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On the Lok Sabha Election Results: Reviewing the Party's Performance

The 15th Lok Sabha elections have resulted in the success of the Congress and its allies, who together won 262 of the 543 seats. The BJP suffered a comprehensive defeat, winning only 159 seats with its allies. The CPI(M) suffered a serious reverse, winning only 16 seats, and the Left parties won a total of 24 seats. With the exception of the Biju Janata Dal in Orissa, the parties that were part of the non-Congress, non-BJP combination, such as the Telugu Desam, the AIADMK and the Janata Dal (Secular), also failed to win any substantial number of seats.

THE MEANING OF THE CONGRESS VICTORY

The Congress neither won a sweeping victory nor did it make gains all over the country. Although it won 61 seats more than in 2004, its share of the national vote rose by only 2 percentage points. There was no uniform trend in favour of the Congress. In the 17 most populous states, the vote-share of the Congress increased in eight and declined in nine. In the 11 smaller states, the vote-share of the Congress increased in seven and declined in four. In some states, including

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large states, the number of seats won by the Congress rose, while its vote-share actually declined. In Maharashtra, the vote-share of the Congress-NCP alliance declined by 3.2 percentage points, and in Andhra Pradesh, the vote-share of the party declined by 2 percentage points.

What accounts for the success, albeit limited, of the Congress? First, the trend that emerged in 2004 of people voting for a secular dispensation and rejecting the communal politics of the BJP continued, and that trend worked in favour of the Congress in the 2009 elections.

Neo-liberalism determined the overall direction of the UPA government's economic policies over its five-year term. The Government failed to tackle the agrarian crisis, and hunger and malnutrition continued on a massive scale. It failed to curb either inflation in the prices of essential commodities or the rising rate of unemployment. While the share of wages in the value of output fell sharply, the period was also marked by a large-scale transfer of resources to the big bourgeoisie and the most affluent sections of the population.

It must be recognized, however, that despite these anti-people aspects of economic policy, the Congress managed nevertheless to hold mass discontent in check over the five-year period and to improve its strength in Parliament. It was able to do so in large measure because of public support for policies such as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the waiver of farmers' debts to public-sector banks, the enactment of the Scheduled Tribe and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, and the increase in the minimum support price of key crops.

Some 4.5 crore people gained, on average, 48 days of work in a year under NREGA. The farm loan waiver scheme, which involved the waiver of Rs. 65,000 crores in loans, provided immediate relief to around two crore farmers. Increases in the minimum support prices of wheat, rice and other crops also provided some relief to the peasantry. The increased allocation (though still inadequate) to education, and the extension of the mid-day meal scheme were also positive steps. All these measures helped, in the minds of the people, to counteract the effects of the agrarian crisis, price rise and unemployment.

It is immediately evident that the policies that worked in favour of the Congress are pro-people policies that were included in the Common Minimum Programme at the instance of the Left, and whose

implementation (however partial) was because of continuous pressure from the Left in Parliament and outside. The Left prevented the destruction of the insurance and banking sector by liberalization, and it is clear that the adverse impact of the global financial crisis was greatly mitigated by the fact that the Left had fought against the globalization and liberalization of the financial sector.

The Congress-led Government gained credibility and legitimacy among wide sections of the people because of the support it received from the Left.

The non-Congress, non-BJP parties that came together to fight the elections was an electoral alliance between the Left and some regional parties in certain states. This “third front”, as it was popularly called, did not gain credibility at the national level. In the absence of a viable non-Congress, non-BJP alternative, a large section of the people (including the people of religious minorities) who wanted to see the defeat of the BJP voted for the Congress-led alliance.

THE CONGRESS PARTY AND THE BIG BOURGEOISIE

Finally, the success of the Congress was also dependent on the solid support it received from the most powerful stratum of the ruling classes, the big bourgeoisie. It is this stratum that made the biggest gains during the tenure of the UPA government. The assets of the top ten corporate houses in the private sector tripled, rising from Rs. 354,392 crore in 2003-2004 to Rs. 1,034,834 in 2007-2008. Income-growth in the first four years of the UPA government contributed to a sharp increase in the number of dollar billionaires. In 2004, there were 9 dollar billionaires in India; that number increased to 53 by 2008. The position of the Congress vis-à-vis the big bourgeoisie also had the solid support of international finance capital.

