

India: Rightwinger Banerjee becomes West Bengal's new chief minister

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25 May 2011

Mamata Banerjee, the leader of the right-wing Bengali regionalist Trinamool Congress (TMC), was sworn-in as Chief Minister of West Bengal, India's fourth most populous state, last Friday. In elections held in April and early May, the TMC won the overwhelming majority of the seats in the state assembly, routing the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front that had ruled the state for the past 34 years.

With a 48 percent share of the popular vote, the TMC and its ally, the Congress Party (the dominant partner in India's coalition government), captured 226 seats in the 294-seat state assembly. The Left Front won 62 seats and 42 percent of the vote, a decline of seven percentage points from the last state election held in 2006.

Big business has hailed the victory of the TMC led-alliance, viewing it as an opportunity to push politics in West Bengal and across India sharply to the right. But the elections were not an endorsement of Banerjee, let alone capitalist restructuring. Rather they were a repudiation of the Left Front government's self-avowed "pro-investor" policies, its attack on democratic rights and corruption.

On the same day she was sworn in, Banerjee unveiled a cabinet comprised of 35 other ministers from the TMC and two from the Congress Party. Banerjee, whose TMC is a junior party in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), resigned as India's Railway Minister shortly before taking up her post as head of West Bengal's government.

As widely expected within elite business circles and the corporate media, Amit Mitra, the long-time Secretary-General of the Federation of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) and a vocal proponent of neo-liberal reform, has been appointed West Bengal's Finance Minister.

Banerjee's appointment of Mitra is a clear signal to Indian big business that her government can be counted on to do the bidding of local and foreign capital. Mitra met with the State Finance Secretary, C.M. Bachawat, Friday to review the state's financial condition and upon leaving the meeting complained that the situation "is not good at all."

During her election campaign, Banerjee charged that the Left Front government had driven the state into bankruptcy. Her government will now implement savage social spending cuts under the banners of fiscal rectitude, economic development, and the need to expunge "Communist corruption."

Her close associate Partha Chatterjee was allocated ministries including Commerce and Industries, Public Enterprises, and Industrial Reconstruction that are also important for restructuring the economy.

Banerjee has kept nine departments under her control: Home, Land and Land Reforms, Information and Cultural Affairs, Health and

Family Welfare, Agriculture, Hill Affairs, Minority Affairs and Madrasa (Muslim religious schools) Education, Personnel and Administrative Reforms, and Power.

By keeping the Home Ministry for herself, Banerjee has ensured that she will have personal control over the state's forces of repression. She is well aware that opposition from working people and the rural poor will erupt in response to her government's economic restructuring measures. Big business is also looking to her to end a Maoist-led insurgency in several districts with large tribal populations.

Prominent Indian business leaders gushed over Banerjee's swearing-in as Chief Minister. Entrepreneur Sam Pitroda said that he was "looking forward to this day." For Tata Ryerson managing director Sandipan Chakravorty, the coming to power of the TMC-Congress government was a "fantastic change ... which will benefit the state and the industry".

The statement by the Tata director is particularly revealing. Tata had to withdraw a car factory project from the Singur area due to a popular agitation, in which the TMC participated, against the outgoing Left Front government's attempt to forcibly acquire land for the project. Big business knows that TMC involvement in these agitations was merely aimed at exploiting opposition to the government.

In a press conference held Friday evening following her first cabinet meeting, Banerjee said her government will return to peasant farmers in Singur 400 of the 1,000 acres that the previous Left Front regime had expropriated for the Tata project. The Tata Group, announced Banerjee, is "welcome" to set up production facilities "on the balance of 600 acres" of Singur land.

The debacle suffered by Stalinists in the West Bengal elections was a result of opposition among workers and the rural masses to the government's lurch ever rightward.

In Howrah District, an area dominated by industry and working-class Kolkata suburbs and which had long been a Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] stronghold, the Left Front lost all 16 assembly seats. The Left was also wiped off the board in East Midnapur District, which was the site of the Nandigram peasant agitation. In 2007, the Left Front government repeatedly used police and CPM goon violence to suppress opposition to the expropriation of peasants' lands for a Special Economic Zone to be run by an Indonesian-based multinational. At least 22 villagers died in the state-orchestrated violence.

The Stalinist leaders have reacted to their defeat by claiming it was simply a result of people's desire for "change" and the "distance" that had grown up between Left Front leaders and the populace as a result of the Left's many years in power.

Left Front Chairman and CPM leader Biman Bose said: "The

reasons behind the debacle for the Left parties will have to be reviewed in detail. From a preliminary assessment, it can be said that we did not understand the mindset of the people, who have endorsed the slogan for change.” Along the same lines, CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, said “people have opted for a change.”

