

Pressure for Indian government intervention against Left Front in West Bengal

Nanda Wickremasinghe
22 February 2001

In the leadup to state elections in May, opposition politicians in West Bengal are stepping up pressure on the Indian government to intervene directly against the Left Front state government led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), which has held power for the past 24 years.

In mid-January, Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee met with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi to press for the dismissal of the West Bengal government under Article 356 of the Constitution which provides for presidential rule of a state. The Trinamool or “Grassroots” Congress was established in 1997 as a regional breakaway from the Congress (I) party. Banerjee is the railway minister in India's rightwing National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP).

At the meeting, Banerjee produced forensic material from a site in the Midnapore district, about 125km south of Calcutta, claiming the “evidence” proved that CPI-M thugs were responsible for the murder of a dozen TMC supporters on January 4. The deaths took place in clashes following a TMC rally in the area led by Banerjee and attended by some 80,000 people. The TMC has since staged a number of statewide strikes calling on the Vajpayee government to impose central rule.

The Left Front government at first denied that any deaths had taken place but later admitted that some people may have died in a clash in the Chotangara hamlet and initiated a police investigation. The TMC and BJP have insisted that the investigation be taken over by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which comes under the control of the national rather than the state government. A delegation organised under the auspices of the NDA visited the area soon after the clash.

The charges of CPI-M thuggery are not new. Last September the Vajpayee government, urged on by Banerjee, threatened to intervene in West Bengal following a series of violent incidents in the Midnapore district involving CPI-M and TMC supporters. The NDA adopted a resolution condemning the Left Front government and urging the Indian government “to take whatever steps it deems necessary to prevent the destruction of the democratic institutions in West Bengal”. It accused CPI-M members of the rape, bashings and murder of BJP and TMC members and supporters.

The CPI-M, which has been steadily losing support to the TMC, is no doubt guilty of thuggery but the violence is certainly not one-sided. In a letter to the Indian Home Minister, the West Bengal government alleged that Banerjee's followers set fire to 20 houses

of CPI-M supporters in Midnapore district on January 6. On January 11, three unidentified persons shot dead a CPI (M) village committee member in the Diamond Harbor area near Calcutta.

So far Vajpayee has been reluctant to try to dismiss the West Bengal government. He has pointed out that without the support of the opposition Congress (I) in the upper house of India's parliament, where the NDA lacks a majority, any move to invoke Article 356 would fail. An attempt in February 1999 to remove the state government in Bihar failed for lack of Congress (I) support.

But Vajpayee has other reasons. He is not certain that other regionally-based NDA allies would support the use of Article 356 against West Bengal, setting a precedent that may in the future be used against their own state governments. Furthermore, Vajpayee does not want to strengthen the hand of the TMC, which has been one of his more unreliable allies and has strengthened its position in West Bengal at the expense of his own BJP. He is well aware that Congress (I) has indicated its willingness to enter into a coalition with Banerjee but only if she breaks from the BJP.

Congress (I) leaders at the national level are under pressure to form such an alliance to halt further defections from their ranks in West Bengal to the TMC. Banerjee, however, is calling for an anti-Left grand alliance or “mahajot” that includes the Hindu chauvinist BJP. If the Congress (I) joined hands with the BJP as well the TMC, it would risk alienating Muslim voters who make up 12 percent of the electorate nationally and 27 percent in West Bengal. In addition Congress (I) does not want to jeopardise the possibility of forming a national government with the CPI-M and the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the future.

While Vajpayee's government has not moved to dismiss the Left Front government in West Bengal, it has nevertheless taken steps to strengthen the hand of the TMC and BJP in the upcoming state assembly elections. After a protracted legal wrangle, the Election Commission has been given the power to transfer, suspend or recommend the dismissal of government employees accused of taking sides during elections. An NDA team met in January with the Chief Election Commissioner M. S. Gill to demand that he take action against Bengali officials connected to the CPI-M who are allegedly engaged in vote rigging.

The CPI-M and the Left Front

Left Front leaders demagogically claim that the moves to oust their government are a conspiracy involving the BJP and the imperialist powers—the US in particular. In fact there is very little reason why the US or any other major power would want to get rid

of the West Bengal government. Far from being “socialist” or “communist,” it has loyally carried out the demands of the capitalist class, locally and internationally, for the past 24 years. The US ambassador to India recently indicated that in the interests of regional stability, Washington wanted a halt to the strikes and protests in West Bengal organised by the CPI-M's opponents.

