

West Bengal government orchestrates murder of top Maoist leader

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5 December 2011

In a calculated display of political ruthlessness, Mamata Banerjee, West Bengal's chief minister and the head of the right-wing Trinamul [Grassroots] Congress (TMC), has justified the killing of a top leader of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist).

Banerjee and her TMC joined forces with the Maoists in several popular agitations against West Bengal's former Stalinist-led Left Front government. But now that the TMC holds the reins of power in the state, Banerjee has predictably turned on her erstwhile allies.

Fifty eight-year-old Mallojula Koteswara Rao, popularly known as Kishenji, was killed on November 24 under circumstances that point to his having been summarily executed by security forces.

The authorities claim Kishenji, reputedly the third senior-most leader of the CPI (Maoist), was killed in a 30-minute firefight with security forces. But human rights organizations, Kishenji's relatives, and even some of the TMC's parliamentary opponents have pointed to numerous gaping holes in the "official story"—beginning with the fact that the bullet that killed the Maoist leader was shot point-blank into his head.

Activists from the Coordination of Democratic Rights Organization (CDRO) who saw Kishenji's corpse prior to its cremation say his shirt and pants were relatively free of bloodstains, yet his body was full of fresh cuts, burns, and welts, indicating that he had been subjected to torture.

These included, burns to his feet, a severed finger, knife injuries to his throat, and "more than 30 bayonet-like cut injuries on the front of the body."

Security forces claim to have killed three other insurgents during a Maoist-initiated gun battle, but they have failed to produce any other corpses. Members of a CDRO fact-finding team that visited the reputed site of the armed encounter last week say that they found no evidence of a gun battle.

CDRO factfinder Gautam Navlakha is reported by the *Indian Express* to have said that the circumstances of Kishenji's death are "exactly like that of Azad." A CPI (Maoist) Central Committee member, Cherukuri Azad Rajkumar was killed by security forces in July 2010 while serving as the party's interlocutor in exploratory discussions with the central

government about possible peace talks.

"Both the leaders were killed when peace talks continued with the government. The only difference is Azad's body had one bullet injury mark while Kishenji's body bears torture marks."

Varavara Rao, the well-known Telugu poet and radical activist who accompanied Kishenji's niece to claim his corpse, told reporters, "In the last 43 years, I have seen so many bodies killed in so-called encounters but have not seen a body like this one ... There is no place on the body where there is no injury."

India's security forces are notorious for their use of "staged encounters" against Maoists, Kashmiri separatists, and other opponents of the Indian state. Security forces capture and summarily execute people, then claim that their victims died in gun battles, so-called encounters.

West Bengal Chief Minister Banerjee has repeatedly and vehemently defended Kishenji's killing. Speaking at a November 27 rally she charged that Kishenji and his associates had been urged to surrender, but that they had instead fired a thousand rounds at security forces. "The Joint Forces," claimed Banerjee, "had no other alternative but to counter it to save [the] lives of hundreds of innocent villagers."

Banerjee lashed out against human rights organizations for daring to question the security forces' conduct: "Where were these people ... when innocent people were being killed by the Maoists?"

Kishenji's death came after weeks of escalating threats from Banerjee and her government of an imminent offensive against the Maoists, who, with the support of sections of impoverished tribal people, have mounted a widening insurgency in West Bengal's Jangalmahal—literally, forest or jungle—region since 2009.

On October 15, addressing a rally in the Jangalmahal region, Banerjee denounced the Maoists as "jungle mafia" and "*supari* [contract] killers." She gave them a seven-day deadline to give up their arms and to begin "peace" talks, warning that if they failed to do so she would order offensive operations. Soon after, the TMC staged anti-Maoist political rallies in several towns and villages where the Maoist insurgents have been active.

