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Hindu Chauvinist BJP Sweeps to Power in India

By Keith Jones

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The Hindu communalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) have swept to power in India's general election, buoyed by popular anger over soaring food prices and mass unemployment and the support of Indian big business and the corporate media.

The BJP will have 282 seats in the incoming Lok Sabha—the first time in three decades any single party has secured a majority in the 545-member lower house of India's parliament. The 54 seats won by the BJP's NDA allies are more than the total secured by any of the opposition parties and mean that the government will have the support of at least 336 Lok Sabha MPs.

What hopes India's workers and toilers have that the BJP will deliver on its election campaign promises of jobs and development will soon be dashed.

Big business has championed the BJP and its prime ministerial candidate—the self-styled Hindu strongman, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi—as the instrument through which to impose socially incendiary “pro-market” reforms in the face of mass popular opposition.

Modi is notorious for his role in instigating the 2002 Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom. But he has impressed India's corporate elite and the likes of Goldman Sachs, which recently issued a

gushing report on Modi's potential to serve as an "agent of change," by lavishing investors with land and tax concessions, illegalizing strikes, and otherwise doing their bidding.

The Indian bourgeoisie's enthusiasm for the arch-communist thug Modi underscores that it is turning to reaction and authoritarian methods of rule to realize its ambitions to transform India into a hub of cheap-labor production for world capitalism.

In an editorial published yesterday, the London-based *Economist* declared, "The last [Congress Party-led] government dithered and was preoccupied with bolstering India's welfare state. India's new rulers must be more strategic and ruthless."

Billions of dollars have poured into India's money markets in recent weeks in anticipation of a BJP victory and on Friday, India's stock markets again soared to record highs. But as last summer's rupee crisis illustrated, India's economy is massively dependent on in-flows of foreign capital and can be roiled by disgruntled foreign investors almost overnight. Standards and Poor's reiterated yesterday that it will slash India's credit rating to junk status if the new government does not demonstrate in the next two to three month's its commitment to "fiscal prudence"—i.e., massive social spending cuts—and "structural reform."

An historic debacle for the Congress Party

Friday's election results constitute an historic debacle for the Congress Party, the party that has led India's national government for all but 13 of the 67 years since independence.

The Congress has won just 44 seats, little more than a fifth of its tally in the last election and not enough under the rules of India's parliament to be recognized as the official opposition.

The Congress's central role in the politics of the Indian bourgeoisie has been bound up with the broad multiethnic, cross-communal popular following it developed due to its association with the struggle against British colonial rule and the rudimentary reforms enacted in the aftermath of independence.

Already by the late 1960s, under conditions of the breakup of the post-Second World War capitalist boom, the Congress was coming into violent conflict with the working class. But with the assistance of the Stalinist Communist parties, it staggered on, becoming in the process a dynastic party revolving around the Nehru-Gandhi family.

While the Congress last won a parliamentary majority in 1984, it has remained until now the bourgeoisie's principal political instrument and has done most of the heavy-lifting in the repudiation of "Congress socialism"—the state-led "national development" program the bourgeoisie pursued in the first four decades after independence.

It was the Congress-led government of Narasimha Rao that, between 1991 and 1996, initiated the bourgeoisie's turn to neo-liberal policies and adoption of a cheap-labor, export-led growth strategy. It was a Congress government that locked India into a "strategic partnership" with US

imperialism and has presided over a rapid expansion of India's military, pressing forward with the development of an air-land-sea nuclear-strike capacity and the building of a blue-water navy.

The "reform"-fueled expansion of Indian capitalism over the past two decades is the subject of endless glowing reports in the West. But the fruits of India's economic growth have been appropriated wholesale by a tiny capitalist elite and the most privileged sections of the middle class, leaving more than three quarters of the population to survive on less than \$2 a day and half of all India's children malnourished.

Returned to power in 2004 after six years in opposition, the Congress claimed that it would deliver "reforms with a human face." This was a sham on par with its earlier claims to be building "Congress socialism."

It consisted of taking a tiny fraction of the increased revenues generated by India's rapid economic expansion to provide work and food for the hungry. While the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government continued to spend the equivalent of less than 4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on education and health care combined, it was selling off at fire sale prices and outright gifting tens of billions of dollars' worth of public assets to Indian big business.

