

# India: Stalinist Left Front routed in West Bengal municipal elections

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front suffered a debacle in the May 30 municipal elections in West Bengal, the east Indian state where the Left has formed the government for the past 33 years.

When municipal elections were last held in 2005, the Left Front won control of 54 of the state's 81 municipal councils, including Kolkata. But this year it secured a majority on just 18 of the 81 councils and captured only 29 of the 141 wards in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation.

The big winner in the municipal polls was the Trinamool Congress (TMC), a right-wing, West Bengal-based split-off from the Congress Party. The TMC has frequently aligned with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But it is currently an important member of the Congress Party-led coalition that forms India's national government, the United Progressive Alliance.

The TMC chose to fight the municipal elections alone after seat-sharing negotiations with the Congress collapsed. This only makes its victory all the more stunning. The TMC won 95 of Kolkata's wards and outright majorities in 26 other municipalities. Due to Congress support, it is expected that the TMC will ultimately form the government in 50 or more West Bengal municipalities.

The Congress, meanwhile, saw its support decline. Contesting the polls in opposition to the TMC and the Left, it won just 10 wards in Kolkata and majorities on only seven municipal councils, as compared with 16 in 2005.

Municipal voters represent about one-fifth of West Bengal's total electorate. Not surprisingly, both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M) and the opposition parties saw the civic elections as a crucial test for the state assembly elections which must be held by the spring of next year.

To the chagrin of the Stalinists, the results underscored the strong popular shift against the Left Front first manifested in the 2008 panchayat (village and rural local government) and 2009 Lok Sabha (national parliamentary) elections.

Just four years ago, in the 2006 West Bengal State Assembly elections, the TMC won only 30 seats to the Left Front's 233. But the TMC has been able to exploit mounting popular anger against the right-wing pro-investor policies pursued by the West Bengal

government and rampant government corruption, including in the distribution of food to the poor.

The unleashing of lethal violence by the government and CPI(M) in 2008 against peasants in Nandigram resisting the government's plans to expropriate vast tracts of land for a Special Economic Zone provoked a national outcry.

In pursuit of investment, the Left Front government has banned strikes in Information Technology (IT) and IT-related industries and it has provided crucial political support for the UPA government's attempt to suppress a Maoist-led tribal rebellion against endemic poverty and businesses' drive to expropriate tribal lands for mining and forestry.

Banerjee is a vicious anti-communist who became active in the Congress in the late 1970s at a time when the party's state unit was notorious for its use of violence on behalf of the landlords. But over the past three years she has hypocritically recast herself as a friend of the poor and opponent of the government's land expropriation policies, with a view to capturing the state government and realizing the ambition of powerful sections of the Indian bourgeoisie to shift the state's politics and that of India as a whole still further right.

An important factor in Banerjee's success to date is the political support that has been extended to her by various "left" organizations, including NGOs, the Socialist Unity Centre of India, and the Maoists. The latter justify their support for Banerjee on the basis of their claim that the Left Front is "socialist fascist" and the need for collaboration with "progressive" sections of the bourgeoisie in completing the "anti-feudal, anti-imperialist national democratic revolution".

Banerjee immediately seized on the civic election results to press forward with her right-wing campaign for the state assembly elections to be moved forward. Previously, Banerjee had appealed to the UPA to place the state under "president's rule"—that is to remove the elected government on the grounds law and order had broken down in the state. Now she is simply saying that the Election Commission should use its authority to advance the state polls from next spring to this fall.

While campaigning in the municipal elections, she urged voters to give her a thumping victory, saying that this would strengthen her demand for early assembly elections.

The Congress leadership and the UPA government have thus far refused to heed Banerjee's calls for early elections. Such an arbitrary act would cause a national outcry. Moreover, Congress is mindful of the critical role the Left Front plays in channelling popular anger into safe parliamentary channels and, therefore, does not want to break all relations with it.

