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India: Congress Party brings fascistic Shiv Sena to power in Maharashtra

After more than a month of political horse-trading and skullduggery following the Oct. 24 declaration of the Maharashtra state assembly election results, the Congress Party and its longstanding regional ally, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), have formed a coalition government with the Hindu supremacist and Marathi-chauvinist Shiv Sena.

Together the Congress and NCP have far more seats than the Shiv Sena. Yet the latter has been given the leading role in the coalition government, with its autocratic leader, Uddhav Thackeray, named as the Chief Minister, even though he does not have a seat in the state parliament.

Maharashtra, with a population of over 115 million, is India's second most populous state and by far the biggest contributor to the country's GDP. The state capital, Mumbai (Bombay), is India's financial capital, and home to many industries, including the Bollywood film industry.

By openly allying itself with the Shiv Sena, a blood-soaked party that constantly incites hatred of minorities and has a long history of using violence to terrorize Muslims or anyone else it deems an enemy, the Congress Party has crossed a political Rubicon. It is signaling that it will no longer be restrained by its threadbare claims to be a bulwark of secularism and the foremost political representative of India's multiethnic and multicultural society from aligning with the most rightwing and rabid communalist forces.

The Congress Party's move is a desperate attempt to revive its political fortunes after winning just 52 of the 543 Lok Sabha in India's April/May 2019 national election, only eight seats more than it had in 2014, when it suffered its greatest ever electoral defeat.

The Shiv Sena fought the Maharashtra state election as a partner of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with which it had jointly ruled the state, under a BJP chief minister, Devendra Fadnavis, since October 2014. The Shiv Sena was also, until the events of last month, a member of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), with cabinet representation in the Narendra Modi-led BJP/NDA government that has ruled India since May 2014 and in the BJP-led governments headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee between 1998 and 2004.

In the Maharashtra polls, the Shiv Sena-BJP alliance was opposed by an alliance of the Congress Party and the NCP, although, in the face of a shameless pro-BJP campaign from the corporate media that promoted Modi as a "decisive" leader for a "rising India," the Congress and NCP all but conceded the elections in advance. Cowed by media claims of an impending BJP-Shiv Sena rout, the Congress and NCP mounted a feeble, rightwing campaign, adapting ever more openly to the communalist rhetoric of the ruling alliance.

However, the election produced a significant setback for the BJP. While it won the largest number of seats, 105 in a 288-seat legislature, this was down markedly from the 122 it had captured in 2014.

The Shiv Sena won 56 seats, seven less than in 2014. Meanwhile, to their own surprise, the Congress Party and its NCP ally won 44 and 54 seats respectively.

The BJP's vote share was also down, falling from 27.8 percent in 2014 to 25.6 percent. However, all of the parties lost significant numbers of votes, reflecting growing disaffection with the entire political establishment, as voter participation fell sharply. In Mumbai only 42.7 percent of registered voters went to the polls.

The BJP's campaign focused almost exclusively on its supposed muscular assertion of Indian sovereignty over Jammu and Kashmir. On August 5, Modi, his henchman Amit Shah, and India's president, the BJP stalwart Ram Nath Kovind, conspired to illegally abrogate the long-standing special provision of India's constitution (Article 370) that granted the now defunct state of Jammu and Kashmir a unique, semi-autonomous status within the Indian Union.

The BJP campaign hardly if ever mentioned the distress of Maharashtra's farmers. At least ten to twelve farmers in the state commit suicide daily, due to economic ruin caused by drought, government negligence, and the usurious rates charged by moneylenders. In order to sweep this brutal reality under the rug, the Modi government has not bothered to release even its grossly underestimated statistics on farmer suicides for the years 2015 and onwards.

The BJP had confidently predicted that it and its Shiv Sena partner would sweep the election, winning at least 200 seats.

As soon as the results were announced, the Shiv Sena sought to exploit the BJP's setback by demanding an equal share of power in the government coalition, and that the BJP make good on a supposed promise to cede the chief ministership to the Shiv Sena for the second half of the five-year legislative term.

