

Indian state election results: a distorted expression of popular opposition to neo-liberal reform

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The results of the five state and Union territory elections held in April and early May point to continuing mass disaffection with the neo-liberal agenda of the Indian bourgeoisie. However, this disaffection could find only distorted expression in the polling, since all the contenders fully support the bourgeoisie's drive to make India a center of cheap-labor manufacturing, research, and business-processing for international capital.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its allies in the Left Front were far and away the biggest winners in the assembly elections. In West Bengal, India's third most populous state, the Stalinist-led Left Front was returned to power with an increased majority, and in the southern state of Kerala, the Left Democratic Front returned to office, ousting a Congress Party-led coalition, the United Democratic Front, after a single term.

In Tamil Nadu, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a Tamil-regional party, will form the state government, after 5 years on the opposition benches. With 96 seats, the DMK fell considerably short of the 118 seats needed to form a majority government. But the DMK's pre-poll allies, including the Congress, the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), were quick to supply the state governor with letters guaranteeing their support for a DMK minority government.

The DMK triumph came at the expense of the AIADMK (All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), which split from the DMK in 1972 and has alternated with it as the state government.

Under the mercurial, one-time movie-star Jayalalitha, the last AIADMK government emerged as a major protagonist of the assault on the working class and rural toilers. It slashed social spending and government jobs, used strikebreakers and mass firings to break a 200,000-strong government workers' strike in the summer of 2003, whipped up Hindu chauvinism with an "anti-religious conversion" law, and jailed political opponents under spurious terrorism charges. After the AIADMK failed to win a single seat in the 2004 all-India election, Jayalalitha reversed several of her government's most contentious policies and increased aid to various socially-deprived groups in an

attempt to woo back popular support.

The DMK and AIADMK made populist promises, including pledges to provide cheap rice and free electricity to farmers and weavers, the focus of their election propaganda. The importance that the promise of cheap rice assumed in the campaign is emblematic of the extreme deprivation that prevails in what it is considered to be one of India's most economically advanced states.

In the northeastern state of Assam, the Congress lost its majority in the assembly, but will be able to cling to office by forming a coalition with the Bodoland People's Progressive Front (Hagrama faction) and by securing support from various independents. In the Tamil-speaking territory of Pondicherry, the Congress retained power, thanks in part to a pre-poll alliance with the DMK.

The Left Front garnered votes by denouncing the Congress-led central government's anti-people socio-economic policies and burgeoning alliance with the Bush administration. In Kerala, it appealed to and benefited from deep-felt popular opposition to the Congress-led state government's development strategy, which focused on attracting big business investment in mega-projects, while ignoring the state's traditional industries.

Yet these calibrated appeals to popular discontent were coupled with pledges to the ruling class that the Left Front will continue to prop up the minority United Progressive Alliance regime in New Delhi and that where the Left forms the government it will implement the economic restructuring program of big business.

In West Bengal the Left Front sought re-election for a seventh consecutive term by portraying itself as the only force that can successfully carry through the industrialization of West Bengal, a euphemism for making the state a magnet for international capital.

West Bengal chief minister and CPM Politburo member Bhuddadeb Bhattacharjee touted his record of "investor-friendly" policies, including tax concessions, land expropriations and industry-specific labor standard exemptions, while repeating previous pledges to curb strikes and popular

protests and promote “work dynamism.”

Big business, for its part, openly threw its weight behind the Left Front’s re-election. A pre-election business survey ranked Left Front-ruled West Bengal the third best state for business in the Indian Union and found that 97 percent of corporate executives believed there was no credible alternative to the incumbent state government.

If the Left Front was able to increase its seat tally from 199 to 235 in the 294-seat state, it was largely because wealthy and middle-class voters in urban areas, who have benefited from the government’s pro-investor policies and a boom in better-paid IT (information technology) jobs, shifted their support to the ruling coalition.

