

India's Lalgarh "uprising"

Rival Stalinist camps abet reaction

Deepal Jayasekera, Keith Jones

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The Indian bourgeoisie has seized on recent developments in Lalgarh, West Bengal—a popular challenge to government authority in an impoverished tribal area involving Maoist insurgents—to push politics in the state and throughout India sharply right.

Bowing to complaints from the Congress Party-led central government and the press about a breakdown of "law and order," West Bengal's Stalinist-led Left Front government has mobilized 1,000 Central Reserve Police Force troops, four units of COBRA (an elite counter-insurgency force), and state police to bloodily reassert the government's fiat in Lalgarh.

For the past two weeks, Indian security forces have been on the offensive in Lalgarh, an area in West Bengal's West Midnapore district that consists of about 60 villages and has a population of more than 150,000. To date there apparently have been few casualties, since the Maoist insurgents have systematically faded away before the advance of the larger, better-armed government force. But even the Kolkata *Telegraph*, which until recently was denouncing the West Bengal government for failing to crush the challenge to government authority, concedes that security forces are abusing villagers in the 95 percent of Lalgarh that they now claim to have "liberated."

Under the headline, "Cops torment, Maoists profit," the June 29 *Telegraph* reported, "The police allegedly beat up villagers at Pathardanga yesterday and destroyed their food grain, reminding residents why they 'hated the force so much' and providing the retreating Maoists a chance to play 'protector' again."

India's central government has long been planning an offensive against Communist Party of India (Maoist) guerrillas and other Naxalite insurgents. It has used the Lalgarh "uprising" to implicate West Bengal's government and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the dominant partner in the Left Front, in this offensive, calculating that this will provide its counter-insurgency campaign with a "left" cover and thus greater popular legitimacy. (See India bans CPI (Maoist) under draconian "anti-terror" law)

India's corporate press meanwhile has served notice that it is sympathetic to the demand of West Bengal's principal opposition party, the rightwing Trinamul [Grassroots] Congress, for the imposition of "president's rule" in West Bengal, that is the sacking of the elected state government, and the advance of state elections not due until 2011. (Under article 356 of India's constitution, the central government is empowered to sack a state government and temporarily rule a state if the normal constitutional machinery of government is deemed to have broken down.)

On June 19, the *Telegraph* declared, "Since [the West Bengal government] will not govern and cannot govern, it should now exit." The *Hindustan Times* was only slightly less blunt in an editorial published the previous day: "The vacillation and inaction that have marked the [West Bengal] government this week can lead to a larger damning observation: that there is no one in charge in West Bengal, two years before it holds

state elections."

The bourgeoisie has been emboldened by the humiliating debacle the Left Front suffered in the April-May national elections. In a politically confused reaction against the seizure of peasants' lands for big business and other "pro investor" policies of the Left Front government, significant sections of West Bengal's toilers, including many impoverished Muslims, voted for the Trinamul Congress (TMC) and its electoral allies, the Congress Party, and the Socialist Unity Centre of India.

The TMC responded to its election gains and entry into the Congress-led national government by immediately launching its campaign for "president's rule." This coincided with a wave of violent clashes between TMC and Communist Party of India (Marxist) cadres. TMC supremo Mamata Bannerjee accused the CPM of seeking to "crush" her party, but in most cases it was TMC activists who provoked and got the better of the clashes. By unleashing a wave of political violence, the TMC leadership clearly hoped to demonstrate that the state was "ungovernable" and thereby provide a pretext for the imposition of "president's rule."

The Congress Party leadership has repeatedly reaffirmed its intention to contest the next West Bengal elections in an alliance with the TMC. But it has thus far ignored the calls from Mamata Bannerjee, now India's Railways Minister, for the imposition of president's rule.

The Congress has long experience in working with the CPM and the other Stalinist electoral party, the Communist Party of India or CPI, and has repeatedly employed their services in stabilizing bourgeois rule. For the first four years following the 2004 election, the CPM-led Left Front provided India's minority Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government with its parliamentary majority.

The Congress and the Indian bourgeoisie are delighted that as a result of the just concluded general elections the UPA government no longer has any need of securing the Left's support. But the Congress is well aware that imposing presidential rule on West Bengal would be an egregious breach of India's constitution, could potentially complicate its relations with other state governments, and would provoke a major political crisis under conditions of heightening class tensions due to the world economic crisis.

It appears that the Congress leadership has drawn the conclusion that it will be more expedient for it to allow a politically weakened Left Front government to remain in power in West Bengal, while holding the threat of president's rule over its head to keep the Stalinists in line.

The principal responsibility for the rightwing offensive in West Bengal, to say nothing of the strengthening of the national Congress Party-led government, lies with the Stalinist CPM and CPI.

