30 percent of their peers who have university or vocational college degrees. Another study, this by a private company, found that even before the recent halving of economic growth India was only gaining an additional two million jobs per year, although due to population growth the labor force is expanding by ten million people or more annually.

Popular anger over price increases, unemployment and corruption will by all reports result in the Congress party and its UPA suffering major electoral loses. The opinion polls—which in

India admittedly have frequently been wrong—indicate that the Congress will win its fewest seats ever. Whether this proves true or not, there are numerous signs of its impending defeat. Most of the Congress's UPA allies have deserted it. Many Congress veterans, beginning with Finance Minister P. Chidambaram, have declined to run for reelection. And the Congress leadership decided not to name Rahul Gandhi, the heir to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that for decades has controlled the Congress, as the party's prime ministerial candidate.

While this was justified by claims that it went against Congress tradition, it was widely understood that the Congress high command thought it best not to name him leader on the eve of a likely debacle. Rahul Gandhi, and his mother, Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi, are nonetheless headlining the Congress election campaign.

Modi and the BJP are appealing to the mass discontent over the economic situation, projecting him as the candidate of "good governance and development." Modi's constant refrain is that he can bring Gujarat-type economic growth to the rest of India. Under Modi, investment has poured into Gujarat, giving it a growth rate that does indeed surpasses most states, but most social indicators—including access to health care, literacy and education—show Gujarat fairing poorly.

The BJP campaign revolves around Modi and this is entirely keeping with the antidemocratic strongman image it wants to project. Speaking Monday at the launch of the BJP's election manifesto he denounced the Congress government as "weak" on the international stage and soft on terrorism, claiming it had failed to properly equip India's security forces: "This country requires a strong government, not a weak, handicapped one." "No one," he added, "should be able to bully India."

While Modi's campaign is focused on cynically appealing to popular anger over inflation, joblessness and economic insecurity, with the aim of winning office and implementing the neoliberal agenda of big business, he is careful to make gestures to the BJP's Hindu nationalist party cadre.

In a move clearly meant to bolster his Hindu nationalist credentials, he pushed aside a sitting BJP MP so he can stand as a candidate in the Hindu holy city of Varanasi (Benares). The BJP manifesto repeats longstanding Hindu supremacist demands, including supporting the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the Babri Masjid mosque that was razed by BJP-RSS-organized Hindu fundamentalist activists in 1992 and abolishing the special status accorded Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state, under the constitution.

The eagerness of large sections of India's ruling class for a Modi-led BJP government underscores that under the impact of the capitalist crisis India's elite is turning toward social reaction and authoritarian forms of rule.

The BJP, assisted by much of the corporate media, are trying to give the impression of a massive popular wave for Modi. In reality his support, such as it is, derives largely from anger with the Congress. Any enthusiasm is limited to the corporate boardrooms and sections of the middle class.

No party has won a parliamentary majority in a national Indian election in thirty years. Instead governments have been multiparty

coalitions, led almost always by the Congress or between 1998 and 2003 by the BJP, and including a large number of regional and caste-based parties.

While the BJP, unlike the Congress, has attracted a large number of electoral allies—it claims twenty-five at last count—most of the important regional parties, including those that form the government in West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—have refused to align with either of the two national parties.

The twin Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India or CPI—are campaigning for a "non-Congress," "non- BJP," Third Front government, comprised of its Left Front and many of the currently nonaligned regional and casteist parties.

Thus far this has been a nonstarter. The Stalinists' prospective allies prefer to keep their hands free so that they can bargain with the two national parties after the election. Most of these parties, it need be added, have previously aligned with the BJP and all have implemented the neoliberal "reform" agenda of big business.

The Stalinists are an integral part of the bourgeois political establishment and have played the pivotal role in suppressing working class opposition to the transformation of India into a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism.

They were instrumental in bringing the Congress-led UPA to power in 2003. For the next four years the votes of the Left Front MPs provided the UPA with its parliamentary majority, even though the Stalinists conceded it was carrying out policies little different from the BJP-led government that preceded it. Ultimately, the Congress chose to effectively kick the Left Front out of the government, so as to press forward with the Indo-US nuclear accord.

In those states, like West Bengal, where the Stalinists have held office, they have carried out what they themselves term "pro-investor policies."

Big business would prefer a government anchored by one of the two major parties. But a Third Front government cannot be ruled out, such is the popular antipathy to the BJP among wide swathes of India's workers and toilers.

What can be said with absolute certainty is that a Third Front government would in no way represent an alternative to the BJP and Congress. It would do the bidding of Indian and international capital and deepen the assault on India's workers and toilers. Such a government, politically led by Stalinists and comprised of a host of regional and caste-based parties—the so-called United Front—came to power after the 1996 elections with the "outside" support of the Congress. Its rightwing policies opened the door for the BJP to come to power for the first time at the head of a national government less than two years later.

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