

Communalist taunts, bellicose threats, phony promises

## India's election descends into the mire

By Keith Jones  
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With each week, the election campaign in the world's "largest democracy" becomes fouler and more toxic, as India's rival capitalist politicians make communalist taunts and bellicose threats, and seek to hoodwink voters with phony promises.

The campaign's tone is being set by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). With unabashed support from much of the corporate media, the BJP is relentlessly promoting Modi, who first came to national prominence by helping incite the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom, as a strongman, who personifies a "rising," more assertive India. Modi, or so the BJP narrative goes, has delivered "world-beating" economic growth, while staggering India's archrival Pakistan with cross-border ground and air strikes.

The opposition parties—and this is true of the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI), no less than the Congress Party—have responded by declaring their undying support for India's "heroic" armed forces. Modi and his BJP, they lamely object, are weakening "national unity" in the fight against Pakistan by politicizing the air strikes India carried out deep inside Pakistan in late February, bringing South Asia's rival nuclear-armed powers to the brink of all-out war.

While pursuing election strategies based on crass attempts to leverage various caste and regional identities, the BJP's opponents are making calibrated appeals to popular anger over the social crisis that stalks rural and urban India, the BJP's economic-growth boasts notwithstanding. However, their denunciations of "agrarian distress" and "jobless growth" have limited currency, for they themselves have all pursued neoliberal, pro-investor policies akin to those implemented by Modi and his BJP whenever and wherever they have held office.

First among equals in this regard is the Congress Party, until recently the Indian bourgeoisie's principal party of government. The Congress Party initiated and in two terms of government (1991-1996 and 2004-2014) pushed through the key policy changes aimed at making India a cheap-labour hub for global capital. Yet it is once again cynically trying to pose as an advocate for the poor, trumpeting a smoke-and-mirrors

electoral promise to provide a guaranteed income to the poorest 20 percent of Indian households.

India's general election is being held in seven regional phases over seven weeks because of the need to deploy large numbers of security forces to ensure the "integrity" of the vote. The first round of voting was held April 11. A second round will take place this Thursday, with polls held in 97 of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, including all 39 constituencies in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, and a sprinkling in each of the country's four most populous states, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal and Bihar. Voting will conclude on May 19, with the ballots from all stages to be counted on May 23.

In 2014, the BJP election manifesto included many longstanding communalist pledges aimed at transforming India into a *Hindu Raj* (Hindu state), such as the building of a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the razed Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. However, the BJP and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) placed promises of jobs and development at the centre of their campaign to unseat the decade-old Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

To be sure, this was a hoax. "Development" was a euphemism for big business policies—social spending cuts and a new wave of privatizations and other pro-investor reforms—that have served to swell the fortunes of India's capitalist elite while leaving the vast majority mired in poverty and squalor.

That the BJP is so relentlessly striking the keys of militarism and communalism in 2019 is, nonetheless, a measure of its apprehensiveness. Through the politics of Indian/Hindu "assertion," Modi and company are desperately seeking to turn attention away from a jobs crisis that is affecting everyone from the rural poor to university graduates, and to divert mounting social frustration and anger behind reaction and war.

If anything, these noxious appeals have reached a new intensity with the start of voting.

Modi routinely accuses the Congress of being "pro-Pakistan," while boasting of the BJP's affinity with, and devotion to, the armed forces. Speaking Sunday in Indian-held Kashmir, the principal flashpoint in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, Modi denounced the Congress for having systematically undermined India's armed forces. "The Congress," claimed

India's prime minister, "has always belittled the ability of the army, its strength and accomplishments."

Stoking violent hostility to Muslims, BJP President Amit Shah recently described migrants from Bangladesh, which was an integral part of India until the 1947 communal Partition, as "termites." Campaigning late last week in West Bengal, Shah declared, "Illegal immigrants are like termites. They are eating the grain that should go to the poor, they are taking our jobs."

Shah went on to vow that a re-elected BJP government "will pick up infiltrators one by one and throw them into the Bay of Bengal." Shah and the BJP are promising to create a National Registry of Citizens, under which Muslims (but not Hindus and Buddhists) who cannot prove Indian citizenship will be summarily expelled.

On Monday, India's Election Commission, which is mandated to administer strict rules banning appeals to communal hatred, slapped a 72-hour ban on Uttar Pradesh chief minister and BJP "star campaigner" Yogi Adityanath from speaking at election rallies in response to his crude attacks on Muslims, including describing them as a "green virus."

The virulence of the BJP campaign is causing unease among some sections of the Indian elite. They fear that the BJP's relentless promotion of communalism and attempts to identify itself with and court military support will undermine the popular legitimacy of the Indian state and destabilize the armed forces and other core state institutions.

But most of the BJP's big-business and corporate media critics continue to contrast what they view as the so-called "good Modi"—the advocate of neoliberal reform and an ever-closer military-strategic alliance with Washington—with the "bad" communal firebrand Modi. In reality, the two are inseparable. If India's rapacious ruling elite has found its political leader in a communalist gangster like Modi, it is because it can find a popular base for carrying through its socially incendiary socioeconomic agenda only within the forces of social reaction.

Meanwhile, the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, connives with, and covers before, the Hindu right, as it has done for decades. Last year, in preparation for the 2019 general election, the Congress made a pronounced turn toward Hindutva-lite politics. Rahul Gandhi, the latest member of the Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty to lead the Congress Party, toured Hindu temples, while the Congress Party championed cow protection and other Hindu communalist causes in various state election campaigns.

When the Congress published its election manifesto at the beginning of this month, even the *Indian Express* noted in an editorial, "In comparison to its earlier manifestos in 2009 and 2014, the Congress is less forthcoming on minorities, which have felt besieged in the BJP-led regime."

Nevertheless, the Congress and a host of right-wing casteist and regionalist parties, many of which have previously aligned with the BJP, are stumping for votes by casting themselves as

the defenders of "secularism" against the "divisive" BJP and its "fascist" ideology.

In promoting this canard, the two major groupings of opposition parties—the Congress-led UPA and an ad hoc, semiformal alliance of regional and caste-based parties sometimes called the Federal Front—are being given critical assistance by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) and their Left Front.

Claiming that the fate of democracy and the Indian Republic are in the balance, the Stalinists are calling for an "Anybody but BJP" vote. They are urging working people to vote for whichever party or alliance of parties is best positioned to defeat the BJP/NDA in a given state, and pledging to strive in the election's aftermath to bring to power and support an "alternative secular government," i.e., a right-wing bourgeois government committed to neoliberal reform and the Indo-US military alliance.

This is a perpetuation and doubling down of the same ruinous course the Stalinists have pursued for the past three decades. Only today, under conditions of global capitalist breakdown, the Indian working class is mounting increasingly militant struggles as part of a growing international counteroffensive of the working class, and the bourgeoisie is hurtling still further to the right, embracing reaction, authoritarianism and militarism.

Since 1991, the CPM has justified its suppression of the class struggle and subordination of the working class to the BJP's big-business political opponents, including proposing up a succession of right-wing governments, most of them Congress-led, on the grounds this was the only way to stop the BJP from coming to power.

As a result, the bourgeoisie was able to gorge on the increased exploitation of the working class, and with India's workers prevented from advancing their own socialist solution to the capitalist crisis, the Hindu right was able to batten off of social despair and grow stronger still.

Democratic rights cannot be defended, and communal reaction defeated, by clutching to the right-wing, pro-imperialist parties of the Indian bourgeoisie and the decrepit institutions of the Indian capitalist state. Rather, in India, as around the world, the rise of social reaction underscores the urgency of the working class constituting itself as an independent political force and fighting for workers' power.

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