

Christians in India Breathe Easier After Elections

✖ NEW DELHI, May 21 (Compass Direct News) – Christians in India are heaving a sigh of relief after the rout of a Hindu nationalist party in national and state assembly elections in Orissa state, a scene of anti-Christian arson and carnage last year.

The ruling centrist party won a second term, but concerns over persecution of minorities remain.

A local centrist party, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), took charge of the government of the eastern state of Orissa today, and tomorrow the new federal government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will be sworn in, representing a second term for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the left-of-center Indian National Congress, commonly known as the Congress Party.

“The election result is a statement against the persecution of non-Hindus,” Vijay Simha, a senior journalist and political analyst, told Compass.

“There were a string of incidents against non-Hindus, which were principally enacted by right-wing outfits,” added Simha, who reported on anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal district of Orissa in August-September 2008. “Since the vote went against right-wing parties, the result is a strong rejection of extremist religious programs.”

John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council (AICC), said the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was “defeated not by Christians or Muslims, but by secular Hindus.”

Over 80 percent of the more than 1 billion people in India are

Hindu. Christians form around 2.3 percent of the population, and Muslims about 14 percent.

The Times of India on Saturday (May 16) quoted Rahul Gandhi, general secretary of the Congress Party, as saying that his party's victory was a rejection of politics of caste and religion and acceptance of "clean and honest" policies symbolized by Prime Minister Singh.

"Internal criticisms within the BJP have brought out that it is losing popularity among youth as well as among the urban middle classes, two segments where it had been strong earlier and which represent the emergent India of the 21st century," stated an editorial in the daily.

Crossroads

The BJP's defeat at the national level is expected to compel the party to decide whether it turns to moderation in its ideology or more extremism in desperation.

"The BJP now faces a dilemma ... Its appeal based on Hindutva [Hindu nationalism] and divisiveness stands rejected by the electorate," wrote Prem Prakash of ANI news agency. "Where does the party go from here? ... The party seems to be waiting for the RSS to provide answers for all this . . . The time has come for it to clearly define what kind of secularism it accepts or preaches."

Hopes of Christians, however, abound.

"I am hoping that the BJP will learn that it does not pay to persecute minorities, and that civilized Hindus are disgusted with divisive antics of the RSS family," said the AICC's Dayal.

Father Dominic Emmanuel of the Delhi Catholic Archdiocese is also hopeful.

"Let's hope that the new government would work harder to

protect all minorities, particularly the constitutional guarantees with regard to religious freedom," he said.

Father Babu Joseph of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India said, "The Indian Catholic bishops are confident that the Congress Party-led UPA government will keep its promises of safeguarding the country from communal and divisive forces and restore confidence among all sections of people, particularly among the religious minorities for providing a stable, secular and democratic government."

Threats Continue

The defeat of the BJP, however, may not bring much respite to those facing persecution at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups.

"One would expect a lessening in persecution of Christians and other non-Hindus – however, extremist groups often step up activities to garner funds and patronage when they are on the retreat," warned journalist Simha. "So, one could also see a rise in anti-minority activities."

The BJP, which began ruling the federal government in 1998, was defeated by the Congress Party in 2004, which, too, was seen as a mandate against Hindu nationalism. Prime Minister Singh said during his swearing in ceremony in May 2004 that the mandate for the Congress-led UPA was for change and "strengthening the secular foundation of our republic."

After the BJP's defeat, however, Christian persecution did not stop. According to the Christian Legal Association, at least 165 anti-Christian attacks were reported in 2005, and over 130 in 2006. In 2007, the number of incidents rose to over 1,000, followed by the worst-ever year, 2008, for the Christian minority in India.

Forsaking its extremist ideology could also be difficult for the BJP because there was a leadership change in the Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist conglomerate and the parent organization of the BJP, a month before the elections. On March 21, Mohan Rao Bhagwat, formerly general secretary, was made the head of the RSS.

On March 22, *The Hindu* quoted an anonymous leader of the BJP as saying, "Mr. Bhagwat has clarity in ideology; he is a quick decision-maker; he takes everybody along; and he expects 100 per cent implementation of decisions."

