

Indian elections: the CPI (ML) campaign

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Elections in India will take place from April 11 to May 23. *Green Left Weekly's* Susan PriceI spoke to Kavita Krishnan, a member of the politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation (CPI-ML) about their campaign to challenge Narendra Modi's far-right Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

In which seats is the CPI-ML fielding candidates? Are there opportunities for the left to coordinate efforts to defeat the BJP?

The CPI-ML is contesting 22 seats [across 10 states]: 4 in Bihar; 3 each in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab; 2 each in West Bengal, Jharkand, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu; and 1 each in Puducherry and Uttarkand.

We are calling for a vote for opposition candidates against the BJP: the priority is to defeat the BJP, especially in Bihar and Jarkhand.

We are working very hard in the seats we are contesting ... and in other seats ... to support candidates from other parties against the BJP.

In the seat of Arrah [in Bihar state], another opposition party, the Rashtriya Janata Dal, has made a gesture of leaving that seat for us ... We have reciprocated by saying we will not put up a candidate against them in the seat of Pataliputra.

It would have made a lot of sense for the anti-BJP alliance to have included the CPI-ML, but it pointedly kept the CPI-ML and other left parties out, even at the cost of weakening the possibility of candidates defeating the BJP.

We are confident, however, that there will be an alliance on the ground and that people will vote for left candidates and CPI-ML candidates to defeat the BJP.

Your election manifesto refers to ruling BJP MPs boasting about their intention to tamper with India's constitution, declaring this will be India's last election. How serious is the BJP's threat to democracy?

It is a very real threat. The basic structures and institutions of democracy — however flawed — are facing a serious threat from the Modi regime.

The BJP is the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a fascist organisation formed in 1925. RSS has been trying to capture the Indian political system ever since and now are the closest they have ever been to succeeding.

Let me give you some background. When the Indian Constitution was formed in 1949-50, in the period immediately after Indian independence from colonial rule, the RSS was unhappy that India had a modern constitution promising equality and liberties for all.

The RSS said that the Manu-smriti (a religious text of Hindu law) should be India's constitution. This text describes the subordinate status of women and oppressed castes, and recommends punishments for inter-caste marriage, for Dalits and people from oppressed castes who read the scriptures.

The RSS would like to replace the constitution with something closer to its idea of India being a Hindu nation, as opposed to a secular country where people, regardless of denomination, religion or gender, have equal rights as citizens.

On several occasions, RSS chiefs have said this quite openly. But this is the first time that BJP MPs have said this.

Anant Kumar Hegde, the Union Minister of State in Modi's cabinet, has openly stated that the BJP aims to change the constitution.

RSS leading ideologues have written that India must be a Hindu nation where Muslims will be treated as second-class citizens and told to accept Hindu hegemony or be killed or thrown out.

The RSS' founding fathers expressed great admiration for Nazi Germany, for Hitler and Mussolini. They modelled their organisation on European fascist organisations and said that what Germany did with its Jews is what India should emulate with its Muslims.

In the past five years under the Modi government, India has been dragged towards this fascist Hindu nation idea.

The government has allowed organisations like the RSS to launch lynch-mob attacks and killings on people from minorities on the pretext that they have slaughtered cows or that they have "raped" a Hindu woman. When they say "rape", they usually mean any romantic relationship between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman; they brand it a "love jihad".

This kind of organised violence has become an everyday occurrence. Mobs have been forcing their way into Muslim homes, dragging Muslims out, killing them and telling them to go to Pakistan. Attacks on Muslims travelling on trains have again become "normal".

Most telling is that Modi stays silent on these attacks, while his ministers congratulate the hate-mongering mobs and those accused of the crimes as "heroes".

A senior BJP leader [who is] a governor in Meghalaya state, tweeted that the Indian army should be able to slaughter and rape Kashmiri people to keep Kashmir under domination.

If this is what those in government positions are saying, you can imagine what the social media cell of the BJP is up to. It abuses Muslims and Kashmiris and makes death and rape threats against the left and other human rights activists.

It is a very dangerous situation: human rights activists and journalists are not only threatened, they are being killed by terrorist organisations of the Hindutva far-right.

I should add that there is a distinction between Hindutva and Hinduism: the Hindu faith is different from political Hindutva — just as there is a difference between the Jewish faith and Zionism. Hindutva politics is basically Hindu majoritarian, far right, fascist politics.

How big an impact have the recent terrorist attacks in Kashmir and rising tensions with Pakistan had on this election?

The Modi government is a massive failure on all fronts. Modi promised good days: anti-corruption measures; jobs for all; and lower prices.

Instead, he has delivered: the worst unemployment in 45 years; the lowest rural wages in 14 years; severe unemployment among educated youth; and very high food prices. His demonetisation measure — getting rid of 500 and 1000 rupee notes — unleashed devastation on the poor.

This government is very blatantly working for the big corporations. At a time when Indian people have become more impoverished, the data shows that the nine wealthiest Indians own as much wealth as the poorest half of the population.

The CEOs of the largest corporations have made great profits; they increased their wealth by 39 or 40 times in the last 2-3 years.

People are questioning the government and there have been movements against it. In response, Modi wants to shift the focus: he does not want the election to be about jobs. Instead, he wants it to be about himself: how he, a Hindu majoritarian leader, has the “machismo” to go to war against Pakistan and put it in its place.

Modi’s dog whistle is his association of Indian Muslims and Kashmiri people with Pakistan: they are being made the target of hate inside India. By polarising Hindus and Muslims and using Kashmir and the conflict with Pakistan, Modi can deflect from all the critical economic issues in the election.

