

India: Congress Party and Stalinists suffer debacle in state elections

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The Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its Left Front suffered major reversals in the state assembly elections held this spring in four states with a combined population of 225 million.

The Congress Party was ousted from power in Kerala in the south and Assam in the northeast, leaving it the governing party in just six of India's 29 states. The Stalinists were routed in West Bengal, the state that for decades constituted their principal electoral bastion, and failed to retain a single of their 22 seats in the Tamil Nadu assembly.

The Congress, which led India's national government from 2004 to 2014, has been discredited among workers and rural toilers because of its pro-investor economic "reforms," which have produced mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, and its pursuit of a global military-strategic partnership with US imperialism.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and its Left Front allies—including the older, but smaller Communist Party of India (CPI)—propped up the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government from May 2004 through June 2008, helping it to implement socially incendiary neo-liberal reforms.

The "Left" governments that held office in West Bengal and Kerala until their defeat in the last round of state elections, held in 2011, pursued what the CPM itself described as "pro-investor" policies. In West Bengal this included banning strikes in IT and IT-enabled industries and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the expropriation of land for big business projects.

In the latest West Bengal state election, the CPM forged an unprecedented electoral alliance with the big business Congress Party and touted the prospect of a Left-Congress state government. CPM leaders, including former West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee,

appeared on platforms and held joint election rallies with Congress President Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, her son and heir apparent.

In Tamil Nadu, the CPM and CPI contested the elections as part of the People's Welfare Front—an alliance of right-wing, regionalist and casteist parties, including the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) and Desiya Mutmoku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK).

The Stalinists' right-wing politics enabled various reactionary big business parties to rally support through a combination of populist promises and communalist, regionalist and casteist appeals.

This included the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which in alliance with two regionalist parties—the Assam Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodo People's Front—won 89 of the 126 seats in the Assam state assembly.

Under Narendra Modi, the BJP has formed India's national government for the past two years. Following on from the Congress, the BJP has intensified the push for "pro-investor" reforms and dramatically enhanced military-strategic ties with the US and its principal Indo-Pacific allies, Japan and Australia.

In early April, the Modi government announced the impending signing of an agreement that will allow the US military to use Indian bases and ports for repair and resupply. While the Stalinists' claim to oppose this agreement and India's integration into Washington's plans to wage war on China, they raised neither in their election campaigning.

In West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, the two biggest of the four states that went to the polls this spring, the respective ruling regional parties—the West Bengal-based Trinamul Congress (TMC) and the Tamil Nadu-based All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)—won reelection.

A right-wing split-off from the Congress and one-time BJP ally, the TMC was a largely discredited force until it was able, with Maoist support, to exploit popular anger with the Left Front over its pro-big business land expropriation program in 2007-08. In the 2011 West Bengal elections, the TMC was the senior partner in an electoral alliance with the Congress that swept the polls, ending 34 consecutive years of CPM-led government.

In this year's election, running alone, the TMC increased its seat tally by 27, winning 211 of the 295 West Bengal assembly seats. One reason for this was the rallying of a sizeable chunk of BJP supporters behind the TMC.

But the most striking feature of the election was the continuing decline of the Left Front, which saw its strength in the state assembly nearly cut in half, from 60 to 32, and its popular vote fall to 25.9 percent from 29.9 percent in 2011.

The CPM campaign was explicitly right-wing, featuring its alliance with the Congress Party, on the one hand, and claims that a Left-led government would be better able to attract investment to West Bengal on the other.

The electorate rewarded the CPM with its lowest-ever seat total. Indeed, the Congress, which increased its seat tally by two to 44, is now the second-largest party in the West Bengal assembly and is expected to claim the status of Official Opposition, although it won just 12.3 percent of the popular vote.

The West Bengal CPM leadership has publicly lamented that the Congress could not “transfer” its votes to the Left, in accordance with the public alliance between the CPM and Congress. “Our workers,” CPM Politburo Member M.D Salim told NDTV, “worked wholeheartedly for the alliance and the Congress benefited. However the Congress votes could not be transferred to us.”

Nonetheless, the West Bengal CPM leadership has indicated it wants the alliance with the Congress to continue at least through the 2019 national elections. Some are even arguing for a national CPM-Congress electoral bloc.

In Tamil Nadu the ruling AIADMK won 134 seats, 36 more than its principal rival, the DMK. During the campaign the AIADMK and DMK cynically traded promises of small subsidies and handouts for voters, while reassuring the ruling elite that they would continue to pursue pro-big business policies that condemn that vast majority to crushing poverty.

The Stalinists, who have previously alternated between supporting one or the other of these parties on the grounds

they could be pressured to pursue “pro-people” policies, could not and would not mount any challenge to their posturing. The Stalinist supported People's Welfare Front failed to win a single seat, its projected chief ministerial candidate, DMDK leader Vijayakanth, losing his deposit.

In the neighbouring small Union Territory, the former French colonial enclave of Puducherry (Pondicherry), the Congress won its sole election victory. Running in an alliance with the DMK, the Congress won government, routing a Congress-breakaway party, the NR Congress.

In Kerala, India's 13th largest state, the CPM-led Left Democratic Front ousted the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) after one term in office.

The result was not unexpected given the unpopularity of the Congress nationally, the right-wing policies pursued by Kerala's Congress-led government and the wave of corruption scandals in which it was engulfed.

Attempting to cover up the debacle it had suffered in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, respectively India's fourth and sixth most populous states, the CPM Politburo issued a statement that hailed the outcome of the Kerala state election as an “historic” victory for India's workers and toilers.

It is nothing of the sort. While the electoral outcome was different, the CPM campaign in Kerala was politically of a one with that in West Bengal, with the Stalinists pledging to pursue pro-investor policies and allying with various Congress split-offs.

Speaking to *BusinessLine* during his pre-poll “Nava (New) Kerala March,” state CPM leader and now Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan promised that a Left Democratic Front would spare no effort at improving conditions for business. Decrying his party's traditional “negativity towards” business, he vowed, “This needs to change. A new paradigm should be evolved wherein an investor is welcomed with open arms.”



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