The big bourgeoisie is in favour of a two-party system in which the Congress and the BJP compete against each other, and it is a fact that the BJP can, even today, get the support of sections of the big bourgeoisie. We have seen, for instance how some big businessmen have endorsed Narendra Modi's leadership in recognition of Modi's big-business-friendly regime. At the same time, the big bourgeoisie is increasingly wary of the repercussions of extremist Hindutva and the violence and terrorist counter-violence that it engenders. In contrast with the 1990s, when a section of the big bourgeoisie shifted their

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support to the BJP, the support of this stratum has consolidated around the Congress party at this juncture.

The successful electoral performance of the Congress is also, in large measure, the success of a class strategy. In implementing a neo-liberal economic policy; the Government serves primarily the interests of the big bourgeoisie, and collaborates increasingly with and is accommodative to foreign finance capital. Four years of income-growth represented a boom period for these strata. Government revenues as a whole increased, though the specific tax burdens on these strata declined. Certain states put in place specific mass welfare measures. The big bourgeoisie has been willing to go along with this overall strategy (one of the terms used in this connection has been “inclusive growth,” although, of course, it is not a policy of genuine inclusion of the socially and economically deprived). Such a strategy permits, after all, unhindered accumulation with only a small part of the surplus collected through taxes and by other means going towards certain mass-based welfare programmes. We can see this strategy in action in a particularly crude form in Andhra Pradesh. In Andhra Pradesh, policies of pampering the propertied and affluent vested interests, and massive corruption in the implementation of irrigation schemes, land sales, and so on, were accompanied by the implementation of measures such as the provision of rice to the poor at Rs 2 per kg, educational concessions for a wide strata of the backward classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, plus some measures such as health insurance and pensions for widows and the elderly. The DMK implemented a variant of this strategy in Tamil Nadu.

This strategy also involves a new and enhanced role for big money in the electoral process. Illegal money is accumulated by ruling class politicians through crony capitalism, and public policy is hijacked by private interests. The symbiosis between capitalists and politicians has reached a new level under neo-liberalism, and the direct impact of the politician-capitalist nexus is now being felt in politics and the political system as never before. Election tickets are given to businessmen-politicians, who, in turn, pump money in for illegal use in elections. The Congress-led dispensation, in collaboration with Congress allies such as the DMK, has taken the use of money-power to new and unprecedented levels. Other bourgeois parties try and follow suit. The large-scale use of money-power vitiates the very basis of democratic elections, and is a serious threat to the democratic system.

This money is generated at different levels of Government and administration: Governments are used to serve the interests of the capitalists and big money, and public policy is subverted and suborned in their favour.

Under the UPA dispensation, we saw how policy-making across a range of areas such as finance, commerce and industry, telecom, civil aviation, environmental clearance and health, were tailored or bent to serve the vested interests that have flourished as a consequence of the businessman-politician nexus.

The Congress is primarily responsible for this perversion of the democratic process. One needs only recall how brazenly the money supplied by big business and vested interests was utilised to bribe and purchase MPs belonging to the Opposition during the trust vote of July 2008. If the Congress-led alliance had fallen short of a majority in the general election, the same lobbies would have been at work to suborn smaller parties and groups of MPs to the Congress cause.

THE DEFEAT OF THE BJP

The BJP's defeat has been significant because it failed for the second successive time to come back to office. Its overall vote-share declined by 3.36 percentage points. Other than in Karnataka and Himachal Pradesh, its vote-share in all states was lower in 2009 than in 2004. The reiteration by the BJP leadership of its adherence to the Hindutva platform, the communal venom exemplified by the hate speech of Varun Gandhi and its replication of its content and tone by BJP leaders in Karnataka, Orissa and other states unmistakably branded the party in the public eye as organisation of divisive communal politics. The projection of Narendra Modi as the successor to L. K. Advani showed where the party was heading.

The BJP seriously miscalculated by linking the anti-terrorist issue to its communal platform, particularly after the terrorist attacks in Mumbai. The people rejected the attempt by Hindutva forces to convert the serious threat of terrorism into a partisan communal issue. The constant identification of terrorism with the Muslim community also betrayed the communal character of the BJP, and the arrest of some Hindutva extremists in connection with the Malegaon blasts further exposed the sectarian stand of the party, which portrayed the prosecution of the accused as a persecution of Hindu religious figures.