Banerjee and her TMC were swept to power in last May's

state election, exploiting popular anger against the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government which, to use its own words, had pursued “pro-investor policies.” An important element in the TMC’s ability to appeal to peasant and worker discontent was its participation in popular movements against the Left Front government’s expropriation of peasant lands for big business development projects. The Maoists welcomed the TMC’s new-found and cynical pose as a defender of West Bengal’s impoverished peasants, joining forces with the TMC in the agitations at Singur and Nandigram, and repeatedly touting Banerjee as a “progressive” alternative to the “social fascist” Communist Party of India (Marxist). No matter that the TMC is a right-wing split-off from the big business Congress Party, has repeatedly made common cause with the Hindu supremacist BJP, and since 2009 has been the most important ally of the Congress in India’s national coalition government.

Banerjee for her part professed to oppose Operation Green Hunt—the India-wide, central government-led anti-Maoist offensive that involves some 100,000 security personnel and Indian army strategic and logistical support—at least in West Bengal.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPM] and its Left Front government, meanwhile, gave their full support to the Indian government’s counterinsurgency campaign—a campaign Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has admitted is aimed at opening India’s jungle and highland areas to capitalist resource development projects. Indeed, for close to two years, the CPM Stalinists sought to convince the Congress to break its electoral alliance with Banerjee on the grounds that, unlike her, they were fully committed to Operation Green Hunt and the central government’s claim that the Maoists constitute India’s “gravest internal security threat.”

When in August 2010 Banerjee made the obvious point that the security forces’ explanation of the Maoist Azad’s death didn’t add up, the CPM Stalinists denounced her for casting aspersions on the honesty and integrity of India’s security forces!

The Maoists publicly called for the election of Banerjee and her TMC last January. Later they backed off, issuing a pro forma call for an election boycott, but they did nothing to enforce the boycott and there is no question that they facilitated, welcomed, and bear political responsibility for Banerjee’s election victory.

During the election campaign, Banerjee sought to burnish her newly-minted “progressive credentials” and appeal to the populace in Lalgarh and other parts the Jangalmahal region by claiming that a TMC government would have central government security forces withdrawn from the state and press for a “peace settlement” with the Maoists. (The mistreatment of the tribal population by security forces had been one of the principal factors in the spread of the Maoist insurgency.)

But, predictably, she began backing away from these

promises no sooner was her government sworn in. She never pressed for the withdrawal of the central government’s counter-insurgency troops, secured the release of only a handful of Maoist political prisoners, and demanded that the Maoists disarm, that is, for all intents and purposes, surrender, as the precondition for “peace talks.” The patent purpose of this demand was to scupper any possibility of talks and thereby legitimize the resumption of offensive operations.

The Maoists, for their part, made clear that were peace talks to take place with the West Bengal government their demands would focus on ending corruption and securing the tribals an equitable share and say in development. This is entirely in keeping with their political perspective of carrying out a “national democratic” i.e., capitalist, revolution in league with the “patriotic elements” of the bourgeoisie.

The WSWS repeatedly warned that the Maoists’ alliance with Banerjee and her TMC constituted a trap for the working class and oppressed masses and a noose for any youths or tribals drawn into their politically retrograde insurgency. Noting, in the run-up to the West Bengal elections, that Banerjee had answered the CPM’s charge that she was in a de facto alliance with the Maoists by claiming that it was the CPM and the Maoists who were “brothers,” we wrote: “By making an amalgam of [her arch-rivals, the Stalinists] with the Maoists, [Banerjee] is signaling Indian big business and her allies in the Congress Party that once she has wrested the West Bengal government from the CPM-led Left Front, using the Maoists to provide her with ‘left’ camouflage, she can be counted on to deal—bloodily—with her erstwhile allies.”

In the half year since she took office, Banerjee has laid the groundwork for brutal austerity, wholesale privatization, and other big business measures. Her current military offensive against the Maoists is but a dress rehearsal for the far broader repression that she will unleash against the struggles that will inevitably develop as the working class and rural toilers come forward to challenge her government’s right-wing agenda.



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