

West Bengal: Left Front government rattled by popular outrage over Nandigram massacre

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The Stalinist-led Left Front and especially its dominant partner—the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM—have been rattled by the popular condemnation of the bloody assault CPM goons mounted last month on poor peasants in Nandigram, a complex of villages southwest of West Bengal's state capital, Kolkata.

Last January the majority of Nandigram's residents, including many longtime CPM supporters, rose up in rebellion against the West Bengal Left Front government's plans to seize their land and turn it over to the Indonesian-based Salim group for a chemical hub. In several days of violent encounters, government officials and CPM loyalists were chased out of the Nandigram area.

Determined to avenge the deaths of several CPM cadres and to smite peasant opposition to its policy of seizing agricultural land for special economic zones for Indian and foreign capital, the West Bengal state government ordered 4,000 heavily-armed police, including special commandos, to recapture Nandigram last March. This resulted in a bloodbath, in which at least 14 peasants were killed, but ultimately the police were beaten off.

In late October-early November, the CPM leadership orchestrated a fresh assault on Nandigram, this time using armed party goons rather than the state police. According to numerous eye-witness reports, the CPM-organized force mounted a campaign of terror, killing at least eight people, preventing the wounded from receiving prompt medical care, and driving thousands of villagers from their homes. (See West Bengal's Stalinist government mounts terror campaign to quash peasant unrest)

Whilst from a military perspective the CPM assault was a success and big business is gladdened by the lengths to which the Stalinists are ready to go in suppressing opposition to their pro-investor "industrialization" agenda, the events at Nandigram have dealt a shattering blow to the Left Front's pretensions to speak on behalf of India's toiling masses.

Some one hundred thousand people joined a spontaneous and, from a social standpoint, highly heterogeneous protest in Kolkata November 14 against the CPM's "recapture" of Nandigram. Large numbers of artists and intellectuals long associated with the CPM and the Left Front have expressed their anguish and anger at seeing a party and a government they identified with socialism acting as a tool of big business and showing utter indifference to the peasants, who in West Bengal as across India, comprise the majority of the population.

Even the CPM's Left Front allies have found it politic to distance themselves from the bloody events in Nandigram. The leaders of the Communist Party of India (CPI), Forward Bloc, and Revolutionary Socialist Party have all claimed that they were not consulted by their coalition partner about its plans to recapture Nandigram, and all have held the CPM solely responsible for the violence.

"We don't know how sincere his admission is, but we welcome it," said the CPI's Bengal secretary, Manju Kumar Majumdar on December 4, shortly after West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee declared that he "regretted" having gloated,

after the recapture of Nandigram, that the CPM's opponents had been "paid back in their own coin."

According to the *Kolkata Telegraph*, "In private, the three CPM partners ... described Bhattacharjee's comments as a 'damage-control exercise suggested by the party politburo'."

The CPM's allies are trying to exploit the crisis over Nandigram to gain a greater say in the shaping of the West Bengal government's and Left Front's policy. Declared Forward Bloc leader Ashok Ghose, "The chief minister today said what we had been saying for long. The course of the state's development can't be decided by the CPM alone. It's good in politics to admit follies."

Predictably, the CPM and the Left Front have responded to the crisis produced by their courting of big business and ruthless implementation of pro-investor policies by shifting still further right.

Within days of the bloody recapture of Nandigram, the Left Front dropped its longstanding opposition to India's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government moving forward with the implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear cooperation treaty and allowed the government to open negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency on granting India special status within the world nuclear regulatory regime. (The Congress Party-led UPA is a minority government that is dependent on the parliamentary support of the Left Front to remain in office.)

While the CPM and Left Front continue to rail against the nuclear accord, arguing that it is meant to bind India to the strategic imperatives of US imperialism, they, to the delight of corporate India, have allowed the government to break the logjam in ratifying the deal with Washington. (See: Indian Stalinists reverse course, allow Indo-US nuclear deal go to IAEA)

West Bengal Chief Minister Bhattacharjee, meanwhile, has vowed that there will be no turning back from the Left Front government's "industrialization policy." Speaking in the West Bengal Assembly Thursday on an opposition motion deplored the violence at Nandigram, Bhattacharjee boasted that there had been record corporate investment in West Bengal this year and said that the peasant protests at Nandigram would not derail the government's plans to appropriate agricultural land for further special economic zones.

Especially significant was the Stalinists' response to a violent protest in Kolkata on November 22 that demanded the expulsion from India of the Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen and decried the reputed mistreatment of Nandigram's Muslims.

Mounted by the Muslim fundamentalist All-India Minority Forum (AIMF) and led by a Congress Party member, the Kolkata protest was manifestly a right-wing provocation. It was aimed at turning the popular outrage over the CPM's actions in Nandigram in a reactionary and communal direction and quickly became a riot.

But the Stalinists responded in kind. They called out the army to suppress a protest that never involved more than a few thousand people,

then bowed to the Muslim fundamentalist right by hustling Taslima Nasreen, a Muslim who has decried traditional religious attitudes towards women, out of West Bengal.

The Left Front government's deployment of the army on the streets of India's eastern metropolis had a two-fold purpose. It was meant to distract popular attention from the crimes the CPM committed at Nandigram and to demonstrate to big business that the Stalinists will ensure "law and order."

Big business, for its part, was quick to voice its confidence in the West Bengal government. Interviewed the day after the AIMF protest, Sanjiv Goenka, vice-chairman of the RPG group and a former head of the Confederation of Indian Industry, told *The Hindu*, "The state has done very well under the Left rule and we have confidence in West Bengal's economic future."