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The BJP has been caught between its fealty to Hindutva and the RSS and its need to broaden its agenda and appeal in order to win over new allies. Those who expect the BJP to evolve into a centre-right party are mistaken: the *raison d'être* of the BJP is to be the political instrument of the RSS. It should also not be forgotten that the rapid growth of the BJP in Karnataka in recent years and earlier in Gujarat was fuelled by the success achieved by the RSS and its offshoot organisations in creating communal polarisation by means of minority-baiting, and inciting and perpetrating communal violence. Where the BJP succeeds in establishing its political base through such methods, it has also been able to enlist the support of capital. As in Gujarat, so too in Karnataka the BJP has received the direct support of big capitalists. The Bellary mine-owners, who are worth thousands of crores of rupees, are now ministers in the Karnataka Government.

It is important to isolate the BJP from its secular allies and the regional parties. The electoral success of the BJP in 1998 and 1999 was related to its gaining allies among secular bourgeois parties. The formation of the non-Congress, non-BJP alliance for the elections led to the BJP being deprived of any worthwhile allies from amongst the regional parties in certain states. In Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Orissa, the alliance of the TDP, the AIADMK and the Biju Janata Dal with the Left parties ensured that the BJP was unable to win a single seat in these states.

Contrary to the claim of the Congress leadership during the election campaign that the formation of the third front would help the BJP, the part played by the third front contributed in an important way to its defeat.

THE FIGHT AGAINST COLLABORATION WITH IMPERIALISM

Neo-liberalism accelerated ruling-class collaboration with imperialism. What began during the Narasimha Rao government was intensified over six years of BJP-led pro-American foreign policy. When the Common Minimum Programme was drafted, the UPA government was compelled to not include a strategic alliance with the United States in it, but the issue was brought back very soon, by means of a reference in the President's first Address to Parliament in June 2004. One year later, the Defence Framework Agreement was

signed in a clandestine way. This was followed by the Prime Minister's visit to Washington, which led to a blueprint for full-fledged collaboration being set out in the joint statement with President Bush.

These events led the Central Committee of the CPI(M) to state the following in March 2006:

In the last nine months, one of the main issues between the UPA government and the Left that came to the fore is the Indo-US strategic alliance and India's foreign policy. On the Iran nuclear issue, the government once again voted for reporting the matter to the Security Council in February 4, 2006. The whole situation will be changing with the new Indo-US equation and the strategic tie up. Our Party must understand the serious danger posed by this orientation of the UPA government. It will have serious repercussions for our economic sovereignty, independent foreign policy and lives of the working people.

The Party was clear that the fight against neo-liberal policies could not go forward without carrying on the fight against the strategic alliance with the United States. With the signing of the Indo-US nuclear deal and the *quid pro quo* by the Congress-led government, that is, of entering into a military-strategic relationship with the United States, it was no longer possible for the Party and the Left to support a Government that was determined to embrace the United States as a strategic ally. As the 19th Congress of the Party noted:

India becoming a strategic ally of the United States would be a major gain for US imperialism. The Party decided to oppose the nuclear agreement as it was the cementing factor for such an alliance. The Party and the Left decided that it would do whatever is necessary to block the agreement.

WITHDRAWAL OF SUPPORT TO THE UPA GOVERNMENT

The withdrawal of support to the UPA government took place when the Manmohan Singh Government declared that it would go ahead and operationalise the nuclear deal by getting the IAEA Board's approval for the safeguards agreement. For the CPI(M), this was a matter on which there could be no compromise, since the Congress leadership had gone back on its commitment to not proceed with the nuclear deal at the IAEA if the Left objected to it. The CPI(M) and the Left became the target of concerted attack after we withdrew

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support to the UPA government. The Political Resolution of the 19th Congress of the Party warned about this eventuality. The UPA Government was dependent on the Left's support, and imperialist circles and the domestic ruling classes were determined to put an end to such an arrangement. The Left had consistently opposed neo-liberal policies and had blocked specific measures in Parliament. It had also firmly opposed the strategic alliance with the United States. Consequently, there was a large-scale and intense campaign to isolate and weaken the CPI(M) and the Left. The Party Congress noted also that such a concerted effort had already begun in West Bengal.

ELECTORAL-TACTICAL LINE

Such was the context in which the Party had to work out its electoral tactics for the Lok Sabha election of 2009. With the ruling classes and their political representatives out to target and isolate the CPI(M) and the Left, it was essential for the CPI(M) to gather allies. The objective of defeating the Congress and the BJP required that an electoral understanding be reached with other non-Congress secular parties.