It is their ruthless pursuit of pro-investor policies—including the shooting down of peasants resisting land expropriations for Special Economic Zones—that enabled the rightwing, largely discredited, demagogue and frequent ally of the Hindu chauvinist BJP, Mamata Bannerjee, to recast herself as a spokesman for Bengal's oppressed peasantry and impoverished Muslims.

The character of West Bengal's Left Front government is exemplified by the events in Lalgarh.

The trigger for the Lalgarh uprising was the police dragnet that the state government ordered last November after West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was the target of a land mine blast while travelling through the Lalgarh area. The Communist Party of India (Maoist) took responsibility for the attack.

The police repression included arbitrary arrests, prolonged detentions and beatings, including of school age youth and women. To protest the police's actions, a body led by tribal elders, the Bharat Jakat Majhi Marwa (BJMM), organized a blockade of the Lalgarh area. So as to prevent police and government officials from entering the area, roads were blocked by digging pits and cutting down trees. Shortly thereafter, more radical elements, soon to be backed by Maoist insurgents, created the People's Committee Against Atrocities (PCPA).

As support for the PCPA grew, the government bowed to its demands that police and other officials withdraw from Lalgarh. But the government has never ordered any independent investigation of the police's actions.

If within a matter of weeks the West Bengal authorities could lose effective control over most of Lalgarh, it was because large sections of the local populace were already deeply alienated from, and angered with, a Left Front government that they view as indifferent to their needs and mired in corruption.

The government has failed to address even the most elementary development needs of Lalgarh's impoverished population.

Less than a quarter of the population has cultivable land. Few have benefited from the National Rural Employment Guarantee, a national, state-administrated program that guarantees a minimum of 100 days of menial, minimum-wage work to one member of every poor household. While the government refuses to admit it, newspapers report that there have been deaths from starvation.

There is not a single high school or college in the area. Medical facilities are also scant and rudimentary. Many Lalgarh residents have to walk kilometres to gain access to drinking water.

These conditions are an indictment of the Left Front which has governed West Bengal uninterrupted for the past 32 years.

The mainline Stalinist parties have abetted bourgeois reaction by politically emasculating the working class, administering the capitalist state in West Bengal, and, for well over a decade, unabashedly pursuing pro-investor policies at the expense of the working class and oppressed peasantry. But the Maoists are also playing a significant role in sowing political confusion among the toilers and facilitating the growth of rightwing forces.

Since 2007, the CPI (Maoist) and other petty bourgeois radical groups have been collaborating with the Trinamul Congress, accepting it as an ally in the campaign against the "social fascist" West Bengal government's land expropriation program. By so doing, they have provided a pivotal boost to Mamata Bannerjee's attempt to exploit the swelling popular anger against the Left Front and harness it to her campaign to capture power in Kolkata and push West Bengal's politics still further right.

(The Left Front government, for its part, has invoked the Maoist presence to justify its use of bloody repression against the peasant protests in Nandigram and Singur.)

The timing of the Maoists' recent expansion of their activities in Lalgarh—in early June they drove the police out of their remaining posts in the area—was not happenstance. They were seeking to take advantage of the political crisis of the West Bengal government, showing a blithe indifference to, if not actively supporting, Mamata Bannerjee's rightwing offensive.

Just weeks after Bannerjee became a minister in the UPA government and under conditions where Bannerjee was demanding the imposition of

"president's rule," the CPI (Maoist) appealed to her to oppose the repression directed against them in Lalgarh, recalling the support they had lent her in the Nandigram agitation.

Bannerjee, for her part, threatened to mount a general strike if the Left Front government did not retract its charge that she has consorted with the Maoists. But she has also complained about not being consulted by her Congress allies over the timing of the counterinsurgency operation in Lalgarh and said that the real task central government forces should be carrying out in West Bengal is a statewide campaign to disarm the CPM.

For all their declamations against the CPM and CPI, the Maoists come out of and uphold the same retrograde Stalinist-nationalist tradition, above all the "two-stage theory of revolution"—the claim that because Indian society continues to be blighted by its feudal and colonial past that India's toilers must join with the "progressive" sections of the national bourgeoisie in completing the democratic revolution.

While the CPM and CPI and their trade union affiliates constrain the working class within the confines of bourgeois parliamentarianism and protest politics, the Maoists reduce the working class to passive spectators of isolated armed rebellions that only serve to dissipate the anger of the most oppressed sections of the population and divide them from the working class. At the same time, as the West Bengal events have so graphically illustrated, they consort with various bourgeois parties.

The social and political crisis in West Bengal underscores the urgency of the Indian working class turning to the revolutionary critique of Stalinism advanced by Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International, including the program of permanent revolution. The working class must be mobilized as a politically independent force, rallying the poor peasantry, tribals and other oppressed masses under its leadership in the struggle against capitalism. The liquidation of landlordism, casteism, the creation of a framework for the collaboration on a basis of equality of all the peoples of South Asia, and the resolution of the other burning democratic tasks will only be possible through the socialist revolution in conjunction with the international working class.



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