

Indian elections

Stalinist Left Front suffers debacle in its West Bengal bastion

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The Left Front, the electoral bloc led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), was in many respects the biggest loser in India's recently concluded national elections.

In the incoming Lok Sabha (House of the People), the Left Front will have just 24 MPs as compared with the 61 it had following the last general election, held in 2004.

In West Bengal, where the Left Front has held power for the past 32 years, it suffered a humiliating defeat, losing 20 seats and recording an 8 percentage-point drop in its share of the popular vote. Whereas the Left Front captured 35 of West Bengal's 42 seats in 2004, in this year's election, which was held in five phases between April 16 and May 13, it won just 15. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM saw its seat tally in West Bengal drop by almost two-thirds from 26 to 9 and its share of the popular vote reduced by 6.5 percentage points, from 38.5 percent to 32 percent.

The Indian and international press have proclaimed the 2009 elections a "victory over the extremes," since the Congress Party—which postures as an "inclusive" party dedicated to the *aam admi* (common man), while ruthlessly upholding the interests of big business—has increased its parliamentary support at the expense of both the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the right and the "Marxist" Left.

This is a self-serving analysis. India's ruling elite expects a politically strengthened Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to accelerate the pace of privatization, deregulation, and "market," i.e., pro-big-business, reform.

The electoral drubbing the Left Front suffered in West Bengal was not a product of a turn to the right on the part of the working class and toilers; rather it was a politically confused protest against a regime that drapes itself in red flags while working hand-in-glove with big business.

The Left Front government in West Bengal has pursued pro-investor policies akin to those of its Congress and BJP rivals. It has banned strikes in IT (Information Technology) and IT-enabled industries, established Special Economic Zones with "business-friendly" tax and labour regimes, and used police and goon violence to crush peasant resistance to its program of land expropriation for business projects. For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, the votes of the Left Front's Lok Sabha MPs, including the 35 from West Bengal, provided the UPA with its parliamentary majority.

The limited land reform the Left Front carried out soon after it first came to office in 1977 secured it a strong electoral base in the countryside. But this base has been shaken, by the CPM-led West Bengal government's use of intimidation and outright violence to suppress peasant protests against land expropriations for a Special Economic Zone to be run by the Indonesian-based Salim Group at Nandigram and a Tata car plant at Singur. Tens of people died at the hands of the police and CPM goons during the protests at Nandigram and Singur in 2007 and 2008.

The Stalinists' drive to expropriate land for Indian and international capital opened the door for the Trinamul [Grassroots] Congress to pose as a spokesman for the oppressed peasantry. The Official Opposition in the West Bengal state assembly, the Trinamul Congress is a rightwing Bengali regionalist party, historically associated (through its Congress Party ancestry) with the defence of landlordism, and a frequent ally of the BJP. It is led by the anti-communist demagogue Mamata Banerjee, who as a minister in Congress and BJP-led central governments strongly supported the neo-liberal "reform" program of Indian big business.

Since January 2007, when mass protests first erupted in Nandigram, the Trinamul Congress has sought to identify itself with the popular opposition to the Stalinists' big-business land expropriation drive. Banerjee placed the land expropriation issue and the violence at Nandigram at the centre of her party's election campaign, making frequent demagogic attacks on the Left Front government for its willingness to do the bidding of the Tatas and other capitalists.

Banerjee's cynical attempt to recast herself as an advocate of West Bengal's oppressed peasantry has, from the outset, been boosted by the willingness of various Maoist and other ostensibly left groups to accept her party as an ally in the fight against the Left Front government.

In the Lok Sabha elections, the Trinamul Congress was allied with both the Congress Party and the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), which split off from the Communist Party of India in the late 1940s.

Claiming to lead a "grand" secular alliance against the "anti-people" Left Front government, the Trinamul Congress emerged as the major victory of the elections in West Bengal. It increased its share of the popular vote by 9.8 percentage points, to 31.2 percent, and captured 19 seats. (In the 2004 elections, when it was aligned with the BJP, it won just one seat.) The Congress retained the 6 seats it won in 2004 and the SUCI—which claimed "out of principle" to be withholding support for the

“big bourgeois” Congress, while supporting the Trinamul Congress—won the lone seat allotted to it by its election partners.

The BJP won its first ever seat from West Bengal, capturing the Darjeeling seat, thanks to an alliance with a Gurkha-ethnic organisation that is agitating for the creation of a separate Gurkha state within the Indian Union, Gorkhaland.

No sooner were the election results tabulated, than Banerjee and other Trinamul Congress leaders began agitating for the UPA government to place West Bengal under “president’s rule,” that is central government control, and thereby force new state elections. While Banerjee is posturing as a “left” critic of the West Bengal Left Front regime, there is no question her aim is to unseat it so as to push the state’s politics far to the right.

The Congress and its UPA have thus far indicated no support for their ally’s demand that the West Bengal government be sacked. The Congress leadership, which has much experience working with the Stalinists, probably calculates that it would much better serve their interests to keep the threat of president’s rule in reserve as a means of pressuring the CPM and the West Bengal government to be “accommodating,” especially as the Congress intends to press forward with rightwing socio-economic reforms that will provoke much worker-toiler opposition.

In line with such a strategy, the Congress leadership has announced that it will maintain the current alliance with the Trinamul Congress through the next state assembly elections in 2011.