The Central Committee of the CPI(M) has conducted an election review in its meeting held on June 20-21, 2009. It has reviewed self-critically the electoral-tactical line worked out by the Party. The Central Committee has reiterated that it was necessary and correct to bring together the non-Congress, non-BJP parties to present an electoral alternative to both the Congress and the BJP. However, we were unable to present a credible electoral alternative at the national level. Other than in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, where Left-led alliances exist, the Party was able to come to electoral understandings in only four states. In Andhra Pradesh, the CPI(M) was part of the four-party alliance that included the TDP. In Tamil Nadu, it was part of an electoral understanding with the AIADMK and three other parties. In Orissa, it had an electoral understanding with the BJD. In Karnataka, it had seat adjustments with the JD(S). These parties came together after elections were announced, and declared their resolve to work together to defeat the Congress and the BJP and form an alternative non-Congress, non-BJP government at the Centre.

However, there was no common policy platform worked out for

this combination nor was there any joint campaign at the national level on policy issues or people's issues before the announcement of elections. Given the limited scope and reach of this combination, projecting it at the national level as one that could form an alternative government was neither viable nor credible. The review of the electoral-tactical line was summed up by the Central Committee as follows:

(i) The decision to withdraw support to the government when it decided to go ahead to operationalise the nuclear deal was correct. It was based on our understanding that the Party cannot support a government which is entering into a comprehensive strategic tie up with United States imperialism in which the nuclear deal was as the Party Congress put "the cementing factor." However, we could not mobilise people on the nuclear issue and rally them during the election.

(ii) It was necessary for us to enter into electoral understandings with non-Congress secular parties wherever possible and give the call along with them to defeat the Congress and the BJP. However, the state-level alliances that were forged could not be projected as a credible electoral alternative at the national level.

(iii) The call for an alternative secular government comprising non-Congress, non-BJP parties was a slogan which could not be believed by the people. It would have been more appropriate to call for an alternative by strengthening the Left and the non-Congress-non-BJP combination that we had forged.

CPI(M) PERFORMANCE

As noted earlier, the CPI(M) and the Left parties were faced with an unprecedented gang-up of forces in West Bengal and Kerala. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress had an alliance with the Congress and the SUCI, and the support of the Maoists and other divisive and separatist forces. As the Central Committee review pointed out:

In this election, we saw this offensive against the CPI(M) and the Left unfolding. The ruling classes and the imperialist agencies have concentrated their attack against West Bengal and Kerala in order to isolate the CPI(M). Spearheaded by the Congress, all the reactionary forces were mobilised to

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ensure that another government dependent or influenced by the Left does not come about. In West Bengal, we saw an unprecedented ganging up of all forces from the extreme right to the extreme Left. The Maoists became the instrument for killing cadres to disrupt the Party. The foreign funded NGOs and the divisive forces based on identity politics, many of whom are linked to imperialism were harnessed. In Kerala, sections of the Catholic Church, the media and NGOs were utilised.

The poor performance in West Bengal can be attributed to political, governmental and organisational factors. The Nandigram and Singur incidents highlighted the issue of land acquisition for industrialisation. One of the reasons for the erosion of support amongst sections of peasantry in certain districts was the apprehension that land would be taken away from them for industrial projects. The TMC-Congress combine used this issue to drive a wedge between the Party and sections of the peasantry. At the governmental level, many policy measures that are directly related to the welfare of the people were either not implemented properly or were substantially delayed in implementation, leading to a loss of support from the people for the Government. The public distribution system, health, education, rural electrification, supply of drinking water are some such policy areas. Thirty-two years in Government have had various ill effects on Party organisation. Bureaucratic behaviour, corruption and malpractices among some cadres have led to alienation of people, particularly from the poorer sections of society, from the Party. Accumulated discontent, including alienation among sections of the Muslim minorities, came to the surface in this election. Some of the present erosion of support was seen in the panchayat election last year.

The shortcomings in government functioning and the weaknesses and wrong trends in Party organisation have been identified. Current tasks have been set out: they include taking steps to improve government functioning, taking up measures that are directly related to the welfare of the people, removing the shortcomings in Party organisation, and rectifying wrong trends. The strategy for industrialisation should be reworked in order that the apprehensions among the peasantry about land being taken away are removed.

The West Bengal Party has come under unprecedented attack during the elections and the post-election period. More than 50

comrades have been killed by class enemies and hired goons, including Maoist squads. These Party members and supporters have sacrificed their lives for the cause of the Party and the movement. More than 1 crore 85 lakh (18.5 million) people, braving all attacks and hostile propaganda, have voted for the Party and the Left Front.

