

# Pivotal elections in five Indian states

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The votes cast over the past month in five Indian state assembly elections, including in six phases of polling in West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state, are to be counted Friday.

At stake are the governments of the east Indian states of Assam and West Bengal, the south Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, and of Puducherry, a Union Territory comprised of former French-colonial enclaves in southern India. These five governments rule over roughly one-fifth of India's 1.2 billion people.

The state elections are an important test for India's Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, which is nearing the midway point in the five-year mandate it received in the May 2009 Lok Sabha election.

India's economic growth rate has bounced back to more than 8 percent after falling sharply in 2008-9. But rising prices, especially for food, are adversely affecting the three-quarters of India's population that survives on less than \$2 per day. The UPA government has also been hit by a series of corruption scandals which have served to illustrate the extent to which the government is at the beck and call of India's corporate houses.

Significant as the elections are for the Congress Party and its UPA partners, Indian and international interest in them has rightly focused on the fate of the Left Front governments in West Bengal and Kerala and of the Left's dominant components, the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPM.

A raft of opinion and exit polls have forecast that the CPM-led Left Front, which has ruled West Bengal without interruption since 1977, will be routed by an electoral bloc headed by the Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress. A right-wing Bengali regional split-off from the Congress Party, the Trinamul Congress (TMC) has previously allied with the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Currently, however, it is a UPA partner, with its leader, the anti-communist demagogue Mamata Banerjee, serving as India's railway minister.

Such is the eagerness of the Congress leadership to unseat the Left, it deferred to the TMC's decision to unilaterally allot itself the lion's share of West Bengal's 292 assembly seats. The TMC left just 60 constituencies to the Congress and two to the Socialist Unity Centre of India, an ostensibly left-wing party whose ideology is an eclectic mixture of Indian nationalism, Stalinism, and Maoism.

Over the past three years, Banerjee and her TMC have recorded a series of victories in local and national parliamentary elections by posturing as opponents of the right-wing policies of the West Bengal Left Front government, especially its use of bloody repression to suppress peasant opposition to the state expropriation of prime agricultural land for Special Economic Zones and other big business projects.

In Kerala, the Congress Party has high hopes of leading its United Democratic Front coalition to power. Two years ago the Congress and

its allies won 16 of Kerala's 20 seats in the Lok Sabha (the lower house of the national parliament). But recent polls have been much less conclusive than those from West Bengal, with some even suggesting that the Left could cling to power. Over the past half century, Stalinist- and Congress Party-led coalitions have alternated as Kerala's government.

The CPM and its smaller Left Front ally, the Communist Party of India, or CPI, have been an integral part of the politics of the Indian establishment for decades and as such have played a pivotal role in politically suppressing the working class.

In the 1970s, when India was convulsed by a wave of worker and peasant struggles, the CPI supported Indira Gandhi's Congress Party, serving in government throughout the 1975-77 Emergency, when basic civil liberties were suspended and tens of thousands of government opponents jailed. The CPM, meanwhile, subordinated the working class to the Janata Party, an ad hoc coalition of bourgeois parties including the BJP's predecessor, the Jana Sangh.

In the 1990s, under conditions of the Indian bourgeoisie's turn to free-market policies and India's full integration into world capitalism, the shattering of Congress Party dominance and the rise of the BJP and its provocative *Hindutva* politics, the Stalinist parliamentary parties came to play an even more prominent role in the official politics of the Indian elite.

The CPM and its Left Front have provided pivotal assistance to the bourgeoisie in implementing its "new economic policy" of privatization, deregulation, marketization and corporate tax cuts. They helped sustain in power a series of "pro-reform" non-BJP governments in New Delhi, contained working class opposition to ritualistic one-day protest strikes and, in those states like West Bengal where they form the government, ruthlessly implemented pro-investor policies.

The UPA is itself largely a Stalinist creation. The CPM and the Left did not themselves join the Congress in government after the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government was unexpectedly defeated in the 2004 election due to popular anger over rising economic insecurity and social inequality. But the Stalinists played a crucial role in convincing other parties to join the UPA. They also helped write the ostensible program of the first UPA government, the so-called Common Minimum Program—a document that promoted, indeed was predicated on, the deception that it is possible to have neo-liberal "reform" with a "human face."

For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, the Left Front provided the Congress-led UPA with its parliamentary majority, although the CPM conceded that the UPA was carrying out socio-economic and foreign policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that preceded it. Ultimately it was the Congress that

chose to break the alliance with the Left, when it decided to press forward with the implementation of the Indo-US civilian nuclear accord and a “global strategic partnership” with Washington.