The twin shocks of the 2008 world financial crisis and the post-2010 halving of Indian's growth rate made it impossible for the Congress to sustain even the derisory social supports it enacted in the UPA's first-term. While joblessness soared and prices rose at double-digit rates, the Congress slashed social spending and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took to the airwaves to demand Indians "tighten their belts" to attract foreign investment.

Big business, meanwhile, turned on the government for failing to redeem with sufficient speed its repeated pledges of further pro-investor reforms.

The complicity of the Indian Stalinists

Responsibility for the fact that the Indian bourgeoisie has been able to exploit mass anger against the Congress-led government to push Indian politics still further right lies first and foremost with the Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM.

They and their Left Front have played a pivotal role in implementing the bourgeoisie's neo-liberal agenda. This includes sustaining in office both the minority Congress-led government that initiated the Indian bourgeoisie's "new economic policy" and the Congress-led UPA government from May 2004 through June 2008.

In those states where they have formed the government, the Stalinists have enacted what they themselves call "pro-investor" policies, slashing public spending, illegalizing strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, and using police and goon violence to crush peasant opposition to the expropriation of their land for big business.

These endless betrayals have shattered the Stalinists' base of support in the working class. In the 2009 elections, the Left Front's Lok Sabha delegation was more than halved, falling to just 24. In 2014, the CPI won no seats and the CPM was reduced to 9.

A government of crisis and reaction

The ruling elite will use the BJP's strong parliamentary majority to try to intimidate the working class and justify state repression.

In reality, the BJP's real base of support is extremely narrow. Benefiting from the mass anger at the Congress and the complicity of the Stalinists, and shamelessly lying about the true import of its "development" program, the BJP won 171.5 million votes (a 31 percent share of the popular vote) in a country of 1.2 billion people.

From the get-go, the Modi-led government will be a regime of extreme crisis. It is tasked with imposing, under conditions of global capitalist crisis, a class-war agenda that is inimical to the vast majority: the slashing of social spending; the reduction and eventual elimination of price subsidies for energy, fertilizer and food; the gutting of restrictions on mass layoffs and plant closures; privatization; the shifting of still more of the tax burden onto working people. The list goes on and on.

Moreover, large swathes of India's population—above all, the working class—is deeply hostile to the BJP's noxious Hindu communalist agenda.

The BJP is itself a highly combustible political formation. It combines captains of industry who are livid that India is "wasting" billions on keeping the hungry alive, recruits from the most bellicose and antidemocratic sections of the national-security establishment, and the cadre of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) militia and associated Hindu supremacist outfits.

Between the end of the election campaign and yesterday's vote-count, Modi, himself a lifelong RSS member, and other senior BJP leaders had a series of meetings with the RSS leadership to discuss the BJP's next steps.

With the BJP enjoying for the first time ever a parliamentary majority, sections of the Hindu right will invariably begin agitating for it to enact some of its longstanding communally-charged pledges—repeated in its current election manifesto—such as abolishing the unique status of Jammu and Kashmir and building a temple to the Hindu god Ram on the site of the razed Babri Mosque.

Moreover, as opposition mounts to the BJP government's big business socio-economic agenda, it will respond with the only means it has of mobilizing its base and popular support—rank communal appeals directed at scapegoating Muslims and other minorities.

India's neighbors, including Pakistan, Bangladesh and China, have all announced their readiness to work with a Modi-led Indian government. But behind the business-as-usual façade, there is undoubtedly deep concern. Modi's strongman image is built in part on his attacks on the UPA

government for “appeasing” Pakistan and being “soft” on China. And during the election campaign, he repeatedly called for the expulsion of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, including after communal violence in Assam resulted in the death of more than three dozen Muslims.

The Obama administration is eager to draw India even more tightly into its anti-China “Asian Pivot.” Toward that end, it has been anxious in recent months to set aside the flap over the visa restrictions Washington placed on Modi in 2005 because of his role in the Gujarat pogrom. On Friday, Obama telephoned Modi to congratulate him on the BJP’s election victory and invite him to visit the White House.