The Stalinists' expulsion of the writer Nasreen from West Bengal is also an attempt to compensate for waning popular support by conciliating the Muslim fundamentalist right. With a Muslim population of some 25 percent, West Bengal has one of the largest Muslim populations of any Indian state.

The AIMF protest is symptomatic of how right-wing forces are seeking to exploit the popular anger over the Stalinists' big business policies to push them, and Indian politics as a whole, further right.

First and foremost amongst these right-wing forces are corporate India and the Congress Party-led UPA government.

India's media has seized on the Nandigram events to churn out vile anti-communist propaganda, blaming the Stalinists' suppression of a peasant movement against special economic zones for big business on the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The Congress, in preparation for a break with the Left Front should the Stalinists not continue to do their bidding on the Indo-US nuclear treaty, have moved to cement an alliance with the main opposition party in West Bengal, Mamata Bannerjee's Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress. Bannerjee is a virulent anti-communist and longtime ally of the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party. But over the past year she has been able to exploit the Stalinists' ruthless imposition of pro-investor policies to assume the guise of defender of the peasants of Nandigram and of others who fear losing the livelihood due to the creation of special economic zones.

Even before the bloody denouement at Nandigram, the Left Front government was mired in crisis as a result of growing opposition to its neo-liberal policies and the increasingly evident corruption in its ranks after three decades of administering the capitalist state in West Bengal.

In the first week of October, riots erupted in the poverty stricken Bardhaman district, about 200 kilometers from Kolkata, over the lack of food, with poor people attacking ration shops that sell government-subsidized food-staples.

The Bardhaman protest launched a wave of rural protests directed at ration shop dealers who are accused of siphoning off subsidized grain supplies in order to make huge profits by selling them on the open market.

Most of the ration shop dealers are CPM members or supporters.

Instead of punishing the corrupt merchants, the Stalinist government reacted by dispatching armed-state police to maintain "law and order" and to protect the crooked traders from the ire of the destitute villagers. The police opened fire on the villagers in Gonnalandi killing one villager and injuring ten others. As in Nandigram the police claimed "self-defense."

This violent response prompted even one of the leaders of the Revolutionary Socialist Party to observe, "While a section of local CPI-M leaders were raking in the moolah [money], the condition of the poor ones was not changing."

According to newspaper reports, over 50 ration dealers were attacked in the month following the Bardhaman riot. Fearing a similar fate almost a quarter of the state's 20,000 ration shop-dealers are said to have returned their trading licenses to the government.

According to the recent government National Sample Survey (NSS) there are 106 underfed families per thousand in rural West Bengal, the worst figure among Indian states. For several years there have reportedly been regular deaths among the state's tea plantation workers due to starvation and chronic malnutrition.

Anuradha Talwar, an advisor to India's Supreme Court who was investigating the conditions of tea-estate workers in West Bengal, told Reuters that more than 15,000 workers in West Bengal have been struggling to survive, depending on rats, wild plants and flowers for food.

As with the Nandigram massacre and the widespread phenomenon of ration-swindling, the Left Front government's failure to act against the police persecution and likely murder of Rizwanur Rahman points to its defense of the rich and privileged against working people.

A young Muslim computer graphics teacher, Rizwanur Rahman, was found dead in highly suspicious circumstances on September 21, one month after marrying his sweetheart Priyanka Todi. It quickly emerged that the police, including senior police officials, had harassed and threatened Rahman at the urging of Todi's father, Arun Kumar Todi, a rich and well-connected Hindu industrialist, who was bent on breaking up the marriage.

The couple was repeatedly summoned to appear before the police after they started living together in Rahman's modest dwelling and Rahman was repeatedly threatened with arrest if Priyanka did not "voluntarily" return to her parents for a week. Twelve days after Priyanka went back to her parent's house, Rizwanur's body was found beside a railway track.

This shocking episode caused widespread demands for an independent enquiry, but for weeks the Left Front government failed to take any serious action against the police involved in the Rahman case and lent credence to police claims that Rizwanur had committed suicide. On October 11 Chief Minister Bhattacharjee ruled out both a CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) probe into Rahman's death and the removal of three senior police officers, including Kolkata Police Commissioner Prasun Mukherjee, who were allegedly involved in the harassment campaign against Rahman.

The government indifference to police corruption and the blatant class and communal character of Arun Kumar Todi's opposition to his daughter's marriage caused a public outcry. "This incident has inflamed the people," explained sociologist Bula Bhadra, "because they have realized that if the police can meddle in a marriage between two consenting adults, our very civil liberty is at risk—and at risk from those who are supposed to uphold it."

A day after the Kolkata High Court ordered a CBI investigation into Rahman's death, the West Bengal government ordered the transfer of Police Commissioner Mukherjee and several other high-ranking police officials.

Bhattacharjee's predecessor as chief minister, the CPM "elder statesman" Jyoti Basu, conceded that the Left Front government has been politically damaged by its delay in taking action in the Rahman case. "Yes, the state government's image has suffered a beating due to the delay in transferring policemen who had allegedly coerced Rizwanur [Rahman]. We have suffered politically."

"I don't know why," continued Basu, "the government has taken so long to act. The issue suddenly became so huge due to protests from civil society that the government was forced to take action against the policemen."

While Basu feigns perplexity, the reality is, if the Stalinist-led West Bengal government is loathe to investigate police corruption, it is because it is increasingly reliant on the state's security forces to suppress opposition to its socially regressive, pro-investor policies.



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