

Indian Stalinists routed in Tripura bastion

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The Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM, India's principal Stalinist parliamentary party, has suffered a humiliating defeat in state elections in Tripura, losing power after 25 years in office to the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which hitherto had never been a significant political force in the state.

When the last state assembly election was held in 2013, the BJP polled less than 2 percent of the vote and all of its candidates, save one, lost their deposit.

CPM General Secretary Sitaram Yechury was quick to blame BJP "money power and muscle power" for the defeat of the CPM-led Left Front. To be sure, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his BJP used all the tricks at their disposal to gain power in Tripura, a north-eastern state with a population of slightly under 4 million.

But the overriding reason for the CPM's defeat was its pursuit of rightwing, pro-business policies in those states where it has held office over the past quarter-century; and its support for a succession of governments at the Centre, most of them Congress Party-led, that spearheaded the Indian bourgeoisie's drive to transform India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital and forge a military-strategic partnership with US imperialism.

In nearby West Bengal, like Tripura a majority-Bengali speaking state, a more than three decade-old Left Front government was ousted from office in 2011, after implementing what it itself touted as "pro-investor" policies. This included banning strikes in IT-enabled industries and using police and goon violence to suppress peasant opposition to the seizure of their lands for business development projects.

The CPM-led Left Front, which held 50 of the 60 seats in the outgoing Tripura assembly, has been reduced to just 16. It polled about 45 percent of the vote, down 6 percentage points from the previous election. The BJP captured 35 seats and its electoral ally, the Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT), eight. Together they polled almost 51 percent of the vote, as support for the Congress Party, long Tripura's second party, collapsed. The Congress saw its share of the vote fall from 36 percent in 2013 to less than 2 percent.

The Tripura election leaves the CPM and its allies holding power in just one of India's 29 states, Kerala. In the national parliament, where the Left Front was the third largest political force as recently as a decade ago, it now holds less than a dozen seats.

Since 1991, the Stalinists' principal declared aim has been to thwart the rise of the Hindu communalist BJP. They have justified their systematic subordination of the working class to the bourgeois political establishment—to Congress, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, and to a slew of reactionary caste-based and regional bourgeois parties—as the only means of keeping the BJP, and its mentors in the shadowy fascistic RSS, at bay.

The end result of this policy is that the BJP is stronger than ever. With the addition of Tripura and Nagaland, another northeastern state which just held its state assembly election, the BJP holds power (or at least a share of it as part of a coalition government) nationally and in 21 of India's 29 states, as well as the presidency and vice-presidency.

As in the 2014 national election, in which it stormed to office, winning its first-ever parliamentary majority, the BJP exploited popular anger over mass unemployment, and deep-rooted and rising poverty.

Under Left Front-rule unemployment in Tripura rose to 19.7 percent, the highest jobless rate in all of India, according to the national Labour Bureau's 2016 survey. Among tribal peoples, who make up close to a third of the state's population, the unemployment rate is substantially higher.

In the aftermath of the election, Suravaram Sudhakar Reddy, the general secretary of the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI), the CPM's principal Left Front ally, conceded, Tripura's "economy is bad. Misery and poverty are increasing. So, people (were) unhappy and angry with the government."

The Left Front also invoked draconian laws—the Disturbed Areas Act and Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA)—giving Indian security forces sweeping repressive powers, including immunity from prosecution for criminal acts, so as to suppress ethno-nationalist insurgencies by multiple tribal groups. The AFSPA was lifted only in 2015.

The BJP, which under Modi has imposed sweeping austerity measures, while accelerating privatization and gutting labor standards and environmental regulations, cynically promised that it would bring development to Tripura. Its 30-page manifesto, “Vision Document Tripura 2018,” promised Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for sectors such as food processing, bamboo and IT; employment to every household; free smartphones for youth; free education for women; free health insurance to all BPL (Below Poverty Line) households; and clean drinking water for all.

The BJP, as its wont, made various communal appeals. With the aim of bolstering its electoral fortunes in the northeast, the national BJP government amended the citizenship law to give citizenship and voting rights to Hindu migrants from Bangladesh, while systematically denying them to Muslim migrants and labelling them as invaders and potential terrorists.

Another factor in the BJP victory was its electoral alliance with the IPFT, which claims to speak on behalf of the state’s impoverished and historically marginalized tribal population and campaigns for a separate state within the Indian Union, “Twipraland.” Though the BJP was careful not to endorse the demand for a separate state, it made demagogic promises to improve the conditions of the tribal people. While all 20 “reserved constituencies” for Tribals were won by the Left Front in the 2013 elections, in 2018 it captured just one.

There is no doubt the BJP national leadership invested considerable political and material resources in unseating the Left Front government in Tripura. Last year it enticed 7 of the 10 Tripura state legislators who had been elected in 2013 on the Congress ticket to defect to the BJP. In the run-up to last Saturday’s vote count, Modi said a BJP victory in Tripura would occasion an even bigger party celebration than did its victory last year in Uttar Pradesh, which with more than 200 million people is far and away the country’s biggest state.

As with the 2014 national election, the BJP victory in Tripura is not the product of a mass groundswell of support for the Hindu right among India’s workers and toilers. Rather it was a cry of anguish over deepening economic hardship and mounting social inequality, and a vote of non-confidence in the parties traditionally identified as progressive or left—the Congress, as well as the Stalinists—whose promises of neo-liberal “reform” with a “human face” have proven utterly hollow.

At the same time, the growing power of the Hindu supremacist BJP, which has now clearly supplanted the Congress as the bourgeoisie’s principal party, must be taken as a salutatory warning as to the urgent need for the working class to take a new road—breaking from all sections of the bourgeois political establishment, including the Stalinist

CPM and CPI, and mobilizing the toilers behind it in the fight for a workers’ government committed to socialist policies.

The Stalinists, for their part, intend to use their debacle in Tripura as an argument to move still further right, with the claim that the growing political power of the BJP shows the need to “unite all secular forces”—that is to harness the working class to the BJP’s rightwing political opponents and the putrefying state institutions of “democratic” India.

In the run-up to the CPM national congress, which is to be held in Hyderabad next month, the party leadership is deeply divided over how far to go in renewing their alliance with the Congress Party, which the Left Front sustained in power both between 1991 and 1995 and again from 2004 to 2008.

General Secretary Yechury favours an “understanding” with the Congress along the lines of the explicit electoral alliance that the CPM formed with the Congress in the 2016 West Bengal state elections. He is opposed by his predecessor Prakash Karat and the majority of the outgoing CPM Politburo. They favour a different rightwing course—an alliance with various regional parties, such as the DMK in Tamil Nadu, including if these parties themselves form an electoral bloc with the Congress Party.

Both factions have declared the defeat of the BJP government is their principal immediate goal, signaling their readiness to help bring power to a Congress-led government. But the Karat faction wants the support for the Congress to be less public until the votes are counted, fearing otherwise that the Stalinists “oppositional” credentials will suffer further grave damage.

A senior leader of the CPM’s West Bengal state complained bitterly to the press about the failure to ally with the Congress Party. “The Tripura results,” he declared, “clearly show that the Left Front should have tried to bring together all the anti-BJP forces to defeat the BJP.”

The CPI, meanwhile has stepped up the pressure on its Left Front ally, to once again explicitly align with what until recently was the premier ruling party of the bourgeoisie. “As Communists,” declared CPI National Secretary D. Raja, “we must understand changing times and challenges.... We have to change our strategy accordingly to defeat the BJP-RSS combine. That’s why we need a broader anti-BJP front.”



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