

Modi & BJP's India: Elections not enough to defeat Hindutva fascism

Friday 4 May 2018, by [MOHAN KOMMALAPATI Narendra](#) (Date first published: 27 April 2018).

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Concerns over the seemingly unstoppable juggernaut of the Hindu nationalist BJP government continuing in power into the indefinite future were partially allayed by the December elections in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat.

Modi was Gujarat's longest ruling chief minister and used his "Gujarat model" as the vehicle of his rise to power. This model was based on large-scale handouts of land, public assets and subsidies to corporate houses in return for media hype and enthusiastic endorsement by an increasingly shrill, intolerant and hectoring corporate media.

The media pushed the official BJP agenda of Hindutva — a program of fomenting religious polarisation and hatred. It aims to push a militarised religion, merging organised religion and the military with a corporatist state pushing Hindi — Sanskritised and largely purged of its Farsi, Arabic and Turkic vocabulary — as a form of linguistic hegemony.

BJP challenged

The first post-Modi elections to the state parliament led to a BJP win in what was widely considered a hollow victory. It lost 16 seats to win a bare majority of 99 seats in a 182 member house. More significantly, it featured the election of a young Dalit (lowest caste) activist, as well as the emergence of powerful voices of opposition to the BJP's agenda of reinforcing traditional caste privileges.

In neighbouring Rajasthan — another BJP-ruled state — the party lost two federal seats and a state parliamentary seat in a by-election to the Congress.

Those concerned about the spread of violent religious nationalism have taken heart from the presence of powerful regional parties in the south, albeit increasingly under pressure from the federal government. There is also the build up of opposition to the BJP's agenda of imposing Hindi as the official language on linguistically diverse states and regions.

These forces of opposition, however, do not necessarily mean the defeat of the BJP's far-right agenda.

Given India's restrictive first-past-the-post electoral system, most federal governments have won power with a minority vote. The BJP won 282 seats in the 2014 election with a party vote of 31%. Along with its alliance partners, it won a total of 336 seats of the 543 seats in the House of

Representatives, with a combined vote of 38.5 per cent.

Going by present trends, the BJP could still form a government in 2019, even if it misses an outright majority. Several factors make that possible, both in terms of party politics and degradation of public institutions.

First, no other political force, except the communists, see the BJP as beyond the pale for a coalition. Second, the real force behind the BJP is the Hindu fascist National Volunteers Association (RSS). This group has significant support among business, the bureaucracy, part of the judiciary, academics, police and the armed forces.

Third, the RSS has a history of backing the Congress and has a core of support among Congress right-wingers. Congress members have been leaders of RSS affiliates such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council).

The RSS and its affiliates have expanded into a vast complex of hard and soft Hindu nationalist organisations operating in multiple sectors. These range from vigilante groups to schools and meditation centres for IT workers — including among the Indian diaspora.

This combination of money, muscle and support from RSS-aligned officials can ensure opposition members can be induced to defect or form coalitions with the BJP. This is not impossible given that many state governors are aligned with the BJP and judicial review of governors' decisions is doubtful.

Even the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the chief election commissioner and the chief of army staff have been associated with a series of questionable decisions and comments that favoured the BJP.

Social degeneration has followed the mass sell-off of public sector industries, privatisation of assets, closures and downsizing of government agencies in a backwards post-colonial economy. Accompanying this over the past three decades has been a feeding frenzy by robber baron corporate bosses, gangster-politicians and multinational corporations in collusion with a colonial bureaucracy marked by entrenched corruption and apathy.

Criminality

This has all come with a growth in criminality in politics. After the 2014 elections, an estimated 34% of federal parliament members were found to have records of violent crime, ranging from attempted murder to abduction, rape and murder. The proportion of gangsters and violent criminals in positions of power rises as one goes down the scale from the federal level.

A few Oxford/Cambridge/Harvard graduates and ex-diplomats present a polished public face to the world, but behind them are large groups of white-collar racketeers and violent street thugs. The huge victory of the BJP has given this complex the opportunity to establish itself as a nexus of business-politician-bureaucrat-police-media-judiciary-and-clergy that does not flinch from unleashing brazen terror against voices of dissent.

What those wedded to electoralist politics and sections of the left fail to acknowledge is that even a defeat for the BJP in the 2019 elections will leave the RSS apparatus and this criminalised nexus largely untouched.

The very nature of neoliberal globalised capitalism means that corporations are increasingly cutting jobs and outsourcing or privatising most operations. Yet India is a country that needs to create an estimated 20 million jobs every year.

The fractious nature of profiteering through outright fraud, handing over vast swathes of land and public resources at heavily subsidised rates, tax breaks and brazen violation of labour and environmental laws means that governments and the elite have to frequently resort to open terror to facilitate capital accumulation. It needs to place an ideological cover on this terror through some form of fascism.

Even without the ideological cover of Hindu nationalism, successive Congress governments established a system of draconian rule through a series of repressive laws.

Low job creation, a break-down of a dominant liberal consensus in politics, an increasingly violent ruling elite and state apparatus, a huge growth of precarious and unorganised work and a backward post-colonial society mean that India has reached a situation of chronic fascism. There is no chance of a return to a liberal capitalist regime, as was possible during the economic boom of post-war Europe.

The implication is clear: break out of the crisis through a radical transformation, or decline further into unmasked brutality and environmental disaster.

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P.S.

* Green Left Weekly, April 27, 2018, Issue 1178:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/elections-not-enough-defeat-hindutva-fascism>