Indian Election 2019: The Bitter Battle for Bengal

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Summary

West Bengal, where a seven-phase poll is underway, has seen the most violence in the 2019 Indian general election. The Bharatiya Janata Party is trying to make inroads into the Trinamul Congress citadel through religious polarisation and charges of misgovernance. While this is likely to reap electoral dividends, the cycle of violence in the state will continue.

For the ongoing 2019 Indian general election, much of the attention has justifiably been on Uttar Pradesh which sends 80 members of parliaments to the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament). It is expected that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will lose seats, compared to 2014, not only in Uttar Pradesh, but also across northern and western India where it won 216 of its 282 seats or 75 per cent of its tally. The BJP hopes to make up some of its losses from two states in eastern India – West Bengal and Odisha – and the Northeast. In 2014, the BJP won only two seats out of 42 in West Bengal and one out of 21 in Odisha. The Trinamul Congress (TMC) and the Biju Janata Dal were the big winners in West Bengal and Odisha respectively in 2014.

While the elections in Odisha are over, the elections in West Bengal, being held over seven phases, have turned out to be the most acrimonious in the country. Reports of violence have accompanied each and every phase of voting. The violence hit national headlines on 14 May 2019 when a pitched battle broke out between supporters of the ruling TMC and the BJP while the BJP President, Amit Shah, was conducting a religiously-charged road show in Kolkata.[1] Disturbingly, a bust of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, a Bengali icon, was vandalised during the clashes. Following the clashes, the Election Commission, in an unprecedented move on 16 May 2019, barred poll campaigning from 10.00pm the next day in nine parliamentary constituencies of West Bengal that go to the polls on 19 May 2019.

Political violence has been a fairly routine occurrence in West Bengal since the late 1960s. The transition from the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front, which governed Bengal for 34 years, to the TMC was itself marked by violence and bloodshed. However, the current violence with communal overtones is a new phenomenon that has arisen as a result of the BJP's aggressive and divisive campaigning in the state. The BJP leadership, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Shah, have put in tremendous effort to breach Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's stronghold. If one tabulates the number of Modi's election rallies during the 2019 campaign, one finds that West Bengal comes second only to Uttar Pradesh (Figure 1). Before the ban came into effect, Modi was expected to address four more rallies in West Bengal.

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[1]   https://indianexpress.com/elections/amit-shah-kolkata-roadshow-jai-shri-ram-west-bengal-elections-mamata-banerjee-5727578/.

**Figure 1: Number of election rallies by Modi (20 March – 9 May 2019)**
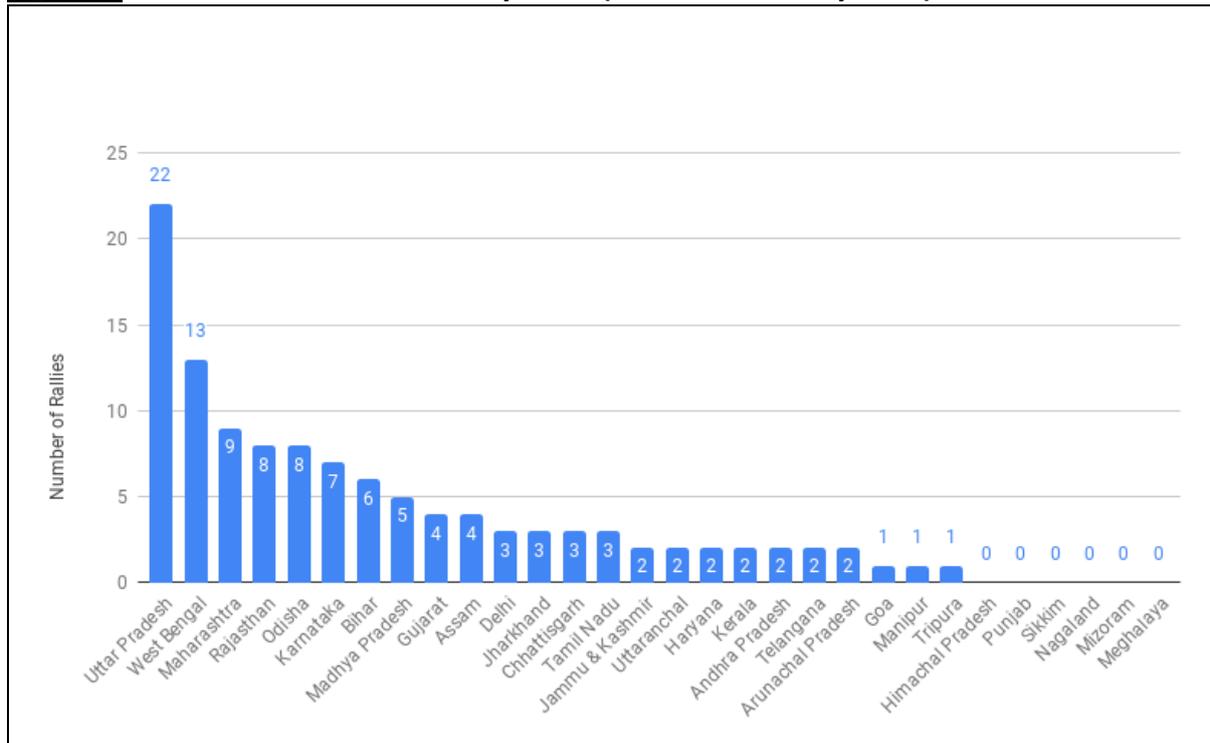
Source: Times of India Election Campaign Tracker

