

Communal outburst from Kerala's Stalinist Chief Minister

Arun Kumar
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V.S. Achuthanandan, the Chief Minister of the south Indian state of Kerala and a Politburo member of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, made remarks at a July 24 press conference in New Delhi that were widely—and rightly—recognized to be an appeal to Hindu communal sentiment.

Taking advantage of the presence of India's national press, Achuthanandan launched into a condemnation of the Popular Front of India (PFI), a small Islamic fundamentalist group that has apparently carried out violent attacks on those it regards as enemies of Islam. Police and government authorities in Kerala charge that PFI activists recently chopped off the hand of college lecturer T.J. Joseph as “punishment” for his reputed derogatory remarks about the “Prophet Mohammed.”

Achuthanandan told the press conference that the PFI and its allies are plotting to make Kerala a “Muslim-dominated” state within 20 years. “For achieving that goal, the outfit,” said Achuthanandan, “is pumping money to attract youth and giv[ing] them weapons.”

“Youngsters are being given money and lured to convert—[to] marry Muslim women and then give birth to Muslim children so that they can multiply.”

For decades, India's Hindu supremacist right has sought to stoke communal strife with lurid claims that Muslims, through proselytization and a higher birth rate, are seeking to reduce Hindus to minority status in India. On the grounds that “forced” and “enticed” conversions must be prevented, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have long campaigned for the adoption of laws making it difficult, if not impossible, to convert from one faith to another.

Achuthanandan has every right—indeed, as an ostensible leader of the working class, he has a political responsibility—to oppose communalist and

fundamentalist politics from whatever source.

The issue here is the content of his criticisms and to whom they were directed. In focusing his attack on the PFI's alleged ambition to make Kerala a “Muslim-dominated state” and raising the communal-population bogeyman, the Stalinist Chief Minister echoed the communal fear mongering of the Hindu right.

That Achuthanandan, who at 86 is one of the most experienced of all Indian politicians, was making a calculated appeal to Hindu chauvinist sentiment is underscored by his failure to combine his denunciation of the PFI with an indictment of the BJP, its Hindu communalist allies, and indeed the entire Indian establishment for aiding and abetting the rise of communalism.

It is incontestable that the growth of Muslim fundamentalist and communal sentiment in India over the past quarter century has largely been fuelled by the rise of the BJP, currently the official opposition in India's parliament and from 1998 through 2004 the dominant force in its national government. The BJP and its allies have repeatedly fomented anti-Muslim violence, most notoriously in 1992-93 with the razing of the Babri Masjid mosque and in 2002 in Gujarat. Yet, due to the complicity and cowardice of the police and judiciary and of the Congress Party and the political elite as a whole, the architects of these pogroms have enjoyed impunity.

Achuthanandan's comments were widely recognized for what they were—an appeal to Hindu communal sentiment.

“We have extended all help to the government for getting rid of anti-national elements,” declared Kerala Congress Party leader Oommen Chandy. “But we never expected such a careless statement from him in return, putting the entire community under a shadow.”

Even a section of the CPM leadership, albeit for its own purposes, felt it necessary to criticize Achuthanandan. A senior leader of the CPM in West Bengal told the (Kolkata) *Telegraph*, “Achuthanandan is sounding like the Bajrang Dal (the youth movement of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad) and the central party is backing him.”

Achuthanandan has responded to these criticisms by feigning surprise. Referring to the Congress and its ally in Kerala state politics, the Indian Union Muslim League, the Stalinist Chief Minister said, “I am at a loss to know as to why they are getting worried when I sought to expose the nefarious activities by a minuscule group in the name of religion.”

But if the PFI is “a minuscule group,” why did Achuthanandan feel it necessary to condemn it at a New Delhi press conference, using rhetoric that was immediately recognized to be akin to that of the Hindu right?

The answer is supplied by the *Telegraph* based on the information fed it by CPM leaders in West Bengal. Under conditions where Kerala’s CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) government has lost support from the state’s Muslim and Christian communities, who respectively represent 25 and 23 percent of the state’s population, the CPM believes that the best bet to staving off defeat in next year’s state election is by “wooing the majority (i.e. the Hindu) community.”

This is only one of a series of rightwing steps taken by the LDF, which like the other CPM-led state governments is implementing pro-investor market reforms, in recent weeks. In mid-July, the LDF announced its readiness to hold talks with all parties in the state on introducing legislation to “regulate”—that is restrict—*bandhs* and *hartals* (political strikes). And in June, the LDF was expanded to include the National Congress Party. A Maharashtra-based regional party, the NCP is a partner in the Congress Party-led national government that the Stalinists’ claim to oppose and has repeatedly flirted during the past 18 months with the ultra-rightwing Shiv Sena.

These rightwing maneuvers come at a time when the CPM is badly split over what course to follow in the wake of the breakup of its four-year partnership with the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance and its subsequent debacle in the 2009 national elections. (See: Indian Stalinists split over what right-wing course

to follow)

The national and Kerala-state CPM leaderships now favor an “anti-Congress” line, which centers on forging alliances with various regional and casteist parties, all of them former coalition partners of the Congress Party and/or BJP. In recent weeks the CPM national leadership has even made overtures to the BJP. This included hailing the BJP’s participation in a one-day general strike against fuel price hikes that was initiated by the CPM and its Left Front. (See: Indian Stalinists join BJP in one-day strike against fuel price hikes)

The CPM leadership in West Bengal, where the Left Front has formed the state government since 1977, opposed the July 2008 decision to withdraw parliamentary support for the UPA government—a decision, it must be emphasized, that was only taken after the Congress effectively kicked the CPM out of the government by forging ahead with the Indo-US civilian nuclear pact so as to cement a “global, strategic” Indo-US partnership.

The West Bengal CPM leadership is pressing for the CPM and Left Front to reconcile with the Congress Party (and thus with the big business UPA government). Its hope is that the Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie’s premier party, can be convinced to break its alliance with the Trinamool Congress, a rightwing split-off from the Congress that has now become the principal opposition party in West Bengal, and thereby avert almost certain defeat in next year’s West Bengal elections.

Unable to reconcile these two positions, the CPM is expected to agree at an Extended Central Committee meeting that starts today and concludes August 10, to allow its Kerala and West Bengal state units to pursue their own independent rightwing courses.



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