

FOCUS-India's Congress hammers BJP in state polls.

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NEW DELHI, Nov 29 (Reuters) - India's Congress party swept to electoral victory in three key states on Sunday, raising the prospect of a power struggle with the Hindu nationalist-led central government.

Congress leader Sonia Gandhi said she was in no hurry to oust the coalition government of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which lost control of two bastion states and failed to wrest control of another.

With most of the ballots from last Wednesday's polls in four states counted, Congress had won three-quarters of the assembly seats in Delhi and the western state of Rajasthan and clinched a majority in the central state of Madhya Pradesh.

Although the elections in four states have no direct bearing on the central government, speculation mounted that some of the eight-month-old coalition's partners could lose confidence in the BJP and jump ship.

The BJP's parliamentary leaders began a conclave at 3:30 p.m. (1000 GMT) and were due to meet their allies later.

The Congress Working Committee planned to plot its next moves later in the day, but Gandhi made it clear that her party would tread carefully.

"...my personal feeling is that we ought not to rush into certain situations, we have to consider the situation properly," she told New Delhi Television. "We don't need to boast about this, I think we have to get down to work now."

Jairam Ramesh, secretary of the Congress economic group, said the polls had brought a "very strong anti-BJP vote" because of the soaring prices of essential commodities.

Anger over prices of staples like onions and potatoes overshadowed last May's nuclear tests, earlier thought to be a powerful political card for the BJP.

Ramesh told a World Economic Forum luncheon meeting that Congress was in no position to form an alternative government from the fragmented ranks of the lower house of parliament.

"We don't believe Congress party is now in a position to bring down the government. Our political reading is that we should come to power in a clean manner," Ramesh said.

Congress won 51 of the 69 seats in the 70-member Delhi assembly for which voting took place, with the BJP at 15. In Rajasthan, it won 150 of the 195 seats and the BJP took just 33. In Madhya Pradesh, Congress took 163 of 320 seats at stake.

In Mizoram, the fourth state where elections were held last Wednesday, the Congress lost to two regional parties. But the state is not considered crucial in national politics.

Parliament's winter session opens on Monday and the Congress is getting strong signals from the communists, who also bitterly oppose the Hindu nationalist BJP, for a coordinated move to turn the heat up on the fragile coalition.

Home (interior) Minister Lal Krishna Advani told reporters in the southern city of Madras that voters had voted against the state governments, not the centre.

"The verdict is certainly a matter which needs introspection and corrective action," he said. "The BJP government at the centre has performed well but because of various factors, the exorbitant rise in prices of essential commodities, it has affected the mood of the people." (additional reporting by Suresh Seshadri in Madras and **Chaitanya Kalbag** in New Delhi).

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