While it is expected that the BJP will increase its tally in West Bengal from its current two seats, the question is by how many. The BJP has set the bar high and is predicting that it will win at least 23 seats.[2] More realistic estimates put the BJP's tally at 8-10 seats. However, even the latter scenario will require a huge swing in the BJP's favour. Until 2011, the BJP had been a marginal player in West Bengal.

In the 2014 general election, the BJP had dramatically increased its vote share from four per cent in the 2011 Assembly elections to 17 per cent (Figure 2). It also won two seats – Darjeeling and Asansol. However, the BJP's vote share fell in the 2016 Assembly elections where it won 10 per cent of the vote and only three seats (Figure 3). Since 2016, though, the BJP has made significant strides and replaced the Left Front as the main opposition party in the state. This was evident in the 2018 *panchayat* (village council) elections where the BJP won 18 per cent or 5,747 of the contested *gram panchayat* seats. This was a huge jump since the BJP had barely won one per cent of the gram panchayat seats in the previous *panchayat* elections held in 2013. Moreover, the BJP came a close second to the TMC in the tribal-dominated districts of Jhargram and Purulia.

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[2]   https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/lok-sabha/west-bengal/bjp-to-win-over-23-seats-in-bengal-amit-shah/articleshow/69307769.cms.

Figure 2: 2014 general election results in West Bengal

	Seats	Vote%
AITC	34	39.3%
INC	4	9.6%
CPIM	2	22.7%
BJP	2	16.8%
OTH	0	11.5%
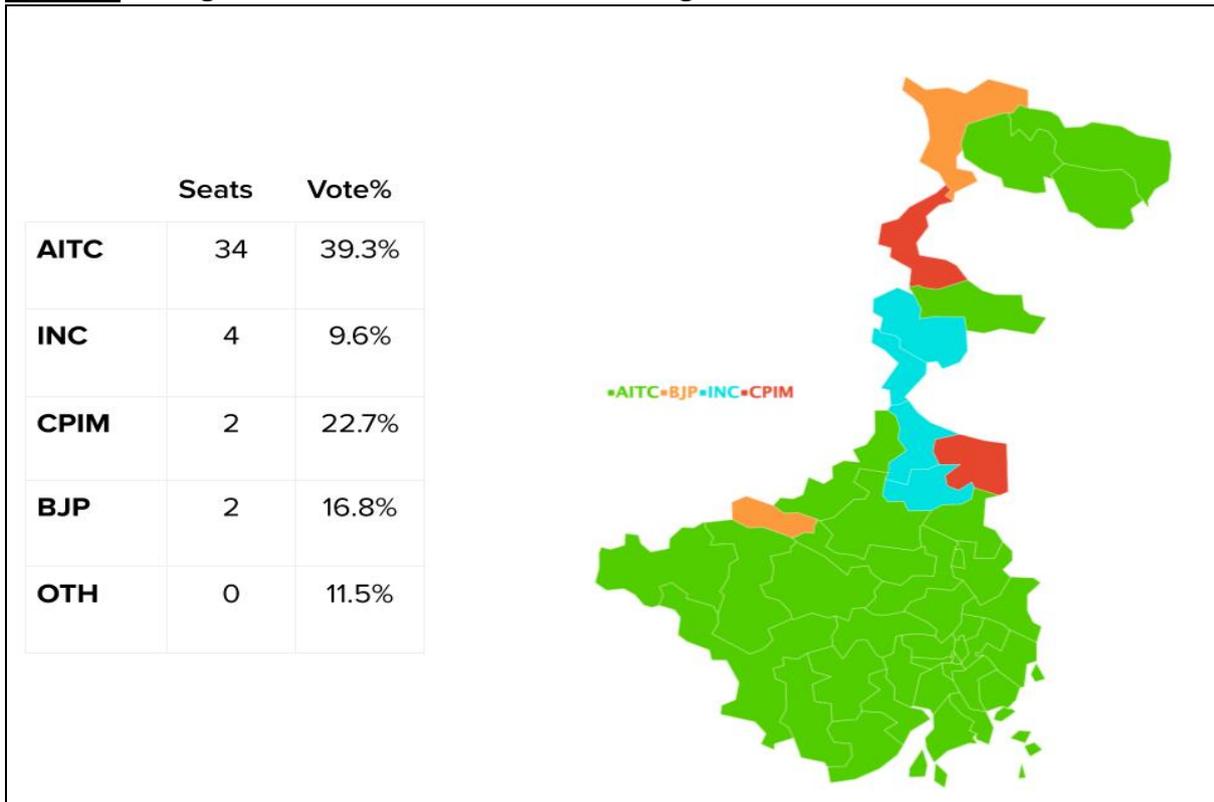
Source: Loki.ai analysis of the Election Commission of India data.