A day before his ascent to the top position, Bhagwat had sent a message to RSS workers across the country to come out in full force and "ensure 100 percent voting" in "the interest of Hindus" during this year's elections, added the daily.

Further, after the BJP's defeat in 2004, sections of the cadre of the RSS and affiliated groups broke away from the conglomerate as they felt the organization was too "moderate" to be able to establish a Hindu nation. Among the known Hindu splinter groups are the Abhinav Bharat (Pride of India), which operates mainly in the north-central state of Madhya Pradesh and the western state of Maharashtra, and the Sri Ram Sene (Army of Rama, a Hindu god), which recently became infamous for its violently misogynistic moral policing in the city of Mangalore, Karnataka.

Furthermore, there are pockets, especially in the central parts of the country and parts of Karnataka in the south, where the BJP remains a dominant party.

Embarrassing Defeat

Results of the general elections and state assembly polls in Orissa and the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, which were held simultaneously between April 16 and May 13, were declared on May 16.

Of the 543 parliamentary constituencies, 262 went to the UPA. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA), led by the BJP, got

160, while the Third Front, a grouping of smaller and regional parties led by communists, bagged only 79.

The Congress Party alone won 206 seats, whereas the BJP's count was 116 – a strong indication that a majority of the people in Hindu-majority India are against Hindu extremism.

The UPA has the support of 315 Members of Parliament, far higher than the 272 minimum needed to form government.

The embarrassing defeat for the BJP came as a surprise. Hoping to gain from its hardcore Hindu nationalist image, the BJP had made leader Narendra Modi, accused of organizing an anti-Muslim pogrom in the western state of Gujarat in 2002, its star campaigner.

Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, spoke in around 200 election rallies, out of which the party could win only 18 seats outside Gujarat.

In Orissa, where the BJP had openly supported the spate of attacks on Christians in Kandhamal district following the murder of a Hindu nationalist leader, Swami Laxmanananda Saraswati, by Maoists on Aug. 23, 2008, the party won not a single parliamentary seat – not even in Kandhamal.

The BJP candidate for the Kandhamal constituency, Ashok Sahu, contested from jail, as he was arrested on April 14 for making an inflammatory speech against Christians. Sahu hoped to gain the sympathy of Hindus by going to jail.

The BJP was sharing power with the ruling BJD in Orissa until March 17. The BJD broke up its 11-year-old alliance with the BJP over its role in the violence that lasted for over a month and killed more than 127 people and destroyed 315 villages, 4,640 houses, 252 churches and 13 educational institutions, besides rendering more than 50,000 homeless.

Even in the state assembly elections in Orissa, the BJP faced

a debacle. Of the 147 seats, it won only seven. The BJD swept the polls with 109 seats. The Congress Party managed to get 27.

The seven assembly seats won by the BJP include two from Kandhamal district. The BJP's Manoj Pradhan, who is facing 14 cases of rioting and murder in connection with the Kandhamal violence, won the G. Udayagiri assembly seat in Kandhamal. In the Balliguda assembly constituency, also in Kandhamal, BJP sitting legislator Karendra Majhi retained the seat. Both G. Udayagiri and Balliguda were at the epicenter of the last year's violence.

Even in Andhra Pradesh state, where Hindu nationalist groups have launched numerous attacks on Christians in the last few years, the BJP had a poor showing. Of the 42 parliamentary seats, the Congress Party won 33. The BJP's count was nil.

In assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh, the Congress Party won 158 of the 294 seats, gaining a majority to form the state government for another five-year term. The BJP did not get even one seat.

In the northern state of Uttarakhand, where the BJP is a ruling party, its count was zero. The Congress Party won all five parliamentary seats.

In Rajasthan state, also in the north, the BJP could win only four seats. The Congress Party, on the other hand, won 20. The BJP had passed an anti-conversion law in 2006 when it was a ruling party. The bill is yet to be signed by the state governor.

In the 2009 election, the BJP got 10 seats in the eastern state of Chhattisgarh, where the Congress Party got only one. In the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the BJP won three of the four seats.

In the eastern state of Jharkhand, the BJP bagged eight seats,

and the Congress Party only one. In Gujarat, the BJP's tally was 15, whereas the Congress won 11. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP won 16 and Congress 12.