Is the Indian Stalinist CPM heading for a split?

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The leadership of India's principal Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, is at loggerheads over whether it should ally with the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, to fight the West Bengal state election. Party leaders have been sniping at each other for weeks over the possibility of a tie-up with the Congress, even as senior leaders of the West Bengal CPM, including former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, publicly appeal to the Congress for an electoral bloc so as to defeat the ruling Trinamool Congress and "save democracy" in West Bengal.

The CPM is supposed to finalize its policy for the state elections to be held this spring in West Bengal and four other states—Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and Assam—at a Politburo meeting today and a meeting of its Central Committee on Wednesday and Thursday.

However, speculation is rife that the party could be heading for a split over its decision in respect to West Bengal.

India's fourth most populous state, West Bengal long served as the principal base of the CPM and its Left Front in electoral politics. But having pursued what it itself described as "pro-investor" policies, the CPM fell from state office in 2011 and in the 2014 national election won just 2 of West Bengal's 42 seats.

Fearing another electoral debacle, the CPM leadership in West Bengal is desperate for a tie-up with the Congress. In this they have the support of CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury.

But most of the party leadership in Kerala, the only other major state where the CPM is a contender for office, is opposed. They fear a partnership with the Congress in West Bengal will undermine their efforts to oust the crisis-ridden Congress-led state government in Kerala, where elections are also due this spring.

Yechury's predecessor, Prakash Karat, is also opposed. The former general-secretary has reportedly suggested that Yechury resign if he is not ready to adhere to the party's "tactical line." Last April, at its 21st party congress, the CPM reiterated its readiness to form all manner of "third front" electoral alliances with regional- and caste-based capitalist parties, but ruled out electoral blocs with either the "neo-liberal" Congress or the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu supremacist party that currently forms India's national government.

The differences between Yechury and Karat and between the West Bengal and Kerala party leaderships are a falling out among thieves—a wrangle over what right-wing course to pursue so as to best bolster the CPM's influence in the Indian establishment.

While Karat leads the CPM's reputed "hardline" anti-Congress faction, it was under his leadership that the Stalinists propped up India's Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government for four years, from May 2004 through June 2008. And did so as the UPA implemented a raft of "pro-market" reforms and forged a "strategic partnership" with US imperialism.

Nor has Karat ever voiced any disagreement with the neoliberal policies the CPM-led West Bengal Left Front government pursued under Bhattacharjee's premiership. These included slashing social spending, banning strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries, and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the expropriation of their lands for big business projects.

Karat has signaled he would be willing to support some type of back-room deal with the Congress in West Bengal, just not a formal electoral alliance.

Speaking late last year on the sidelines of a CPM

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"organizational plenum," Karat said he recognizes the CPM faces an "extraordinary situation" in West Bengal and that tactical "flexibility" is required.

The Kerala-based Onmanamora website reported last week, based on discussions with senior party leaders in the south Indian state, "Karat and company … do not want to be branded as … insensitive to the party's plight in Bengal. They insist that they wouldn't have bothered (i.e., objected) if the party cooperated with the Congress in some of the constituencies in Bengal without making it official."

However, they view a formal alliance as "suicidal," because it would so identify the CPM with the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie and do so under conditions where the Congress Party has been reduced to an also-ran in much of the country because of its implementation of right-wing, big business policies. Indeed in the 2014 national election, the Congress finished fourth in West Bengal, winning just 9.6 percent of the popular vote.

Karat's faction calculates a somewhat more "oppositional" posture will better serve the Stalinists in rallying support among India's workers and toilers who are voicing increasing opposition to the 20-month old BJP government and thereby regaining significant influence in official Indian bourgeois politics. From 1991 through 2008, the Stalinists played a pivotal role in sustaining in office a succession of Congress and Third Front governments that spearheaded the drive to make India a cheap-labor producer for world capitalism and were consequently courted and feted.

A senior Kerala CPM politburo member talking to Onmanorama, accused the party's Bengal unit of "challenging the political line that wants the CPM to strengthen itself and the larger Left" and suggested that "the Bengal unit might form another party if it cannot agree to what the party congress resolved (last April)."

On Friday, the West Bengal CPM State Committee met to discuss its recommendation to this week's central leadership meetings. On the eve of that meeting, the former CPM Chief Minister Bhattacharjee tried to claim that in seeking an alliance with the Congress Party, the West Bengal CPM is responding to popular pressure. "The people of Bengal," he told a public rally in Barackpore, "have a strong opinion for a larger alliance of all political parties against the ruling Trinamool Congress."

Meanwhile, Biman Basu, the head of the West Bengal Left Front and a CPM Politburo member, announced that the CPM's sister Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (CPI), and the other nine parties that comprise the Left Front in West Bengal had unanimously agreed to consider an electoral alliance with the Congress.

According to information leaked to the press, at Friday's CPM State Committee meeting more than forty party leaders spoke in favour of jointly fighting the elections with Congress and less than a dozen against. The meeting concluded with the adoption of a resolution calling for the CPM to spearhead a campaign to defeat the Trinamool Congress in the coming state elections and to rally the support of "all forces opposed to (the) ruling party," an obvious reference to the Congress Party.

Supporters of a tie-up with the Congress explained that if the resolution did not specifically mention an alliance with the Congress, it is because the Congress high command has yet to formally endorse opening talks with the CPM on an electoral pact.

However, the West Bengal Congress leadership is strongly in favour of contesting the polls jointly with the CPM and according to a February 4 report in the Kolkata-based daily the Telegraph, Yechury has already held two meetings with the All India Congress Committee member in charge of Bengal, C.P. Joshi, to initiate discussions on the divvying up of seats.

Both Yechury and Karat attended Friday's West Bengal leadership meeting, but in accordance with CPM practice did not speak.

While in Kolkata the two senior-most CPM leaders reportedly met separately with leaders of the CPI and other key Left Front constituents in an attempt to convince them of their respective positions.

Such a public breakdown of the "unity" of the CPM leadership is unprecedented and underscores the depth of the divisions and the potential for a party split.

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