Figure 3: **2016 Assembly Election Results in West Bengal**

	Seats	Vote%
AITC	211	45.6%
INC	44	12.4%
CPIM	26	20.1%
OTH	9	11.6%
BJP	3	10.3%
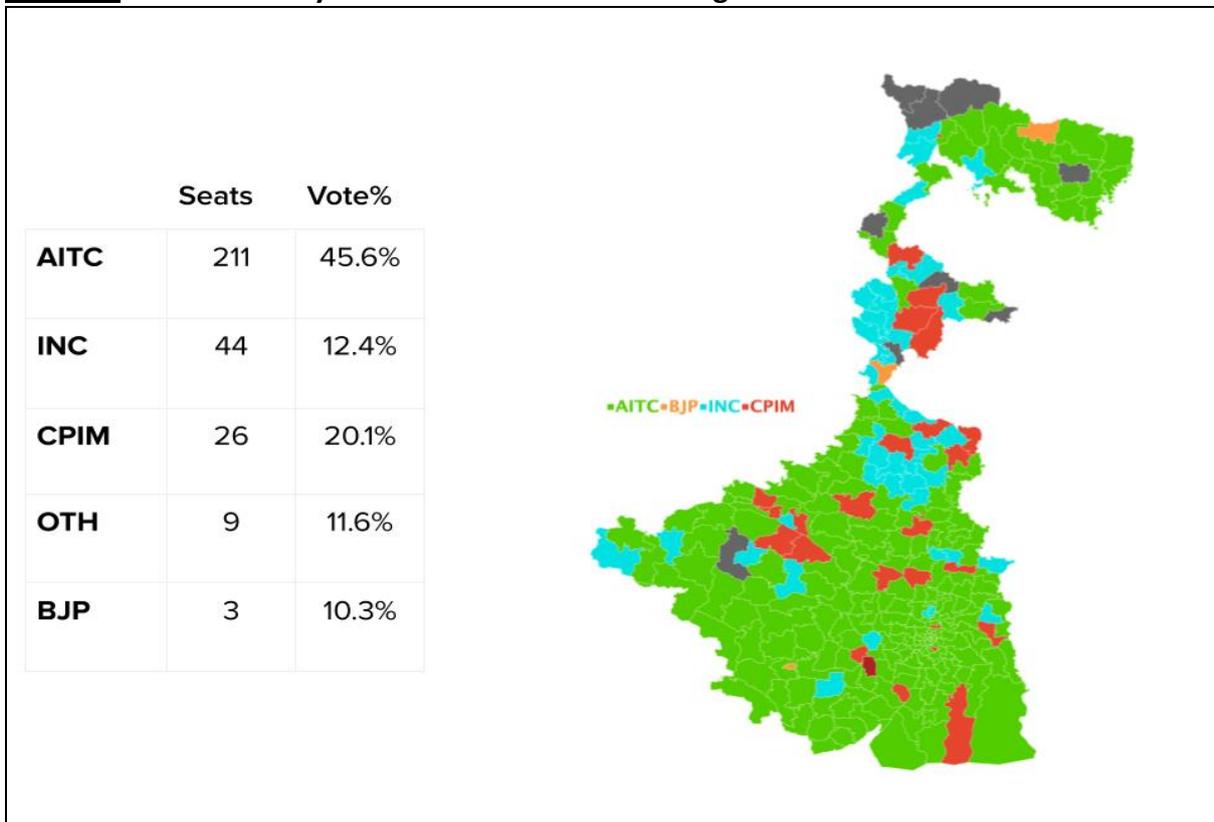
Source: Loki.ai analysis of the Election Commission of India data.

The BJP's gains have come mainly at the Left Front's expense. The latter's vote share fell from 30 per cent in 2014 to 26 per cent in 2016 and has declined further since. Many of the Left cadre have switched to the BJP. The BJP has also been successful in attracting leaders from the TMC. There were 21 constituencies in West Bengal where the BJP's vote share increased by 10 per cent or more in 2014 (Figure 4). It is in many of these constituencies, spread across Bengal, that the BJP is hoping to make a mark in 2019.

