

Dominated by communalist appeals and threats

India's multi-phase election concludes

By Keith Jones
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The last leg in India's multi-phase election to decide the composition of the Lok Sabha, the lower and more important house of India's bicameral parliament, will be held Sunday, with voters going to the polls in 59 of the 543 Lok Sabha constituencies.

The votes from this and the election's six previous regional phases will be tabulated only on Thursday, May 23. Nonetheless, the end of balloting Sunday will trigger intense backroom political jockeying, as Indian big business' two national parties—the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress—vie to rally support from a host of smaller, regional chauvinist and caste-ist parties so as to best position themselves to stake their claim to government once the votes are counted.

Fueling the political horse-trading will be the release of exit polls, whose publication was banned, along with the release of new opinion poll data, during the April 9 to May 19 voting period.

India's capitalist elite propelled Narendra Modi and his BJP to power in 2014 to accelerate the implementation of privatization, deregulation and other “pro-investor” reforms, and to more aggressively pursue its predatory great power ambitions on the world stage. Five years on, as attested by the media's laudatory coverage and the BJP's massive lead in corporate donations, most of big business continues to view the BJP as the best bet to provide the “strong” government needed to force through its reactionary agenda in the face of mounting popular opposition.

Earlier this year, polls indicated that Modi and the BJP were well positioned to retain power, albeit with significantly fewer seats, rendering them dependent on their National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners for a parliamentary majority. However, as the election concludes, there is much to suggest the ground has shifted.

India's economy continues to slow markedly. Feeble export growth is a factor. But the principal cause is weak consumer demand, attributable to years of government austerity, a longstanding agrarian crisis, surging unemployment, and a credit squeeze rooted in the massive corporate debts that are weighing down the country's banks.

The BJP placed phony promises of jobs and development at the center of its 2014 election campaign, successfully exploiting mass anger over jobless capitalist expansion and dilapidated and non-existent social infrastructure. For years it crowed relentlessly about India's “world-beating” growth, even as the official unemployment rate rose to a 45-year high—with 18.7 percent of

men 15 to 29 and 27.2 percent of young women jobless.

However, such fraudulent promises and claims all but disappeared from the BJP's 2019 election campaign. Instead, Modi and the BJP doubled down on vile Hindu communalist appeals and bellicose threats against India's arch-rival Pakistan. Their transparent aim has been to divert mounting social frustration and anger into the most reactionary channels and mobilize their Hindu supremacist activist base.

In February, just before the election campaign's official launch, Modi seized on a terrorist attack in disputed Kashmir to foment a war crisis with Pakistan that brought South Asia's rival nuclear-armed states closer to all-out war than at any time since 1971. The BJP has repeatedly invoked India's first air raid on Pakistan in almost half a century to project Modi as a fearless strongman, while accusing the Congress of appeasing Pakistan and undermining the armed forces.

Tirades against India's Muslim minority and declamations of Hindu superiority have, if anything, been an even more prevalent feature of the BJP campaign. In a provocation that reveals both its desperation to polarize the electorate on communal lines and its sense of impunity, given the support it enjoys within the state and the complicity and cowardice of the bourgeois opposition, the BJP named as one of its “star” candidates Pragya Singh Thakur—a self-declared Hindu priestess under criminal indictment for her role in terrorist bombings targeting Muslims.

Underscoring the toxic, violent and combustible character of the party openly embraced by wide sections of the Indian bourgeoisie, Thakur this week praised the Hindu supremacist who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948 as a “patriot.”

Congress blazed the right-wing path for Modi

The Congress, til recently the bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, has competed with the BJP in proclaiming its support for February's reckless and illegal attack on Pakistan and dubbing India's military “heroes.” It has also sought to counter the BJP's charge of Muslim “appeasement” by embracing various Hindu communalist and fundamentalist causes in what even the corporate media has termed a “Hindutva (Hindu supremacism) lite” campaign.

While attacking the BJP for not meeting its deficit reduction targets, i.e., not imposing sufficiently harsh austerity, the Congress has made a calibrated appeal to social discontent with promises of increased spending on education and health care and the gradual introduction of a “guaranteed annual income” that would provide

72,000 rupees (about US \$1,025) to the poorest 20 percent of households.

These promises appear to have gained little popular traction, and with good reason. The big business Congress has done most of the heavy lifting in implementing the bourgeoisie's post-1991 drive to transform India into a cheap-labour hub for global capital.