After the BJP demurred, including denying it had made any promise to share the chief minister's post, the two parties resorted to mutual mudslinging.

As this continued and the Congress-NCP and Shiv Sena began to send out feelers about a possible tie-up, the BJP national government intervened, placing Maharashtra under "President's Rule" i.e. direct rule from the center.

Ultimately "President's Rule" was lifted in the dead of night, because the BJP thought it had engineered a split in the NCP that would allow it to dump the Shiv Sena and lead a coalition with the breakaway NCP group.

But this piece of skullduggery soon fell apart, and in turn helped solidify the prospective Congress-NCP-Shiv Sena alliance.

As part of their own sordid political maneuvers, the Congress and NCP insisted that the Shiv Sena quit the NDA. This it did, its one cabinet minister resigning from the national government. However, the Shiv Sena described this as a formality and emphasized that it was one of the founding members of the BJP-led alliance. In other words, the Shiv Sena will return to the NDA fold when it sees fit.

The Shiva Sena-led Congress-NCP-Shiv Sena governmental alliance has pretentiously dubbed itself the *Maha Vikas Aghadi* (MVA) which translates loosely as the Great Front for Progress or Development.

Its unveiling was preceded by hectic negotiations between the leadership of the three parties on a so-called "Common Minimum Program" (CMP). The CMP makes various

populist promises especially to the millions of distressed, indebted farmers. But its principal purpose is to give political cover to the Congress Party, and to a lesser extent to the NCP, by providing wording meant to validate their preposterous claim that Maharashtra's new Shiv Sena-led government is committed to "secularism."

This canard was soon exposed when Uddhav Thackeray openly stated in the legislature that he will never give up Hindutva—the Hindu supremacist ideology first codified by the Maharashtra-born V.D. Savarkar. "I am still with the ideology of Hindutva," affirmed Thackeray. It "cannot be separated from me."

The CMP, it need be added, contains a socially incendiary communalist provision. In the opening address to the legislature, Governor B.S. Koshiyari emphasized that the MVA government would, in the name of "providing jobs," soon enact legislation mandating 80 percent reservation of private sector jobs for "sons of the soil." Given that the Shiv Sena emerged by violently targeting "South Indians" in the 1960s for taking jobs from "locals," a legislatively codified reservation mandate would hand an unprecedented weapon to this Marathi-chauvinist outfit to target "outsiders."

The Shiv Sena came into existence in 1966 under the violent leadership of Uddhav Thackeray's father Bal Thackeray. It exploited anger over widespread youth unemployment—an endemic phenomenon across India then as now—by blaming the jobs crisis on South Indians and Gujarathis (people from Gujarat). It demanded Marathi speakers be given preferential hiring and organized physical attacks on "outsiders" in Mumbai.

The Congress Party which ruled the state unchallenged at that time, extended support to this vile outfit so as to use it as a battering ram to destroy the Stalinist-led trade unions that dominated Mumbai's then extensive textile industry.

Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid by BJP-led Hindu extremists in December 1992, the Shiv Sena orchestrated violent attacks against protesting Muslims in Bombay, killing hundreds. The party mouthpiece *Saamana* constantly spews hatred towards Muslims and in 2015 it claimed that Muslims were procreating in great numbers to subsume the "Hindu Rashtra" or Hindu nation.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM—which in the name of fighting the BJP has systematically suppressed the class struggle and subordinated it to the Congress Party, till recently the Indian bourgeoisie's principal party of government—has backed the coming to power of the Shiv Sena-led alliance in Maharashtra.

A statement issued by the five CPM Central Committee members from Maharashtra declared: “To ensure that the BJP does not return to power, the CPM has decided that it will not oppose the formation of the new Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi government that will be jointly formed by the Shiv Sena-NCP-Congress.” The statement went on to declare that the CPM “expects” this cabal of rightwing parties, headed by the fascistic Shiv Sena, “will make a clean break from the policies of the previous BJP-led regime,” and be “uncompromising” in its “defence of democracy and secularism.”

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