Figure 4: **Constituencies where the BJP improved in 2014**
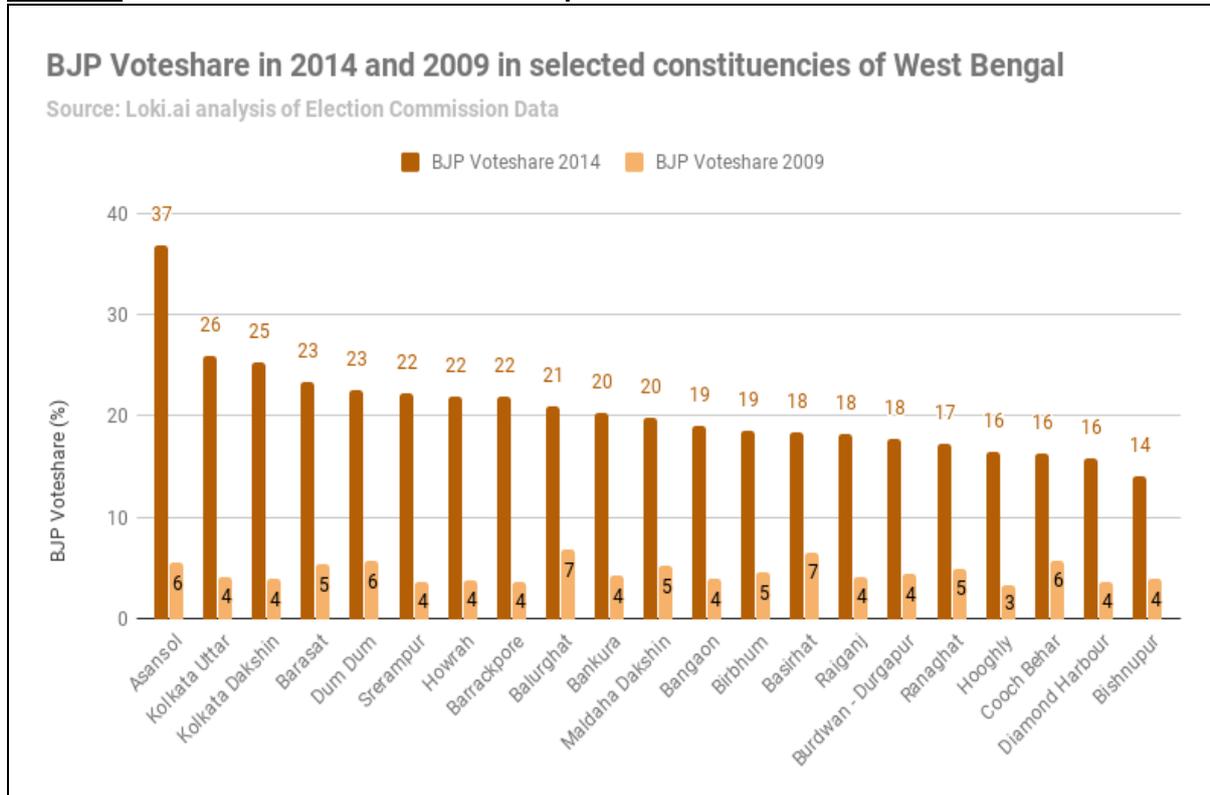
Source: Loki.ai analysis of the Election Commission of India data.

The BJP has benefitted from a multi-pronged strategy. First, the BJP has portrayed the TMC as a pro-Muslim party. The Muslims constitute 30 per cent of West Bengal's population and the post-poll surveys by CSDS-Lokniti in 2016 showed that more than half the Muslim voters in the state backed the TMC. Second, the BJP is using religious festivals such as Ram Navami to polarise Bengal and push its Hindutva agenda. Several armed Ram Navami rallies were taken out across the state in 2018, some of which resulted in violence. Third, the BJP has used the National Register of Citizens to target the TMC and Mamata over illegal infiltration from Bangladesh. Fourth, Mamata, who is into her second term, is facing some anti-incumbency and the BJP has levelled charges of misgovernance and corruption against her. Finally, like in other parts of India, the Modi factor is at play during the general elections in West Bengal.

These tactics have raised visions of the BJP "doing a Tripura" – where the BJP dramatically ousted the Left Front in 2018 after the latter had been in power for over 30 years – in West

Bengal.[3] While that seems somewhat improbable, the BJP will hope to make inroads into West Bengal in 2019. This is, however, likely to lead to further polarisation and violence.

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[3] https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-times/can-bjp-do-a-tripura-in-west-bengal-dont-rule-it-out/articleshow/69286280.cms.