The media’s role has been very suspect; a large part of the media helped Modi win in 2014. A large section of the corporate media is still invested in Modi, pushing his narrative in a big way. They are also trying to suppress news about big ticket corruption and crony capitalism in which the prime minister’s office and the PM himself are directly implicated.

This kind of “blowhard” talk has two kinds of impacts: the first is a sense among Indian people that it is misplaced. For instance, the wives of the soldiers killed in the Pulwama bombing attack have said, on the record: “We don’t want war. We don’t want any soldiers killed on this side or that side of the border.”

Secondly, Ajit Doval, the PM’s national security advisor and someone with a very dubious track record, is single-handedly responsible for taking the Kashmir dispute further away from a resolution. This is also being debated.

At the same time, it looks bad for the PM to be trying to evade every other conversation and every other debate while trying to turn the election [...] into a war in which he stands for India against the enemy Pakistan.

The CPI-ML opposes a proposal for a new open-cut coalmine in Parsa that would put 170,000 hectares of forest at risk. How big are the threats to environmental regulations by companies like Adani?

The Modi government has launched a systematic assault on environmental regulations and environmental protection laws, as well as laws to protect the [land] rights of forest-dwelling and indigenous communities.

This is all in the name of what Modi calls “ease of doing business”. His government has made it easier for big corporations and transnational corporations to acquire forest land.

The government recently took away thousands of hectares of forest land in Chhattisgarh to give to

an Adani subsidiary for mining. This endangers the forest dwelling people and their livelihoods, as well as this rich forest.

There was a recent case where the Supreme Court ordered the eviction of 20 *lakh* (2 million) Adivasi (indigenous) families from forest land on the basis that their claim to land was rejected. The order was bought by a supposedly pro-wildlife NGO.

The Modi government did not challenge the order in court. It did not say anything against this NGO's attempt to dilute the law and evict the forest dwellers.

Afterwards, there was a huge hue and cry that forced the government to file a review petition in the Supreme Court, and the order to remove the indigenous people has been stayed.

We have recently found out that Modi sent a letter to most state governments proposing an amendment to the Indian forests act, which is a draconian, colonial piece of legislation and gives forest authorities a lot of power over forest-dwelling populations.

It is now proposing to make that law even more draconian whereby forest authorities will be able to shoot and kill with impunity. The law will give protection from prosecution, because it will be assumed the authorities are shooting in self defence. They will also be able to search people's homes without a search warrant.

This law is similar to those allowing the armed forces special powers in conflict areas in north-east India, as well as Kashmir.

Legalising their use in forest areas will impact tribal Adivasi and forest-dwelling populations in a terrible way.

Gautam Adani is someone whose fortunes have risen along with Modi's own. He has been close to BJP governments in many states that have gone out of their way to hand over precious land and forest resources as well as assets such as coalmines, to Adani.

The regulations on airport contracts have also been tweaked, so Adani has now received contracts for seven airports across India.

Your election manifesto talks up the need to protect the rights of women, the LGBT community and to take a stand against hate crimes and communal violence. How widespread is such discrimination?

The sharp escalation in Islamophobic hate speech and violence has marked the Modi regime. It has been orchestrated by the PM and his closest aides, as well as his MPs and party leaders.

The most recent example was when Modi gave an election speech in Wardha, ironically one of the places associated with Mohandas Gandhi, who led India's freedom struggle and who was killed by a terrorist from a far-right Hindu organisation.

Modi referred to an instance where persons accused of having conducted a terrorist bombing on the Samjhauta Express, the train between India and Pakistan, were acquitted.

The acquittal happened because the prosecution failed to submit evidence against the accused and deliberately weakened the case.

A couple of years ago the prosecutor claimed she was being pressured by the government to weaken

the case because the [accused] persons were close to the RSS and had the PM's approval.

One of the judges who acquitted these people said that he was left with no choice because a lot of evidence was not presented.

Referring to this case, Modi said that the previous Congress government was anti-Hindu because "they accused us" — "us" being Hindus. He referred to himself not as "Indian", but as "Hindu". He said: "Congress says we are terrorists, but we are peace-loving" and "Congress tarnished our image in the world".

When Modi says "we", "our" and "us", he means Hindus and, for him, Hindus can never be terrorists.

Last month, 11 Muslims were acquitted. They had been in jail for 25 years on fabricated terror charges. The court held there to be zero evidence against them.

In the Samjhauta Express bombing case, one [of the accused] admitted in an interview, as well as to a magistrate, that he was implicated in the crime and he had been asked to help to plan and carry it out and to help distance the matter from the RSS and the BJP. He was still acquitted.

[Modi] is trying to make this election a Hindu versus Muslim election. He is doing this because he is in trouble ... There are so many questions for which he has no answer.

If you look at violence against women: there are organised crimes against women by outfits close to the RSS. This is the most organised kind of violence against women's autonomy ever to be approved by a government in India.

There have been rallies, led by BJP leaders, [in support of] the persons accused of the rape and hate murder of a little Muslim girl of the Bakarval community, a nomadic community in Jammu and Kashmir.

There are many other instances of blatant crimes against women.

There is also hate speech against the LGBT communities by BJP MPs, including Subramanian Swamy who recently gave a controversial speech at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is known for hate speech against Muslims, women and LGBT communities and said LGBT people are "sick", that they "need treatment" and he is against the decriminalisation of homosexuality.

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