

Amidst mounting social opposition

Indian elite nervously prepares for national elections

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The campaign for India's national elections is unfolding in a highly-charged political environment.

Among India's workers and toilers there is deep-rooted anger against not just the Hindu supremacist Bahartiya Janata Party (BJP), which swept to power five years ago on the basis of phony promises of jobs and development, but against the ruinous outcome of three decades of neo-liberal "reform."

This anger, however, can find no genuine or positive expression in the politics of the Indian establishment. All of the parties, from the BJP and the Congress Party to the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, have connived in the implementation of "pro-investor" policies aimed at making India a cheap-labour hub for global capital. All support the great-power ambitions of the Indian bourgeoisie, even as they draw South Asia ever more deeply into the maelstrom of imperialist intrigue and conflict, and threaten to ignite, as was highlighted again last month, a catastrophic war with Pakistan.

The elections will be held in seven regional phases, starting just two weeks from now on Thursday, April 11 and concluding Sunday, May 19. The votes are to be tabulated May 23. State elections will be held alongside the national vote in four states—Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Sikkim—but not in Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state and the focal point of the India-Pakistan strategic rivalry. Citing "security" concerns, the BJP government has extended indefinitely the central government rule it established over Jammu and Kashmir last June, after the state government, in which the BJP served as the junior party, collapsed due to differences over how to contend with mounting popular opposition.

Opinion polls, which in India have often proved wrong, indicate Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP will cling to power. But unlike the past five years, they will be dependent on the votes of their National Democratic Alliance allies for their parliamentary majority.

The BJP's record of austerity and reaction

The BJP re-election campaign revolves to a large degree around the promotion of Modi as a self-made Hindu "strongman," who incarnates an assertive "rising" India. The other key theme of the BJP campaign is the claim that the Modi government has delivered

"world-beating" economic growth.

In 2014, India's corporate elite propelled the BJP to power, so as to accelerate neo-liberal reform and more aggressively assert its interests and ambitions on the world stage.

Five years on, the BJP continues to vastly out distance all its rivals, even when combined, in corporate donations.

However, some sections of the ruling elite are fearful that the BJP is sowing a whirlwind: that its noxious communal politics are rending the social fabric and undermining the popular legitimacy of state institutions; and that its relentless hype about India's growth and suppression, and fiddling with economic statistics can't cover over the grim reality that confronts the vast majority.

The fruits of India's growth have been monopolized by a tiny capitalist elite. Between 2015 and 2017, the portion of India's wealth owned by the top 1 percent surged from 53 to 73 percent, leaving the remaining 99 percent with a 27-percent share.

India, as even much of the corporate media now concedes, is beset by both an agrarian and jobs crisis. According to a suppressed government report, the labour force participation rate plunged from 63.7 percent in 2003 to 49.8 percent in 2017-18, because tens of millions have given up looking for non-existent work.

The BJP was clearly rattled by its defeat in state elections in December in three states—Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Rajasthan—which are part of the "Hindi belt" that has historically constituted its principal base of support, and by the palpable growth of social opposition in recent months. This includes farmer protests and the participation of tens of millions in a two-day general strike in January against the Modi government's pro-big business economic policies.

In an attempt to divert the mounting social anger and mobilize its Hindu right base, the BJP seized on the February 14 Pulwama terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir to foment a war crisis with Pakistan. Making good on Modi's pledge to punish Pakistan for the attack, Indian warplanes struck inside Pakistan on the night of February 25 for the first time since the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war.

Even though this resulted in a Pakistani counter-strike that brought South Asia's rival nuclear powers to the brink of all-out war, the BJP and much of the corporate media continue to promote India's airstrike as a masterstroke. Modi, they claim, has shattered the shackles of Indian "strategic restraint" vis a vis Pakistan,

winning international recognition for an Indian “right” to punish Pakistan for major terrorist attacks in Indian-held Kashmir.

The Congress Party and their Stalinist enablers

The Congress Party’s response to last month’s war crisis was akin to that of the other opposition parties. That is to say, it hailed the Indian airstrikes, but quibbled when the BJP relentlessly milked them for electoral gain, countering that all the credit should go to the “heroes” who comprise India’s military.