Until recently, these layers formed the main constituency of the Trinamool (Grassroots) Congress (TMC) of Mamata Banerjee. Formed in 1997 as the result of a split with the Congress Party, the TMC is a right-wing populist, Bengali regionalist party. In the just-concluded election, the TMC saw its seat total reduced to 29 from 60, while the Congress lost five seats for a total of 21.

No sooner were the election results tabulated, than Bhattacharjee reiterated his commitment to press forward with pro-business economic reforms. Addressing a press conference in the state capital Kolkata (Calcutta) last Thursday, Bhattacharjee said the poll results were “a clear verdict to improve our performance in formulating and implementing our economic policies for greater development in the State.”

He went on to reassure business that they should ignore any party rhetoric about socialism. “Socialism, I believe, is historically inevitable but in the present situation we can’t build it. Therefore, if we are to develop we need investments and have to invite private capital. There is no alternative to this at this moment.”

In a gesture that typifies the relations between big business and the Left Front government, Ratan Tata, one of India’s biggest capitalists, sent Bhattacharjee a congratulatory note and the chief minister drew attention to it at his press conference. The next day, it was revealed that Tata has selected West Bengal to be the site of a new car plant.

Sanjiv Goenka, the vice-chairman of RPG Enterprises, rejoiced in the Left Front’s re-election: “For me it’s a feeling of great happiness, great delight ... I think this government has delivered on all fronts.”

In Kerala too, the new Left Democratic Front ministry will pursue neo-liberal economic reforms. This has been underscored by the make-up of the new government. While the post of chief minister has been given to CPM veteran V.S. Achuthanandan, who has made muted criticisms of the extent to which his party has adopted the agenda of big business, the majority of the CPM’s seats in the new cabinet have reportedly gone to supporters of party State Secretary Pinarayi Vijayan, an unabashed advocate of pro-investor restructuring.

Acutely aware of the popular dissatisfaction with the UPA,

the Left Front appealed for votes on the grounds that a strengthened left will be able to pressure the central government into pursuing pro-people policies.

This is a cruel hoax, whose purpose is to camouflage the fact that the Stalinists intend to use any increased leverage they have with the UPA to further integrate themselves into the political establishment and smother any attempt of the working class and toilers to mount an independent political challenge to the government and the neo-liberal agenda of the bourgeoisie.

That this is so, is underscored by the fact that the CPM is now touting Bhattacharjee—the CPM leader most esteemed by big business—for a major role in national politics.

According to Politburo member and CPM senior statesman Jyoti Basu, Bhattacharjee should play a more significant role in negotiating differences between the Left Front and the UPA government.

The Congress tried to put a positive spin on the election results by trumpeting party president Sonia Gandhi’s victory in a by-election in Rae Berali, Uttar Pradesh. But her victory was a foregone conclusion. The by-election had been made necessary by Gandhi’s March resignation from parliament over the “no-office for profit issue.”

Although the Congress did pick up more seats in Tamil Nadu and retained its ministries in Assam and Pondicherry, this was more than offset by its fall from power in Kerala and miserable showing in West Bengal.

The election results underline that while the Congress is far and away the most powerful force in the UPA, it remains a shadow of the party that dominated India politics for the first four decades after independence. As one press commentator noted, “You have the Congress party scattered all over the country—but not in the crucial heartland of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.”

For India’s official opposition, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the election results were yet another setback. Since falling from power in the 2004 elections, the BJP has suffered a series of almost uninterrupted reversals.

To be sure, the BJP was never expected to be a major factor in the elections, since they were in states outside its base in the north Indian Hindi belt. Nevertheless, BJP officials were hard-pressed to disguise their dismay at their showing. Yet again, the BJP failed to win a single seat in the West Bengal and Kerala assemblies and it lost the lone seat it held in Pondicherry and the 4 seats it had captured in Tamil Nadu when aligned with the AIADMK. Only in Assam did the BJP win any seats, increasing its seat tally from 8 to 10.



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