In Kerala, where the Left and Democratic Front polled nearly 42 per cent of the vote, it cannot be said that the mass base of the Party has been reduced substantially, though there is erosion of support among certain sections of the people. The Party has identified some of the issues responsible for the defeat. Disunity in the Party and the LDF has had an adverse impact on the people. The Catholic church has been able to rally a substantial section of its followers against the CPI(M) on the basis of its opposition to the Education Act. The support extended to LDF by the PDP has been utilised successfully by the opposition to create confusion among sections of secular-minded people. The big campaign launched on the SNC-Lavalin case, a false case that has been foisted on the Secretary of the Kerala State Committee of the CPI(M), has had an impact on some sections of the people. On the issue of maintaining the unity of the LDF, the main responsibility lies with the CPI(M). The objective of keeping the LDF united should have been considered when differences arose on seat sharing.

There are organisational problems in the Party that have persisted for a long time. Progress has been made in resolving many of these problems. Nevertheless, millions of people supporting the Party expect that the problem of disunity in the leadership be resolved once and for all.

Tripura is the only state where the Party and the Left did not suffer reverse. Rather, the results in Tripura show how the CPI(M) and the Left Front have solid support. The Party won both the Lok Sabha seats polling 61.7 per cent of the vote. It is also significant that the Left Front has led in all the sixty assembly segments and except in two, it got more than 50 per cent of the vote. Such a sterling performance is a tribute to the political-organisational leadership provided by the state committee of the Party and to the all-round development work, oriented to the poor, by the Left Front government.

The overall performance of the Party outside West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura and in states such as Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu,

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where there were election alliances, was unsatisfactory. The exceptions were in Rajasthan and Maharashtra, where good votes were polled in Sikar and in the Dindori and Palghar constituencies.

Although the all-India political situation doubtless had an impact on our performance, we must also take note of our own shortcomings in all these states. Other than in Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, we have not led sustained struggles, particularly of the peasantry, during this period. Despite various efforts and except in a few places, we could not mobilise people and conduct struggles for the implementation of NREGA and other such policy measures. We are still to implement the Party Congress decision to conduct struggles on local issues on a sustained basis. Apart from all-India one-day general strikes of the working class, we have failed to conduct sustained struggles of workers on various issues.

The electoral results confirm that even in places where struggles are conducted, if we fail to develop mass organisations and build the Party, we cannot expect to gain political and electoral support.

RECTIFICATION CAMPAIGN

An important task that emerges from our election review is the need immediately to organise a rectification campaign. The reviews conducted in West Bengal, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh show up a number of wrong trends and violation of Communist norms by cadres and leaders at different levels. The 19th Party Congress decided that priority should be given to the rectification campaign in order to eliminate wrong trends in the organisation and to uphold Party norms and communist values. The various ills in the organisation noted in the review underline the need to cleanse the Party organisation and raise the political-ideological level of Party members. The Central Committee has decided to take up the task of formulating the rectification campaign document at the earliest opportunity and to initiate such a campaign thereafter.

The Party has suffered a setback in the Lok Sabha election. On the basis of the review made by the Central Committee, earnest efforts should be made to ensure that the Party overcomes the political and organisational shortcomings and weaknesses that have been identified. We have to implement the political-tactical line adopted at the 19th

Congress and step up the independent work of the Party on that basis. The Party must rebuild links with those sections of people who have been alienated from it. The Party must take up the issues of the basic classes, and launch struggles and mobilise them to fight for their rights and livelihoods. We must conduct sustained struggles of people on local issues.

The task set out in the Political-Organisational Report of the 19th Congress to expand the Party and mass organisations must be implemented. It is incumbent on the entire Party to take up the work of removing organisational weaknesses and to rectify wrong trends and practices in the Party. In West Bengal and Kerala, State Governments have to take urgent steps to implement welfare programmes to meet some of the urgent needs of the people.

A Communist Party must face many ups and downs in the course of developing the Party and movement. An election reverse should not demoralise us. We should go to the people with the confidence that we can rally them around the Left platform. The people of the country expect the CPI(M), as the biggest contingent of the Left, to steer a course that will provide an alternative to the current ruling order. In order to do so, the Party has to strengthen Left unity and gather other secular and democratic forces by drawing them into joint action. A common platform must emerge from which to defend national sovereignty, secularism and fight for alternative economic policies.