

India: Stalinist-led Left Front suffers debacle in state elections

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front have suffered a shattering defeat in a series of state assembly elections that were held in April and early May and whose results were tabulated yesterday.

The Stalinist-led Left Front was routed in West Bengal, where it has ruled for the past 34 years, winning barely a fifth of the assembly seats. West Bengal Chief Minister and Communist Party of India (Marxist) Politburo member Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta, and 24 other ministers in the 34-member Left Front cabinet failed to win re-election. In a record turnout of almost 85 percent, the Left's share of the popular vote fell by 9 percentage points from the 2006 state elections.

In Kerala, the other major CPM electoral bastion, the Left Democratic Front (the local version of the Left Front) was defeated after a single five-year term in office.

These reversals leave the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its Left allies governing only a single state in the Indian Union, tiny Tripura. Two years ago, the Left Front suffered a similar debacle in the national elections. Its representation in the Lok Sabha, the lower and more important chamber of India's bicameral parliament, was cut by more than half.

Indian big business is hailing the Stalinists' defeat. India's principal stock indexes were up sharply Friday in the expectation that the Congress Party-led national government will accelerate market reforms, including privatization and the gutting of labor laws, and that the new Trinamul (Grassroots) Congress government in West Bengal will be a driving force of capitalist restructuring, beginning with measures to sharply reduce the state budget deficit.

It is widely anticipated that West Bengal's new finance minister will be victorious Trinamul Congress candidate Amit Mitra, the longtime secretary-general of one of the country's principal business lobby groups, the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

But far from being a popular mandate for right-wing policies, the successive electoral defeats suffered by the Stalinists were a popular rejection of their "pro-investor" policies and leading role in implementing the Indian bourgeoisie's plans to transform India into a cheap labor producer for world

capitalism.

In the 2004 national elections, the Left Front won more seats than ever before, then used its increased influence to assist the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, in forming a governmental coalition. For four years, from May 2004 through June 2008, the Left provided the minority Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) with its parliamentary majority, even while conceding that the UPA was carrying out policies little different from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government that preceded it.

Meanwhile in West Bengal, the Left Front pursued policies that it itself described as "pro-investor." These included outlawing strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, closing down or selling off "sick" public sector units, giving handouts to big business in the form of tax concessions, and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the expropriation of their lands for Special Economic Zones and other big business projects.

This lurch to the right opened the door for the Trinamul Congress, a right-wing Bengali-regional split off from the Congress Party, to make a populist appeal to peasant discontent and widespread anger over the lack of jobs and government corruption.

This cynical maneuver was aided by various pseudo-socialist organizations, including the Communist Party of India (Maoist), the leader of a tribal insurgency in the jungle and highland regions of eastern India, including parts of West Bengal. In the name of fighting the "social fascist" CPM, these organizations accepted the TMC as a "progressive ally" in the peasant mobilizations against the Left Front government's land expropriations in Nandigram and Singur. And they continued to promote the TMC—the CPI (Maoist) going so far as to proclaim its support for TMC leader Mamata Banerjee becoming West Bengal's chief minister—after the TMC joined the Congress-led UPA.

During the just concluded election campaign, the TMC continued to posture as friend of the poor, while sending all manner of signals to big business that it will slash spending and otherwise impose pro-market policies once it gets its hands on

the reins of government.

The TMC now holds 184 of West Bengal's 294 assembly elections seats. But no doubt because Banerjee anticipates a hostile reaction from the populace once she reveals her real agenda, the TMC supremo has said that she wants the TMC's election allies—the Congress Party and the Socialist Unity Centre of India—to join the government.

The Congress Party is trumpeting the state assembly election results as vindication of its policies. Speaking Friday, Pranab Mukherjee, the UPA Finance Minister and the effective boss of the Congress Party in West Bengal, mocked the Left and the Official Opposition BJP and demanded they cease their efforts to “destabilize” the UPA government. This was a reference to the non-confidence motion the Left co-sponsored last year over mounting energy prices and which the UPA struggled to survive and the opposition parties' recent parliamentary offensive over a series of mega-corruption scandals.

Mukherjee noted that the while more than 800 assembly seats had been at stake in the state elections in the eastern Indian states of West Bengal and Assam and in two states (Kerala and Tamil Nadu) and a Union Territory (Puducherry) in southern India, the BJP had won less than ten seats. A party whose roots lie in the north India's Hindi belt and in western India, the BJP has failed to become a significant force in India's south outside of Karnataka and has always been an also-ran in Assam and in West Bengal, the country's fourth most populous state.

But if the Congress can crow, it is only because of the weakness of its principal all-India political opponents.

The election results were far from uniformly positive for the Congress Party and the UPA.

In Kerala, the Congress-led United Democratic Front only just managed to defeat the Left, winning 72 seats to the Left Democratic Front's 68, and gaining a 46 percent share of the popular vote to the Left's 45 percent.

In Tamil Nadu, the Congress and its UPA partner, the DMK, suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the DMK's arch-rival and fellow Dravidian (Tamil) regionalist party, the AIADMK.

The DMK, which since 2006 had formed a minority government with outside support from the Congress, saw its parliamentary representation reduced by more than three-quarters. For its part, the Congress captured just 5 seats in the 234-seat Tamil Nadu assembly.

The DMK-Congress election campaign touted the state's recent economic growth, including a significant expansion of manufacturing. But as elsewhere in India, economic growth has been associated with increased economic insecurity and ever-widening social inequality. During the past year the DMK state government used police repression and its pro-employer labor front to suppress a wave of strikes.

The DMK-Congress alliance was also badly tarnished by the 2G scandal—the selling off of telecommunications spectrum at

fire-sale prices and in many instances to shell companies that “flipped” them to other players. A. Raja, the now defrocked Union Telecommunications minister who presided over the 2G sale, is a DMK leader. Also implicated in the 2G scandal and now facing corruption charges is Kanimozhi, a DMK parliamentarian and the daughter of outgoing DMK Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi.

In Puducherry, a territory comprised of former French colonial enclaves in southern India, the local Congress government was ousted by an electoral alliance of the AIADMK and a new party floated by a dissident Congress leader, the “N. Ranganam Congress.”

Apart from West Bengal, where it was very much junior partner to TMC, the Congress significantly increased its share of the popular vote only in Assam. There the Congress won a third successive mandate, this time capturing a majority of the assembly seats, triumphing over an opposition dominated by national-ethnic, communal and caste-ist parties.

In Tamil Nadu, the twin Stalinist parliamentary parties, the CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI), did pick up a handful of additional seats. This was because they were riding on the coattails of their electoral ally and erstwhile partner of the Hindu supremacist BJP, the AIADMK.

When the AIADMK was last in office it violently attacked the working class, using strikebreakers and mass firings to crush a strike by 200,000 state employees. Yet the Stalinists embraced it as the “progressive alternative” to the DMK and helped its leader, the mercurial ex-movie star Jayalalitha, burnish her populist credentials. In recent months, leaders of the CPM-aligned Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) repeatedly urged workers to abandon militant strikes by spreading the lie that after the elections—that is, once the rightwing AIADMK was back in office—the workers' lot would improve.

The CPM has responded to its defeat in West Bengal by announcing its readiness to cooperate with the incoming TMC-led government. “We accept the results with humility,” declared CPM Politburo member Brinda Karat. “We will be a responsible opposition in the state.”

Such promises of “responsibility” have a very definite meaning. The CPM will use whatever influence it retains through its parliamentary seats and control of the CITU apparatus to smother the opposition that will soon erupt within the working class to West Bengal's new right-wing government.



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