

Indian Stalinists at loggerheads in wake of electoral debacle

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The faction fighting within the top ranks of India's principal Stalinist party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, has intensified in the wake of the drubbing the party received in the recent state assembly elections. In not-for-attribution remarks, several veteran Stalinist leaders have themselves raised the possibility that the party could be heading for a split.

The CPM-led Left Democratic Front returned to power after a five-year hiatus in Kerala, India's thirteenth largest state. Otherwise, however, the elections were an unprecedented washout for the Stalinists. In West Bengal, where a CPM-led coalition ruled for 34 consecutive years ending in 2011, the Left Front lost half its seats and was reduced to a humiliating third place. In Tamil Nadu, the CPM and its close ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI), lost all 22 seats that they held in the outgoing state assembly. For the first time in six decades, there are no CPM or CPI legislators in Tamil Nadu.

The election debacle has intensified the divisions within the CPM over its attitude toward the Congress Party—the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie and the party that over the past quarter century has done most of the heavy lifting in implementing the bourgeoisie's neoliberal “pro-investor” agenda and in forging a strategic partnership with US imperialism.

In West Bengal, the CPM took the unprecedented step of forming an electoral alliance with the Congress to contest the just-concluded state elections. This included seat-sharing, joint campaign events at which top CPM state leaders shared platforms with Congress leaders, such as Congress vice-president and heir apparent Rahul Gandhi, and a full-throated call for a “Left-Congress” coalition government.

The West Bengal state party leadership and CPM General-Secretary Sitaram Yechury favor continuing this explicit alliance with the Congress in what is India's fourth most populous state and doing so at least though the next national elections in 2019.

The proponents of an alliance with the Congress present it

as a state initiative to counteract the “violence” of West Bengal's rightwing Trinamool (Grassroots) Congress government. Yet several have frankly said it could open the door to a national Left-Congress alliance against India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government.

Yechury's predecessor as CPM general-secretary, Prakash Karat, the Kerala CPM leadership, and the state units in Tripura and Tamil Nadu oppose a formal tie-up with the Congress, but only so as to pursue an alternate rightwing course that will just as assuredly shackle the working class to the Indian bourgeoisie, its parties and state.

Karat and his supporters fear an explicit alliance with the big-business Congress will bring further discredit to the CPM and undermine its electoral support in Kerala and Tripura where the Congress is its principal rival for state government. In opposition to Yechury and the CPM, they advocate “Third Front” electoral alliances with a host of regional and caste-based bourgeois parties that are just as committed as the BJP and Congress to the ruling elite's drive to ally India with Washington and to make it a cheap-labor haven for international capital.

The opposition to the Congress on the part of what the corporate media invariably portrays as the CPM “hardliners” is largely for show. Since 1989, the CPM has repeatedly propped up Congress-led governments at the Centre, most notoriously when, under Karat's leadership, the CPM supported from May 2004 through 2008 the Congress-led UPA coalition, while it pressed forward with pro-investor reforms and forged a “global strategic partnership” with US imperialism.

Notwithstanding their utterly unprincipled character, the differences within the CPM leadership are deep and increasingly embittered, because they are bound up with rival calculations as to how the CPM and its various state units can best maintain influence within official bourgeois politics and the access to pelf and privilege that comes with it.

The CPM Central Committee and Politburo had been supposed to meet within days of the May 19 ballot count for

the five state elections so as to assess the party's performance. But so deep were the divisions in the wake of the party's election debacle, the Politburo meeting was postponed for a week and the Central Committee meeting for a month. Accordingly, the Politburo met on May 28-29 and the Central Committee is to meet over three days starting Saturday, June 18.

In an attempt to defuse intraparty tensions, the May 28-29 Politburo meeting issued a statement that made only brief criticism of the CPM's electoral alliance with the Congress in West Bengal and that said nothing about the calls raised in the election's aftermath and at the meeting itself by West Bengal party leaders for the alliance to continue.

The "tactics evolved in West Bengal," said the Politburo statement, "were not in consonance with the Central Committee decision based on the political-tactical line of the Party which states that there shall be no alliance or understanding with the Congress Party."

Over the past three weeks, the rival factions have traded barbs and Yechury has repeatedly signaled his support for the West Bengal party leadership's promotion of joint action with the Congress, within the state assembly and in extra-parliamentary campaigns, in defiance of the Politburo majority.

The CPM West Bengal State Committee met in the state capital Kolkata last weekend with the participation of Yechury, Karat and a senior party leader from Kerala, M.A. Baby. According to press reports, the State Committee endorsed the party's election alliance with the Congress and called for it to continue. Speaking to the press after the meeting concluded on June 12, Yechury said, "In Bengal, Trinamool terror has to be resisted at any cost. For this, we will have the broadest possible unity of people." Asked by journalists if that meant joining with the Congress, Yechury effectively called for the continuation of the CPM-Congress alliance, saying, "I have said the support of all forces opposed to Trinamool has to be strengthened. I think you all have got the answer."

Speaking to a rally of the party's student wing, the Students' Federation of India, on Wednesday, Politburo member and West Bengal CPM State Secretary Surya Kanta Mishra said it would be a "betrayal" of the 21.5 million people who had voted for the Left-Congress alliance if it was to be discontinued: "Can we upset this alliance? No we cannot. We cannot betray the people who supported us."

Thus a major part of the CPM leadership is advocating a formal alliance with the Congress—a discredited, decrepit, dynastic bourgeois party. And under conditions where the bourgeoisie, rattled by the world economic crisis, is hurtling to the right. In 2014, it brought the Hindu supremacist BJP to power to pursue a more aggressive policy against the

working class and internationally, including by integrating India into Washington's anti-China Pivot to Asia.

As for the Karat faction, while it now feigns shock at the West Bengal CPM's electoral alliance with the Congress, at the February 17-18 Central Committee (CC) meeting called to finalize the party's stance in the coming state elections it gave the alliance a green light. Under conditions where the West Bengal CPM, with Yechury's support, had been lobbying for months for some type of an electoral "understanding" with the Congress, the CC meeting passed a resolution that said the CPM "would seek the cooperation of all democratic forces.. . to defeat the Trinamool Congress [and] isolate the BJP and their machinations."

Subsequently, the CPM national and Kerala leaderships gave their effective approval to the West Bengal CPM campaign, voicing no dissent as it worked out a seat-sharing agreement with the Congress, coordinated election events, and publicly campaigned for a Left-Congress government.

Only after the alliance ended in an election debacle for the CPM (but not the Congress, which increased its parliamentary representation) did the Karat wing publicly decry the pact with the Congress Party in West Bengal.

Meanwhile, under its direction, the Kerala CPM mounted a thoroughly rightwing election campaign, focused on corruption allegations against the Congress-led UDF government and promises to pursue pro-investor policies. Upon assuming office, CPM Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan immediately invited multinational companies to invest in Kerala.

Revealingly, in all their state election campaigns, the Stalinists were completely silent on the Modi government's harnessing of India to the US's predatory strategic agenda and Washington's concerted drive to transform India into a frontline state in its military-strategic offensive against China.



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