

## From New Delhi by Paul Zykofsky

### No winners in state elections

*Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress Party must correct serious weaknesses in local organization and leadership.*

The ruling parties in four states of India were put on notice by over 37 million voters in elections for state assemblies held May 19. In the two states which have been under the rule of the Communist Party of India—Marxist (CPI-M), the opposition parties led by the Congress-I (for Indira Gandhi) made significant gains. Meanwhile the ruling Congress-I suffered setbacks in the other two states under its rule.

The elections took place at the mid-point in Prime Minister Gandhi's five-year term of office; some observers referred to them as "mini-national elections" and voters turned out in record numbers in most of the 592 constituencies being contested.

Unlike the 1980 national elections, which were basically reduced to a referendum "for" or "against" Mrs. Gandhi, the state polls involved more complex local factors. Nevertheless they supply some indications of voters' mood and general political trends.

It is clear that in the two states with the largest communist following—Kerala and West Bengal—the Maoist-leaning CPI-M was dealt a blow. In the coastal southwestern state of Kerala, the United Democratic Front (UDF) coalition led by the Congress-I won 77 out of 140 seats in the state assembly, a gain of 8 seats, giving them a firm majority after a period of unstable government in the state.

These gains, observers think, are a negative reaction to the ruralist policies of the previous CPM government and charges of widespread corruption. A similar, though less pronounced, trend can be seen in West Bengal, where although the Left Front government retained a two-thirds majority, with 238 seats out of 294, the Congress more than doubled the seats it and its close allies hold to 56, making a strong showing in Calcutta where it took half the 22 seats. Six of the CPM's state government ministers were defeated including Finance Minister Ashok Mitra, a Maoist economist who worked for the World Bank for many years. The Congress would have done much better had it not been for the factionalism and poor quality of its state leadership.

In the smaller northern states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh, the Congress-I's greatest enemy was also the divisions within its own ranks and problems of its leadership, problems which extensive personal campaigning by Mrs. Gandhi could not fully overcome. At this time it seems almost certain that the Congress will retain rule in those states, but only with the help of elected independents, many of whom are Congress members who ran as independents after being left off the official list of party candidates. In both states as well, the Congress majority slipped.

In Haryana, part of the grain-producing breadbasket of the northwest, the Congress won 36 out of 90 seats (1 is undecided); the regional farmer-based Lok Dal party won 31 seats; the Hindu-chauvinist RSS-linked Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 6 seats; 4 seats went to smaller parties; and 12 to independents. The Governor of the state has already asked the Congress Chief Minister Bhajan Lal to form a new state government. Six of the state cabinet ministers lost.

In the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the BJP took 29 seats out of 68 and the Congress 31. The balance of power is held by six elected independents, five of whom are former Congressmen, so it is likely that here also the Congress Party will be able to retain power, but barely.

There were also by-elections for seven seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the national parliament. The Congress won three of theseven.

The overall results indicate several things. The right-wing BJP did more poorly than they expected, particularly in Kerala, where they failed to win a seat and in West Bengal. The Congress Party organization has shown serious weakness in its state and grassroots organizations, a weakness which cannot be compensated for by the continued popularity and mass appeal of Mrs. Gandhi. There are other states, such as in the south, where Congress governments are suffering from similar problems of weak and incompetent leaderships.

The Congress and Mrs. Gandhi have an opportunity to correct those problems; they must do so if the central government is to be effective in "delivering the goods."