That said, the Indian bourgeoisie is eagerly anticipating the defeat of the Stalinists in their West Bengal bastion, calculating that this will provide it with an occasion to shift politics sharply to the right.

The current issue of *Business India*, a leading corporate publication, argues that the UPA government must now press forward in implementing big business’ longstanding demand that laws restricting the layoff of workers and plant closures be gutted. Its front cover baldly declares, “Labour Reform—the time to strike ... The expected loss of the Left in West Bengal should defang the militant communist unions. This may be the best opportunity for labour reform.”

That the right-wing TMC is poised to take power in West Bengal is an indictment of the CPM and CPI, which, as part of their self-avowed “pro-investor” agenda, have banned strikes in the IT and IT-enabled sector, sold off and closed down “sick” public sector units, curtailed social spending and otherwise pursued right-wing policies.

The Communist Party of India (Maoist), which is leading a tribal insurgency in much of eastern India, including several districts of West Bengal, also has been instrumental in creating conditions where the right wing—the TMC and the Congress Party—can benefit from the popular anger against the Left Front’s betrayals.

In the name of fighting the purportedly “social fascist” CPM, the Maoists made common cause with Banerjee and her TMC, accepting them as allies in the peasant anti-land-expropriation movements at Nandigram and Singur. This support was crucial in enabling Banerjee, who had hitherto been popularly known as a right winger, to reposition herself as an advocate for West Bengal’s oppressed peasantry.

Over the course of the past two years, CPI (Maoist) leaders have repeatedly praised Banerjee and said that they would welcome her becoming the state’s chief minister. In January, a CPM leader in West Bengal issued a statement to the press announcing that the Maoists would not be calling for a boycott of the West Bengal elections so as to ensure the Left’s defeat at the hands of the TMC.

However, last month the Maoist leadership reversed course and did issue a boycott call. It has provided no explanation for this about-face. Perhaps it felt that its support for a party which is aligned with the Congress Party, the premier party of the Indian bourgeoisie, was too politically compromising. Or perhaps it has become disconcerted by Banerjee’s repeated statements equating the CPM, whom she routinely accuses of violence and murder, with the Maoist insurgents.

In any event, the Maoists cannot escape their political responsibility for providing Banerjee with a “progressive” mask—a mask that she will quickly forsake once she gets her hands on the state apparatus.

As for the CPM, it has responded to the implicit and at times explicit alliance between the Maoists and the TMC, by shifting still further right. It has given full-throated support to the counter-insurgency war launched against the Maoists by the central government, Operation Green Hunt, and repeatedly appealed to the Congress to recognize that the Left is a much more dependable ally than the TMC.

There is no question that the loss of its West Bengal bastion will precipitate a major political and organizational crisis for the CPM. It is public knowledge that the leadership of the West Bengal party has long been at odds with the national leadership. For example the West Bengal leadership argued against the decision to withdraw support for the UPA government in 2008.

The CPM in Kerala is also split between right-wing factions. The CPM Politburo had to intervene to ensure that the sitting chief minister, the octogenarian V.S. Achuthanandan, was given a seat to contest in the current elections. Achuthanandan has alienated many in the Kerala CPM by supporting corruption charges against his rival for the leadership of the state branch of the CPM. In the Indian press Achuthanandan is invariably portrayed as a fiery leftist, but on all the essential issues—including support for the bourgeoisie’s “new economic policy” and propping up the UPA for 4 years—he has invariably lined up with the rest of the CPM leadership.

In keeping with their right-wing maneuvers with the parties of the Indian bourgeoisie, the CPM and CPI are contesting the Tamil Nadu state elections as the junior partners of an alliance led by the AIADMK. When the AIADMK was last in office in the first half of the last decade, it came into violent conflict with the working class, using scabs and mass firings to break a public sector workers’ strike.

In Tamil Nadu the Stalinists have a long record of switching between serving as electoral allies of the AIADMK and its arch-rival, the DMK, which currently is a UPA partner and Congress ally. Only a few months ago, the CPM had to expel the former leader of its state assembly faction for his fawning praise for the DMK state government. Previously this same CPM MLA had been demoted—not expelled—for acting as a go-between for textile magnates in his Tirupur constituency who wanted to bribe the state labour minister not to enforce various labour regulations.

The DMK is at the center of the scandal arising from the fire sale of second generation cell phone spectrum, with the now defrocked DMK Union Telecommunications minister and the daughter of Tamil Nadu’s DMK chief minister facing criminal charges.

In Assam, where the Congress has led the government for the past ten years, polls are predicting a hung parliament.



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