Not surprisingly, the election results have precipitated a major crisis in the CPM, with many in the leadership arguing that the party should move even further right.

It has long been known that sections of the West Bengal party leadership opposed the decision to withdraw support for the UPA government last July after it announced its intention to push forward with implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear treaty. In the wake of this month’s election debacle, several defeated CPM MPs have denounced the decision to oppose the Congress-led government, arguing that the nuclear issue and the drive of India’s elite for a strategic partnership with the US were “incomprehensible” to ordinary people and that the Left drove the Congress into the embrace of Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamul Congress.

Adopting the standpoint of a capitalist investor, Amitabh Nandi, the defeated CPM MP from Dum Dum, said, “From day one of withdrawing support from the UPA, our slogans, our activities have proved we are against stability.”

The CPM’s introspection has seen the party leadership forced to make some damaging admissions. According to the Kolkata-based *Telegraph*, West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo members Budhadeb Bhattacharjee told an emergency meeting of the party state secretariat May 19, “land acquisition, disenchantment among Muslims, and corruption in the ranks” were the reasons for the Left’s “miserable” showing.

Traditionally Muslims, who make up a disproportionate share of the state’s most impoverished, have supported the Left, in part because of its opposition to the BJP and Hindu communalism. But that support was shaken by the Left Front government’s actions at Nandigram—the area has a large Muslim population—and by the revelations of a central government

inquiry into the conditions of India’s Muslim minority. The Sachar Committee found that whereas Muslims comprise 25.2 percent of West Bengal’s population, their share of government jobs is just 4.7 percent.

In 2007, riots broke out in many towns and villages in West Bengal in protest against corruption in the running of ration shops. The shops are generally staffed by cadres from the CPM and its Left Front partners.

During the election campaign, two *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) reporters travelled to Kolkata, the West Bengal state capital.

They report, “As we walk along the city roads we see much evidence of extreme poverty and backwardness. We see homeless people living their life—cooking, eating, sleeping, and their children studying and playing—on the pavement under the hot sun. It is summer and the heat is unbearable. What is equally shocking in the “red bastion” is the continuing practice or men eking out a living pulling rickshaws, a degrading practice outlawed in most of India.”

Siddique Alam Beg, a philosophy student from Alipur campus of Calcutta University, told the WSWS, “The Left Front is not so fitted to the ideology it claims to represent. We can’t find such a development here as claimed by the Left Front.

“There are so many problems yet to be resolved like for instance basic infrastructures—roads, transport, health and electricity. I am from a rural area, Kalicharampur in Diamond Harbor. There is no health centre in that village. People have to travel many kilometres to reach one.”

Siddique insisted, “What we need is a total change. It is not just political change—change in who would be in power. Rather we need a social change.” He is also critical of the land reforms of the Left Front, “It has been carried out to some extent. But not so much as they claim.”

In respect to the violence at Nandigram, Siddique said, “They have done something wrong there. It also shows that the Left Front is not so much for their ideology as they claim.”

In Kharda, a working class area in Kolkata, we met Mohan Prasad, an unemployed jute mill worker. He explained how he lost his job: “There were about 3000 workers in Kharda Jute Mill where I was working when it was closed in July 2007. CPM affiliated CITU [Center of Indian Trade Unions] leaders advised us to accept VRS [Voluntary Retirement Scheme]. They said that otherwise the central government would close the factory. They said it would be privatized and then ‘you will face more problems. Wages will be cut down.’”

Mohan was annoyed by the cynical attitude of the CPM towards political opponents: “Here anyone who opposes the CPM is branded as Maoist or Trinamul supporter. If the Left Front had done so well for workers for 32 years, then workers would give their votes for it.”

Mohan has no illusion on the opposition parties, including the Trinamul Congress: “People are against the CPM and Left Front. But Trinamul is not the alternative. The opposition party leaders make demagogic speeches about workers and peasants on the public platforms, but they do nothing for workers and peasants.”

WSWS spoke to another former jute mill worker, Prakash Chowdry, 46, in Kharda. He had joined Kharda Jute mill as a trainee in 1977 and got employment in 1980. He said, “We were sacked in 2007 at the age of 44. Our main need is jobs. What is left for us without a job? Whom to blame?”

Trade union leaders did nothing for us. Now I am working as a fitter at a private firm on casual basis for Rs. 100 (\$2 US) per day. What to do? No pay for any holiday.”

Like many workers, Prakash also doesn't have faith in the opposition: “What to say about CPM and Left Front? We have seen what they have done to us in our factory. Trinamul and Congress will be quite good if they can give us jobs. But we can't believe them, we can't rely upon them.

“The CPM did some good things for us in the past. Those days they fought for higher wages. Now they behave badly. When we got jobs that was fine. But when we were losing our jobs through VRS they did nothing.”

Prakash was disturbed that he couldn't see a better future for workers: “I am the only breadwinner in our house with 10 people. I have only Rs. 100 per day for all 10. People need jobs to support their families, nothing else. Doing a small business also can't help. Now small businesses also have problems. Those who are running private mills give only Rs. 80-100 per day for a worker.”

“The CPM says they will work for people. If they do so, it will be OK. But I don't believe that. I say the party which can run mills and give us jobs and help us will be good.”



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