The historic ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, the Congress appeared to be on its death-bed, after suffering a long string of electoral debacles, until receiving a shot of adrenalin from last December’s state elections.

A dynastic party, now led by Rahul Gandhi and his mother Sonia Gandhi, the Congress has no substantive differences with the BJP over economic or foreign policy. Indeed, Congress spearheaded the abandonment of the bourgeoisie’s post-independence state-led development program, its pursuit of an India-US “global strategic partnership,” and its drive to make India a major military power.

But Congress is hoping nonetheless to exploit the widespread anger over the lack of jobs and government support for agriculture and the savage austerity measures the BJP has imposed in the name of reducing the debt-to-GNP ratio. Congress is trumpeting a “guaranteed annual income” scheme which it claims would ultimately provide the poorest 20 percent of Indian families with up to 72,000 rupees (or roughly US \$1,000) per year, with the aim of raising their incomes to 12,000 rupees (\$172) per month.

Much of this is smoke and mirrors, and not only because the Congress Party has failed to flesh out the details of the program, which would be rolled out over many years. Much of it is to be paid for through “rationalizing,” i.e., cutting existing social spending programs.

In a reference to Modi’s trumpeting of his “surgical strikes” on Pakistan, Rahul Gandhi is boasting that the Congress’ phony guaranteed income scheme constitutes a “surgical strike on poverty.” But as even some of Gandhi’s political rivals have noted, the Congress has been claiming that it will lift Indians out of poverty for generations. In 1971, Rahul Gandhi’s grandmother, Indira Gandhi, won a sweeping election victory on a pledge to “banish poverty” (*Garibi Hatao*).

The Congress is also denouncing the “divisive” communal politics of the BJP. But it itself has shamelessly connived with the Hindu right, including by lending full-throated support to an RSS-led agitation against a Supreme Court order opening a Kerala shrine to women, and by placing “cow-protection” at the center of its government agenda in Madhya Pradesh.

The Congress toyed with the idea of forming a “grand coalition” with a host of regional and caste-ist parties. But ultimately it has formed electoral alliances only in a handful of states. There are two reasons for this. The Congress leadership feared a “grand coalition” would cut across its attempts to re-establish itself as a truly national party. Recognizing the Congress’ weakness, many of its potential allies—such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in north India, and the Telugu Desam Party(TDP) in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana—drove a hard

bargain. They are calculating they will have greater leverage if they keep their hands free to haggle over cabinet seats with both the Congress and BJP—many of them are erstwhile BJP allies—once the votes are counted.

The CPM, its sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), and their Left Front have played the principal role over the past three decades in politically suppressing the working class. From 1991 to 2008, the Stalinists propped up a succession of right-wing Indian governments, most of them Congress-led. Moreover, in the states where they have held office, West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, they have implemented what they themselves concede are “pro investor policies.”

The Stalinists’ response to the bourgeoisie’s embrace of communal reaction and authoritarianism in the form of Modi and his BJP has been to turn still further to the right. They have redoubled their efforts to chain the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie and its state, claiming that to counter the BJP and “save democracy” and “the Republic,” the working class and oppressed must work for the election of an “alternate secular” government—that is, help bring to power another right-wing capitalist government, likely Congress-led, committed to the ruling class’ agenda of intensifying the exploitation of the working class and maintaining and expanding India’s role as a satrap of Washington in its military-strategic offensive against China.

If the Hindu right has been able to grow into such a menace, it is precisely because the Stalinists have politically paralyzed the working class, preventing it from advancing its own socialist solution to the social crisis, and subordinating it to right-wing capitalist parties and governments.

India’s workers must blaze a new political path based on the Trotskyist program of permanent revolution: the mobilization of their independent class strength and the rallying of the toilers and poor behind them in the fight for a workers’ government, as part of a global working-class offensive against capitalism.

The authors also recommend:

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The political significance of India’s two-day general strike
[12 January 2019]

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