These are pathetic self-serving statements. The Stalinists are seeking to cover up the deep-going rejection of their rightwing capitalist policies because they have every intention of pressing forward with them.

The West Bengal Left Front government ruthlessly pursued the Indian bourgeoisie’s program of transforming India into a cheap labor producer for world capitalism. It expropriated peasant lands for big business projects, closed “sick” public sector units, gave tax concessions to investors and outlawed strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries. Following the election debacle, Communist Party of India (CPI) trade union leader Gurudas Dasgupta conceded that the government had allowed employers to flout labour standards and restrictions on the use of contract workers. “For a long time,” said Dasgupta, “... labour laws were not maintained properly” in West Bengal.

The CPM and the Left Front are not parties of workers and the rural poor as they falsely claim. They represent the interests of the Indian national bourgeoisie. And, with their proclamation that they will act as a “loyal opposition” to Banerjee, the Stalinists have already served notice that they will suppress the opposition that will inevitably erupt against the incoming TMC-Congress government.

The defeat of the Stalinists in their West Bengal bastion has intensified the fissures between and within the various Left Front partners, especially the CPM. These differences are over what rightwing course can best maintain Stalinist influence in official politics.

There has been much media speculation that outgoing West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee will resign from the CPM leadership prompted in part by his absence from a May 18 CPM Politburo meeting. CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, who has had to rebuff press suggestions he could soon be forced from his own post, has denied that Bhattacharjee is quitting. According to Karat, Bhattacharjee did not attend the meeting because of the “grim situation” in West Bengal—a reference to the violence inflicted on CPM cadres by TMC goons.

Be that as it may, it is public knowledge that there have long been sharp differences between the CPM national leadership and the party’s West Bengal unit over the Left Front’s orientation to their ostensible bourgeois opponents.

Bhattacharjee and the CPM’s West Bengal unit are known to have opposed the July 2008 decision to withdraw support for the Congress Party-led UPA government over its decision to implement the Indo-US nuclear accord. For four years, the Left Front had sustained the minority UPA in power, even while conceding it was carrying out policies little different from those of the BJP-led government that had preceded it.

The West Bengal CPM wanted to continue supporting the Congress so as to impede an electoral bloc between the Congress and TMC, but also so as to woo investors by demonstrating the Left’s commitment to “stability.”

Following the 2009 national elections, in which a TMC-Congress alliance won a large majority of the seats in West Bengal, the rival wings of the CPM joined hands in seeking to convince the Congress Party leadership that the CPM would be a more reliable partner than

the TMC. Central to this rightwing appeal was the CPM’s and West Bengal Left Front government’s fulsome support for Operation Green Hunt, the military offensive the UPA government has launched against a Maoist-led tribal insurgency.

The Stalinists repeatedly proclaimed their support for Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s designation of the Maoists as India’s “greatest internal security threat,” while chastising the TMC and Mamata Banerjee for working with the Maoists in Nandigram and various other anti-Left Front agitations

To wrest power from the Left, Banerjee assumed a populist guise and the Maoists and other petty bourgeois “left” forces assisted her in this by boosting the TMC as a vehicle for “progressive change.”

Now that Banerjee’s gambit has paid off, big business is losing no time in outlining the rightwing policies they anticipate and expect her government to implement. Thus a May 23 India Today column titled “Didi’s War Ahead” (Didi is the pet name that the media have given Banerjee) declared: “Managing victory is always the bigger task, and she has inherited a state in tatters. Its dire fiscal situation will leave little wiggle room.” The article insisted that without a “major increase in taxes or a cut in expenditure like salaries or social spending” the government will not be able to meet its pledge to “balance the books.”

Banerjee has a long record of supporting privatization and social spending cuts as a minister both in the current UPA government and in the BJP-led government that preceded it.

As for her flirtation with the Maoists, no one should have any illusion as to how she will proceed. During the election campaign, Banerjee was at pains to distance herself from the Maoists, repeatedly making the charge that they and the CPM are “brothers” who are colluding together against the people of West Bengal.

There has long been a low intensity civil war between the CPM and the Maoists and for months the Maoists urged West Bengal’s toilers to support Banerjee and her TMC so as to defeat the “social fascist CPM.”

While nonsense, Banerjee’s casting of the CPM and Maoists as allies has a definite political meaning. Just as she intends to justify privatization and spending cuts in the name of fighting CPM “corruption,” so she will invoke “Maoist violence” to justify repression in the countryside.



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