Nevertheless, in the wake of the municipal elections, the Congress leadership was quick to reaffirm that it is determined to maintain the previously announced alliance with the TMC for the state assembly polls. In congratulating Banerjee on her performance, Union finance minister and West Bengal Congress Party boss Pranab Mukherjee clearly acknowledged the TMC's leadership of such an alliance. Banerjee, he said, "has clearly established the acceptability of her party as the political harbinger of change in the state".

The civic poll results have intensified the frictions and crisis within the CPI(M) as well as in the CPI(M)-led Left Front. There were unconfirmed reports that West Bengal chief minister and CPI(M) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee offered to resign as head of the state government. Both Bhattacharjee and his industries minister Nirupam Sen, missed the CPI(M) Politburo meeting that was to discuss election defeat of the Left Front.

The CPI(M) tried to downplay Bhattacharjee's absence from the meeting as a personal reaction. "Buddhadeb takes defeat personally and shuts himself off. He did the same thing after the Lok Sabha election," a party source said. However his absence clearly reflects frictions within the party over its electoral rout.

It is well-known that West Bengal party leadership, led by Bhattacharjee, vehemently opposed the CPI(M)'s decision to withdraw its parliamentary support for the UPA government in 2008 over the Indo-US civil nuclear deal. Now confronted with the threat of being unseated by the TMC in the coming state assembly elections, Bhattacharjee has repeatedly reached out to Congress appealing to it to break its alliance with TMC.

Pointing to his government's all-out assistance to the Congress-led central government's anti-Maoist insurgency war, Operation Green Hunt, and the TMC's alliance with the Maoists in opposing the land expropriations at Nandigram and Singur, Bhattacharjee has argued the CPI(M) is a more dependable ally for the Congress—India's premier bourgeois party—than the TMC.

CPI(M) State Secretary Biman Bose blamed the party's electoral debacle on its failure to properly implement a "rectification" or anti-corruption campaign initiated in response to the rout the party suffered in the 2009 national elections. "The campaign," said Bose, "has not been implemented in letter and spirit so far."

He also conceded that the party had lost support among sections of industrial workers and Muslims, many of whom are amongst the state's poorest citizens. Recently, in response to a central government report that found Muslims are grossly under-represented in state public sector employment, the Left Front government unveiled a reservation (affirmative action) policy.

Talking to Karan Thapar's "Devil's Advocate" program on CNN-

IBN, Left Front ally Communist Party of India (CPI) general secretary A. B. Bardhan said, "They [Left Front] have been too long in power. Maybe they got swollen-headed ... because of that they have got alienated."

To the irritation of the CPI(M), another Left Front ally, Forward Bloc (FB) state general secretary Ashok Ghosh, said that the people had rejected the Left Front government because it's tottering "under the weight of corruption and deviation from Left politics."

In an attempt to hold onto some popular support, several smaller Left Front constituents have been making efforts to distance themselves from "big brother" CPI(M). It cannot be ruled out that one or more will break from the Left Front and line up with the right-wing TMC prior to the state assembly polls.

In any event, none of them advances a program substantially different from that of the CPI(M) and as members of the current government they bear full responsibility for its pro-big business policies.

In a desperate attempt to rally support from the peasantry, who for decades formed the core of the Left's electoral support due to its implementation of a limited land reform, West Bengal's CPI(M)-led Left Front government recently announced a new scheme to distribute land to the landless. The government says it will buy land from farmers at 25 percent above the market price and then redistribute it. The government's burgeoning deficit, however, precludes this from being anything more than a token program.

Another measure that the Left Front government has taken in response to the civic poll setback is to assign special officers to recover money owed jute mill workers for gratuity. At present the mill-owners owe a staggering 3 billion rupees (more than \$600 million US) in gratuity.

In addition the Left Front government claims to be taking measures to improve the living conditions of tea plantation workers, by requesting plantation owners to provide electricity and water connections to workers' residential areas.

Even if implemented, these measures, announced after the Left Front has been in power for 33 years, will not bring any substantial improvement in the living conditions of West Bengal's workers and peasants.



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