

Stalinist CPM backs ruling Indian Congress party's presidential candidate

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India's main Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, has decided to support the ruling Congress party's presidential candidate, Pranab Mukherjee. This is a signal to the Congress and to the entire ruling class that the CPM is willing to resume its alliance with the Congress to secure the government, should the latter's alliance with West Bengal-based Trinamool Congress (TMC) break up.

They are thus signalling their support for the Congress' attempt to install as president a veteran political fixer who can navigate the complex negotiations that could arise, in the event of another hung parliament, amid deepening popular opposition to Congress' policies. It is signalling that it acts as an integral part of the Indian bourgeois establishment.

The CPM-led Left Front backed the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government from 2004 to 2008, providing parliamentary support under conditions where the ruling coalition lacked an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the national parliament. In the 2009 national elections, the TMC, the Left Front's main rival in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, contested in an alliance with the Congress, swept the polls in West Bengal, and became a partner of the UPA. To the further dismay of Stalinists, the TMC came to power in West Bengal, imposing a humiliating defeat on the Left Front, which had ruled the state for 34 years.

However, tensions have grown between the TMC and the Congress, fueled by the former's demagogic opposition to the UPA government's attempts to make free market economic reforms and, most recently, to Mukherjee's candidacy. Finally, on Tuesday, TMC chief Mamata Banerjee announced that her party had decided to vote for Mukherjee.

After issuing a four-sentence politburo statement

justifying the party's support for Mukherjee as the candidate with "widest acceptance", CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat, published a lengthy article on June 25, which went to painful lengths to justify its position.

Karat said: "In the background of the presidential contest are the troubles afflicting the UPA government, which include the worsening economic situation... the lack of cohesiveness in the alliance itself, and its inability to take political and policy initiatives." Nonetheless, there was no question that the CPM would do anything besides supporting the UPA.

The CPM leader pointed to the fact that the party has voted with the Congress in presidential elections since 1992—justifying it the name of preventing the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) "from putting in place a constitutional head of state who would be amenable to the influence of the Hindutva [Hindu chauvinist] forces".

The CPM-led Left Front used this same argument on the need to "keep communal forces out of power" to justify its parliamentary support for the UPA government—even as it conceded that the latter was carrying out right-wing, pro-investor economic policies and aligning its foreign policy with US imperialism.

Noting that Mukherjee's candidature "has led to a deepening of the rift between the Congress and the TMC," Karat stated: "The rift within the ruling alliance is something that the CPI(M) took into account when deciding its stand." This clearly points to the Stalinists' attempts to use tensions between the Congress and the TMC to move closer to the Congress and prepare to support it, should the Congress-TMC alliance collapse.

In his article, Karat argued that "fighting the Congress and the BJP should not be equated as maintaining equidistance from both on all matters". He

continued by noting that “on the question of president ... since the key issue is that the constitutional head of state should be firmly secular and not in any way open to BJP influence, the CPI(M)’s thrust will be against a BJP-sponsored candidate”—i.e., lining up with the Congress.

Nonetheless, he cynically continued: “When it comes to the fight against economic policies, the thrust will be against the Congress and the UPA government.”

In fact, in the name of “fighting neo-liberal economic policies”, the Stalinists have lined up with the BJP. In calling a general strike last February 28 against price hikes, privatisation and the contract labour system, CPM unions collaborated with the unions of both the ruling Congress and the BJP, though these parties have clearly shown their commitment to neo-liberal policies by enthusiastically carrying them out while in office.

This not only helps the BJP cast itself in populist colors, but cuts directly across the effort to mobilize the working class across communal lines.

The CPM’s support for Mukherjee’s candidacy has led to crisis in the Left Front and its own ranks. While the CPM and the Forward Bloc (FB) decided to support Mukherjee, Left Front’s other two partners—the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)—will “abstain” in the vote.

According to media reports, the CPM politburo was almost equally divided over the issue, mainly on regional lines. While West Bengal members pushed for a vote for Mukherjee, those from the southern Indian state of Kerala opposed it.

The former chief minister of West Bengal, CPM politburo member Bhuddadeb Bhattacharjee, who had been skipping all party meetings since the party’s electoral defeat in 2011 save those held in the West Bengal state capital of Kolkata, had reportedly sent a letter to the New Delhi politburo meeting to back the Congress candidate. He was also contacted over the phone to make his views known to the meeting.

These calculations are driven not by a principled difference, but by the differing electoral calculations of the CPM’s major power bases.

The CPM forces in West Bengal calculate that supporting the Congress candidate will pave the way for resuming the party’s alliance with Congress, breaking latter’s alliance with the TMC. They think

such an alliance will boost their electoral fortunes in West Bengal in future elections. On the other hand, the Kerala unit’s opposition to backing Congress candidates is based on the fact that the Congress is the CPM’s main rival in Kerala.

A leading young member of the CPM, Prasenjit Bose, convener of the party’s Research Unit, sent a resignation letter to the party leadership in opposition to its decision to support Mukherjee’s candidature. In a damage control attempt, the CPM politburo issued a statement, saying it had rejected Bose’s resignation but expelled him from the party.



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