The Stalinist CPI-M and its left allies came to power in West Bengal in 1978 on a wave of opposition to the Congress (I) government which had intervened in the late 1960s to dismiss the state government in which the CPI-M was a partner. In 1984, the West Bengal government offered to open up the state's nationalised corporations for joint investment with Indian or international big business partners.

In the early 1990s as the national government started to deregulate the Indian economy and encourage foreign investment, the Left Front began to compete with other Indian states. Chief Minister Jyoti Basu visited Europe to sing the praises of West Bengal as a site for international investors. Over the period from 1991 to 1999, 338 foreign-financed industrial projects were launched in West Bengal, involving close to 60 billion rupees (\$US1,300 million). Another 100 billion rupees (\$US2,200 million) in agreed projects are awaiting finalisation.

The results have been devastating for workers. Officially unemployment is now over 5 million across the state. The traditional industries—jute, tea, sugar, textiles and engineering—are in deep crisis with many mills facing closure. In the jute sector alone, 28 out of 59 factories have been declared insolvent, threatening the jobs of over 250,000 workers. In comparison with other states, West Bengal has fallen from second in terms of per capita GDP in the 1960s to fifth in 2000. The state ranked second in indebtedness and first in the number of suicides by sacked workers. In 1999, 48 percent of the state's population were living below the official poverty line.

In the rural areas the CPI-M relied on the support of poor peasants, which its policies of land reform had helped to proliferate. Between 1962 and 1982, the proportion of land in holdings of less than 1 acre increased from 4.1 to 10.9 percent while the area in holdings of five acres or more decreased from 56.5 to 39 percent. But many of the small landholders were unable to meet the rising costs of agriculture, went into debt and were forced to leave their land. The result was growing alienation in rural areas from the Left Front as landless peasants had difficulty making a living.

The hostility to the CPI-M was compounded by the party's use of state power to benefit its own members and those of various front organisations. For example, CPI-M made party loyalty a criterion in granting lands. At the same time, the Left Front government enforced the demands of employers. Its police force has repeatedly been involved in attacking striking workers, including the notorious case of shooting down strikers at the Kanoria jute mills in 1993. Under successive governments, the expenditure on the police force has increased 13-fold while the budget for social services has stagnated and is now beginning to contract.

The ability of the TMC and its allies to make political inroads in West Bengal is a direct product of the failure of the CPI-M to meet the needs of ordinary working people. Banerjee, then a member of

Congress (I), came to prominence in 1990 when she was arrested in the course of protests against the Left Front government's decision to hike up transport fares. She broke with Congress (I) in 1997 with the support of sections of the Bengali ruling elite.

Banerjee and the TMC base themselves on Bengali chauvinism, rightwing “law-and-order” issues and populist appeals to layers of small businessmen, hawkers and sections of workers, citing the record of the Left Front governments. In its 1999 election manifesto, the TMC proclaimed its willingness to join with any other party, including the Hindu chauvinist BJP, in order to defeat “Communism”. It made its largest gains initially in West Bengal's urban areas.

The TMC rapidly displaced Congress (I) as the main opposition party in West Bengal. It won seven West Bengal seats in the national elections held in 1998 and a further seat in the 1999 national poll, in which the BJP took three West Bengal seats. The vote for the Left Front fell to 47 percent while the TMC-BJP alliance won 37 percent and Congress (I) 13 percent. In urban areas, the Left Front was 12 points behind the right-wing TMC-BJP grouping.

Local elections last year provided further shocks for the CPI-M. Then, in the middle of 2000, the Left Front candidate in a by-election for the seat of Panskura was easily defeated by the TMC—the first time that the “left” had lost the seat in more than three decades. More than 80 percent of the voters in the constituency are landless peasants or poor farmers. In other elections, the Left Front won only 33 of the 78 municipal councils and lost control of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation for the first time in 15 years.

Now the CPI-M is staring at the possibility of defeat at the state elections in May. While the Congress (I) national leadership has so far refused the TMC's offer of a grand alliance including the BJP, its members in West Bengal are voting with their feet. A prominent leader Ghani Khan Chaudari announced on January 28 that he and five other state Congress (I) MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) would join the “mahajot” with the TMC and BJP. Four days earlier two Congress (I) MLAs had joined the TMC.

Whatever the immediate outcome of the state election, the CPI-M and its policies are responsible for paving the way for the establishment of a right-wing regime that will compound the social crisis facing the working class and oppressed masses.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact