

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article8613>



India

Indian coalition government: a defeat For Hindu nationalism

- IV Online magazine - 2024 - IV595 - August 2024 -

Publication date: Monday 5 August 2024

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On June 4, 2024, the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, was re-elected for the third time, but with fewer seats. His Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was unable to secure an absolute majority. The results make it amply clear that this Hindunationalist supremo is paying the price for his refusal to address the socio-economic crisis that has gripped the country, and gotten worse over the last 10 years under his administration. Rahul Gandhi, his main rival, rose to prominence as the leader of the opposition coalition, Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (India), in an election much closer than anticipated.

Fictions and truths

Many people were surprised by the outcome. Most had predicted a landslide victory for Modi. After six weeks of voting, the BJP, which has been in power for ten years, gained only 240 seats (272 are needed for a majority), down from 303 in 2019. This places Modi in a tight situation leading the Nationalist Democratic Alliance, a coalition of fifteen parties that includes smaller regional parties. His opponents call it a “moral defeat”. After all, the 73-year-old Modi sought 400 seats in the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) so that he could amend the constitution.

Despite this unexpected setback, the autocratic leader celebrated his win, calling it a historic achievement, as people put their trust in (his) alliance for the third time. Yet his party lost even in Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous and impoverished state, in the north of the country.

Uttar Pradesh has also emerged as the latest laboratory of Indian fascism in the last decade. There, in the city of Ayodhya, Narendra Modi inaugurated the Ram temple in January 2024, built on the ruins of the Babri mosque. A symbol of the overwhelming might of Hindutva, led by an ultra-nationalist whose ambition is to transform secular India into a Hindu nation. The BJP lost in Ayodhya too.

Modi will now be forced to rely on his alliance partners, shocking for someone accustomed to enjoying unrestricted power and authority for more than 20 years. Not only has the political landscape changed and Modi been substantially weakened, but he is now facing a freshly rejuvenated opposition, out to challenge his omnipresence in Indian politics and society. These were amply evident in the first few sessions of the newly convened parliament.

In the days to come, the BJP will also have to fight several state legislative elections, where the opposition alliance, bolstered by the results, will challenge them strongly.

Modi-magic under challenge

The Modi-magic has generally ceased to work. The personality cult built around the supreme leader has proved inadequate during the elections. But what changed so suddenly? The poor results are attributed to unemployment, a profound socioeconomic crisis, and all-pervasive inequality that has reached new heights. Also, Modi’s mismanagement of the Covid crisis, during which at least five million Indians died, has been one of the prime factors, slowly brewing discontentment with his regime.

Economic results are good on paper (6.8% growth in 2024, according to the IMF), to the extent that India is now the world's fifth-largest economy, ahead of the UK. But other indicators are poor. According to data from Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), India has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world, at 45.4%. The general unemployment rate is 8%, which may not account for numerous types of underemployment and disguised unemployment. India is a country where 92.4% of the workforce is estimated to be employed in the informal sector. While infrastructure is now more developed, as evident with the near doubling of airports (from 74 to 140), public debt has increased (82% of GDP), and employment-generating industries are lacking. The IMF has also warned that general government debt might surpass 100 percent of GDP shortly.

One of the biggest crises faced by the country is profound rural distress, with rural incomes declining consistently since the beginning of 2022. A never-ending inflationary spiral puts basic goods more and more out of reach for rural households, exacerbating this loss of purchasing power. Over and above that, the Modi government did nothing about the agrarian crisis that has been underway since the 1990s, when India adopted neoliberal measures that hit the agrarian sector hard. Even though agriculture contributes approximately 18 percent of the country's GDP, it employs nearly 45 percent of the workforce—close to 594 million people, according to latest estimates.

The agrarian crisis and agrarian distress in India have resulted in rural-indebtedness. Numerous reports submitted to the government on farmers' suicides have pointed out clearly that indebtedness among rural households has been a major cause. The National Sample Survey Office's (NSSO) Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households and Land and Livestock Holding, 2019, released in 2021, revealed that around 50% of Indian agricultural households are indebted. This is a colossal figure considering that there were 93,094 million farm households in the country in 2019.

Failure of religious polarisation

The masses emerged as the most powerful agency in the current elections. Results show that the BJP lost 38 seats in the constituencies that saw active participation in the farmers' struggle. While the Modi regime couldn't be unseated, the election results do not fully capture the mood of the masses in the streets. Let's not forget that everything was stacked against the opposition in this, the least free and fair national election in India's history of independence. The ruling party had a huge advantage over the opposition when it came to administrative machinery, media, and finances.

Can we interpret the mandate as one for a secular and democratic India? Yes, in a certain way but only partially. Modi sought unquestioned public endorsement for his ten years of authoritarian rule, and support for the next five years of dissolving the country's bourgeois-democratic fabric. The voters declined to approve his plans. Even amongst the voters that supported his Hindu majoritarian politics, the communal appeal did not prevail over all other considerations, despite his ferocious anti-Muslim remarks.

This result punctures his image of invincibility and is also a personal defeat for him. It is certain that the country's democratic backsliding to an outright autocratic state has been halted, if only for the time being. This will possibly open up democratic spaces, both within and outside the parliament. The agenda of the BJP, together with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—a right-wing Hindu nationalist, paramilitary organisation— was to amend the constitution, with the help of an overwhelming (more than two thirds) majority, to create a Hindu state. This is now postponed for the time being. The BJP-RSS' Hindu majoritarian project has suffered a critical electoral blow, but is not entirely defeated.

The future uncertain

The rejuvenation of the opposition space will surely open up spaces for dissent and defiance. As economic conditions worsen for an overwhelming majority of the country, we will witness more and more protests and revolts in the days to come. But will spontaneous and episodic uprisings be sufficient to defeat the fascists? Let's not ignore the fact that we are up against a formidable power that can retaliate strongly. The global right-wing wave also has negative consequences for Indian politics. The BJP has demonstrated an ability to bounce back from electoral defeats owing to the strong grass-roots network of the

RSS across the country. The repressive machinery shows no signs of relenting. The action taken by the BJP to target author Arundhati Roy, in a prosecution for 'hate speech', indicates that they want to pursue repression more vigorously.

So it is too early to be conclusive. The BJP has lost an absolute majority but has not been vanquished. Any exaggeration of the opposition's achievements can take us down the wrong political path. However, the election results have not only raised questions about Modi's invincibility, but have also returned the country to a coalition government after a decade of one-party control. A strong government with total control of the parliament wouldn't have augured well for the working class.

A weak government would certainly open up options for the Left and social movements. In order to exploit that, we need a clearly articulated strategy that is able to create a counter-hegemonic narrative, based on a strong anticapitalist transformative vision, with a strong democratic component. However, the Left is hardly a force to reckon with in the current Indian political landscape, even though they have been able to increase their parliamentary presence from 6 to 9. It is high time that we need a New Left that can fight against Hindu hegemony and is not separated from the transformative counter-project of building democratic socialism either.

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