The 1991-96 Narasimha Rao-led Congress government initiated "big bang" pro-market reform, and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government (2004-14) pressed forward with privatization, deregulation and corporate tax-cutting, while forging an Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

On Thursday, a senior Congress leader announced that the party will not insist on Rahul Gandhi, the latest member of the Nehru-Gandhi political dynasty to head the party, or another Congress veteran serving as prime minister in India's next government. "My party high command has already made it clear that the Congress is not averse to making a leader from any regional party the prime minister," said Ghulam Nabi Azad, the Congress leader in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of India's parliament.

This unprecedented pre-vote count overture suggests that the Congress calculates it still has a long way to go in its "rebuild" after suffering far and away its greatest ever electoral defeat in 2014, but that the parliamentary arithmetic may make it possible to wrest power from the BJP and form an alternate right-wing government.

Both the BJP and Congress head alliances of 20 parties or more, respectively, the NDA and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). But there are also a sizeable number of regional parties—including the West Bengal-based TMC, the BSP and Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the BJD in Odisha and the TDP in Andhra Pradesh—that chose to stay clear of the national party-led alliances in the hopes of increasing their post-election leverage.

All of these parties have previously joined forces with the BJP, and most with the Congress as well. Their opposition to the BJP, in so far as it is not a mere pose, has absolutely nothing to do with defending the interests of India's workers and toilers. Rather it is rooted in their concern that the BJP, in its drive to consolidate power, including by placing its Hindu communalist supporters in leading positions in the state apparatus and in universities and other cultural institutions, is running roughshod over the interests of the regional- and caste-based bourgeois factions they represent; and, even more importantly, that the BJP's unrelenting drive to impose the diktats of the most powerful sections of big business and foment communal reaction is reaping a whirlwind of social opposition that could imperil capitalist rule.

A social powder keg

India is a social powder keg, whose fuse is already alight. As around the world, the working class is mobilizing to assert its class interests. Tens of millions of workers participated in a two-day general strike last January in protest against the BJP's big business economic policies, including its promotion of contract labour. But the growing wave of strikes and farmer protests is animated by opposition not just to the Modi government, but to the ruinous outcome of three decades of the Indian bourgeoisie's

economic "reform" policies.

India is one of the most unequal countries in the world. While India's 120 billionaires—up from just 2 in the mid-1990s—and the rest of India's top 1 percent gorge on 51.5 percent of the country's wealth, the bottom 60 percent owns just 4.7 percent.

If the opposition of the working class finds no positive expression in the Indian elections, it is because of the criminal role of the Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its older, smaller ally, the Communist Party of India—their Left Front and their affiliated trade unions. For decades, they have systematically suppressed the class struggle while providing parliamentary support to right-wing governments, most of them Congress-led, which have implemented neo-liberal policies and pursued closer ties with Washington.

As a result of their betrayals, including the imposition of what they themselves dub "pro-investor" policies in the states where they have formed the government, the Stalinists have suffered a hemorrhaging of support and will likely win no more than a handful of seats.

Their response to the intensification of the class struggle—Modi's rise to power and the growth of worker resistance—has been to redouble their efforts to harness the working class to the parties of the bourgeoisie and to its state. They have mounted an "Anybody but BJP" campaign, urging support for whatever party or alliance in a given state has the best chance of defeating the candidates of the BJP/NDA, and have proclaimed in advance their support for any non-BJP government the Congress and the right-wing regional parties might manage to stitch together.

The working class will come into headlong conflict with India's next government. Whatever its precise composition, it will be tasked by the ruling elite with making the working class and toilers bear the burden of the global capitalist crisis and the increasingly frenzied struggle among the imperialist powers, great powers and aspiring great powers like India for access to resources and strategic advantage.

In the pages of India's major English-language dailies, the bourgeoisie is already demanding that the next government intensify the exploitation of the working class through accelerated "reform" and integrate India even more completely into the US war drive against China by joining a full-on US-led military alliance with Japan and Australia.

Significantly, while there is handwringing among some sections of Indian and foreign capital over Modi's communal "excesses," much of the criticism of him emanating from ruling circles is that his government has not been sufficiently ruthless in imposing big business' agenda. A *Financial Times* editorial, for example, dismissed Modi as "more a tinkerer" than a Reagan- or Thatcher-style "revolutionary."

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