

Stalinist CPM and CPI suffer meltdown in India's national election

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Under conditions of mounting working class opposition to India's Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led government and to the ruinous outcome of three decades of "pro-market" reform, India's principal Stalinist parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the smaller, older Communist Party of India (CPI)—have suffered an unprecedented electoral debacle.

Together, the CPM and CPI will have just five of the 545 seats in the Lok Sabha, the lower and more powerful house of India's bicameral parliament—3 for the CPM and 2 for the CPI. Their partners in the CPM-led Left Front electoral alliance will have none.

This is far and away the smallest ever "Left" presence in the Lok Sabha and places in jeopardy the CPM and CPI's official status as "national parties." In India's first post-independence election, the CPI won 16 seats, making it the Lok Sabha's second largest party, after the Jawaharlal Nehru-led Congress Party with 364. As recently as the 14th Lok Sabha (2004-9), the CPM had 43 MPs and the Left Front with some sixty members was the third largest bloc in the Lok Sabha.

Since then, the Stalinists' base of support in the working class and among the rural poor has hemorrhaged. In each subsequent national election the Stalinists' Lok Sabha delegation has been effectively halved. The CPM's share of the national vote has plummeted from 7.7 percent in 2004, when it polled more than 30 million votes, to 5.3 percent in 2009, 3.25 percent in 2014, and less than 2 percent (final figures have yet to be released) in 2019.

The CPM and CPI have reaped the consequences of their role in politically smothering the working class and enforcing the ruling class's post-1991 drive to transform India into a cheap-labour haven for global capital. This has included propping up a series of right-wing Indian governments, most of them Congress-led, that have implemented "pro-market" reform and pursued ever closer relations with US imperialism. Moreover, in the states where they have formed the government, the Stalinists have themselves implemented "pro-investor" policies, while

dismissing socialism as "a far off cry," to use the infamous words of the late West Bengal Chief Minister and CPM Politburo member Jyoti Basu.

Whereas decades ago the Stalinists justified their shackling of the working class to various capitalist parties in the name of supporting the "progressive" faction of the national bourgeoisie against the "feudal," "pro-imperialist" wing, for the past three decades they have argued that India's workers and toilers should support the Congress—until recently the Indian elite's preferred party of government—and a host of regional chauvinist and caste-ist parties as the only way to block the Hindu supremacist BJP from power.

With the working class prevented by the CPM, CPI and their affiliated union apparatuses from advancing its own socialist solution to the mounting social crisis, the Hindu right has been able to exploit popular frustration and anxiety over chronic poverty, economic insecurity and rampant social inequality. Indeed, after three decades in which the Stalinists suppressed the class struggle, claiming that workers must "defend democracy" through parliamentary combinations and electoral alliances with the parties of their bourgeois class enemy, the BJP and Hindu right are stronger than ever.

In the just completed election, the Stalinists once again sought to drum up support for the Congress, its United Progressive Alliance, and a host of other right wing, popularly discredited bourgeois parties in the name of bringing to power a "democratic, secular alternative"—i.e., a right-wing, big business government. All of these parties make their own reactionary communalist and caste-ist appeals and all of them—and this goes for the Stalinists as well—hailed Modi's provocative and reckless February 26 air strikes on Pakistan, which nearly resulted in all-out war. And all are as committed as the BJP to India serving as a cheap-labour hub for global capital and a junior partner of US imperialism in an anti-China Indo-US "global strategic partnership."

After decades in which they have functioned as a part of the bourgeois establishment and have been complicit in the

assault on the working class and oppressed toilers, the CPM's and CPI's claims to represent a "pro-people" alternative, let alone socialism, cut no water with working people.

In the three states traditionally considered as the Stalinists' electoral bastions and where they have repeatedly formed the state government—West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala—the CPM and CPI won just one seat. Their four other Lok Sabha victories came from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where they entered into a right-wing electoral alliance led by the right-wing Tamil regionalist DMK and supported by Rahul Gandhi and his Congress Party.

In **West Bengal**, where the CPM-led Left Front formed the state government for 34 consecutive years ending in 2011, the Stalinists suffered a complete rout. Not only did they lose their two remaining seats, but in 41 of the 42 constituencies their candidate lost their deposit.

The CPM's vote share shrank from 22.7 percent in the last Lok Sabha elections in 2014 to just 6.3 percent, and that of the Left Front as a whole from 29.9 percent to just 7.5 percent.

At the end of the last decade, the right-wing demagogue Mamata Banerjee and her Trinamool Congress (TMC) were able to exploit mounting opposition to the Left Front government's ruthless imposition of pro-investor policies. This was exemplified by the lethal police and goon violence the Left Front government unleashed in 2007 against small farmers in Nandigram protesting the expropriation of their land for a big business Special Economic Zone, and its outlawing of strikes in IT and IT-enabled sectors.

A decade after the TMC's rise, the BJP has been able to make an electoral breakthrough in West Bengal, where it traditionally has been a minor player, tapping into growing resentment at the TMC's rule, while totally eclipsing the Stalinists. In the 2019 elections, the BJP won 40 percent of the popular vote in West Bengal, up from just under 17 percent in 2014, and captured 18 seats, while the TMC won 22 seats and 43 percent of the vote.

The CPM-Left Front electoral collapse in West Bengal was preceded by and bound up with major defections from its party apparatus. Initially this took the form of defections to the TMC, but more recently it saw both local party leaders and "grassroots" workers go over to the BJP, with the claim that this is the only viable means of withstanding a campaign of TMC violence that has resulted in dozens of deaths. These developments expose the CPM's massive West Bengal apparatus to have been a corrupt and politically putrefied patronage network, dependent on access to government resources and government-police protection.

Epitomizing the defection of a section of the West Bengal CPM to the far-right and what has long been the CPM's

avowed principal enemy, two former CPM state assembly legislators stood as BJP candidates in the election. One of them, Murmu Khagen, will sit in the new Lok Sabha as a BJP MP.

In **Tripura**, India's other majority Bengali-speaking state, the CPM fared no better than in West Bengal. It held both of the state's two seats in the last Lok Sabha. But both fell to the BJP this election, and in neither did the sitting CPM MP even finish second. After 15 years in office, Tripura's CPM-led Left Front government was ousted by a BJP-led electoral alliance last year.

In **Kerala**, the one state where the Stalinists still lead the government, the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) has been reduced to just one seat from eight. The LDF's vote share declined 8 percentage points from 40 to 32 percent, its worst ever result. All the state's other 19 seats were captured by the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), which increased its vote share to 47 percent.

The LDF government is currently mounting a full-court press to drum up foreign investment. On May 17, as part of a foreign tour aimed at courting European capital, Kerala Chief Minister and Politburo members Pinaryi Vijayan rang the bell to open the trading session at the London Stock Exchange. Vijayan responded to the first of Modi's two much vaunted "surgical strikes" on Pakistan by getting the Kerala state assembly to unanimously adopt a resolution in Oct. 2016 hailing the cross-border attack.

The CPM Politburo responded to the party's election debacle with a terse statement that conceded that the party "has suffered a severe setback" and promised to "introspect."

Underscoring that the Stalinists will move even further right, intensifying their efforts to shackle the working class to the India bourgeoisie, its parties, and state, West Bengal CPM Politburo member Mohammed Salim lamented the CPM's failed attempt to forge an election alliance with the Congress in the state: "The result," he asserted, "would have been entirely different if the alliance had worked."



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