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The West Bengal Municipal Polls: End of the Road for the Left?

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Abstract

The Trinamool Congress (TMC), an important constituent of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, has triumphed in the West Bengal Municipal Council polls. The ruling Left Front has lost in some of its strongholds due to a strong anti-incumbency wave, while the Congress which fought independently has also disappointed. This brief gives an overview of the verdict and also analyses the possible ramifications of the outcome for both state politics, especially in the context of next year's assembly elections in the state and national politics.

The Trinamool Congress – a key constituent of the ruling Congress-led UPA in India – has defeated both the Left Front and Congress Party in the recently concluded West Bengal Municipal Council polls. The TMC hopes to set up the municipal boards in at least 50 civic bodies on its own strength and with Congress support in a few others.² The Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M)-led Left Front has won 18 municipalities and the Congress has triumphed in seven. In 25 civic bodies, no party has been able to secure a decisive majority.

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² 'Mamata's moment', *The Hindu* (4 June 2010), <http://beta.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/article445825.ece>. Accessed on 4 June 2010.

Headed by the Minister for Railways, Mamata Banerjee, the TMC has won the polls with emphatic margins. It is Banerjee's triumphs in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) and the Salt Lake City, which have come as major surprises. The party has won 95 out of 141 wards in Kolkata, and 16 out of 25 in Salt Lake.³ The results indicate that urban voters in Bengal, particularly in Kolkata and suburbs, widely prefer Banerjee and her party over the ruling Left.

The Left's debacle in the municipal polls has not come as a bolt from the blue. The decline of the Left in West Bengal and the rise of the TMC were evident in last year's parliamentary elections, where the latter bagged 19 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats. A crucial difference this time around was that during the parliamentary elections, the Congress and TMC fought together, while they did not in the current polls. The TMC, however, won handsomely despite parting ways with the Congress. As Banerjee remarked after the elections, 'The victory in the Lok Sabha elections was easy, since we had an alliance. But this time, it was hard because we were alone. This time, the fight was against Congress, BJP and the CPI(M). When everybody left us, the people accepted us.'⁴

The strong anti-Left sentiment in West Bengal can also be gauged from the fact that Banerjee triumphed despite faltering on numerous accounts in the recent past. She has politicised the outbreak of Left Wing Extremism (LWE) in the state by claiming that there was no Maoist problem and it was all a creation of the ruling Left regime. Only recently, the TMC chief remarked that 'there are no Maoists' in West Bengal and condemned the security operations conducted against the Maoists, saying that the operations were only strengthening workers of the ruling CPI(M)⁵. Moreover, as Minister for Railways, her handling of the Gyaneswari Express derailment, which resulted in the killing of 148 people,⁶ left much to be desired. Rather than focusing on dealing with the crisis, Banerjee was busy making political statements. 'Whoever did it, it was a political conspiracy. The accident has happened two days before the (civic) election. One may be politically against us, but I feel bad that the way the incident was engineered to fulfill one's political interest.'⁷ Indeed, Banerjee was quick to apportion all blame for the tragedy on the West Bengal government and refrained from sharing any responsibility. Finally, while the Left has been criticised for lack of

³ Smita Gupta, 'In victory a bitter message for Mamata', *The Hindu* (3 June 2010), <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/national/article445027.ece>. Accessed on 4 June 2010; and Bidyut Roy and Ritwik Bhattacharya, 'Mamata drives another nail in West Bengal Left Coffin', *Indian Express* (3 June 2010), www.indianexpress.com/news/mamata-drives-another-nail-in-west-bengal-left-coffin/628751/0. Accessed on 4 June 2010.

⁴ See Bidyut Roy and Ritwik Bhattacharya, 'Mamata drives another nail in West Bengal Left Coffin'.

⁵ 'No Maoists in West Bengal', *The Hindu* (15 April 2010). www.thehindu.com/2010/04/15/stories/2010041561791300.htm.

⁶ 148 people were killed and over 200 injured in the derailment of the Howrah-Kurla Lokmanya Tilak Gyaneshwari Super Deluxe Express in West Bengal's West Midnapore district, allegedly triggered by Maoists on 28 May 2010.

⁷ 'Political war begins', *The Pioneer* (2 June 2010), www.dailypioneer.com/259258/Political-war-begins.html. Accessed on 4 June 2010.

industrialisation and economic progress in West Bengal, there is no denying that Banerjee spearheaded the agitation for dislodging Tatas' Nano car project from Singur in West Bengal. The Nano project eventually rolled out from Gujarat, much to the disappointment of West Bengal.

The municipal elections in West Bengal are dubbed as the 'semi-finals' in the run-up to assembly polls in the state next year. If the current results are seen together with last year's parliamentary elections, there is no doubt that the exit of the Left from West Bengal is a foregone conclusion. A media report echoes the sentiment, 'After a record seven successive wins in the Assembly election, beginning 1977, the CPI(M) and the other Left parties might have to settle for a spell in the opposition. Even if corrective action is taken by the Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee government, it is difficult to envisage a change in the popular mood in West Bengal.'⁸ If the Left loses West Bengal, a state that it has ruled for more than three decades, its political prospects in India will receive a severe jolt.

The municipal election results, apart from driving another nail in the Left Front's coffin, also have some bearing for the national politics. They increase Banerjee's leverage with the Congress Party and the UPA, with whom she has been sharing a strained relationship of late. Immediately after the results, Banerjee was quick to demand for early assembly polls in Bengal. She has demanded advancing the polls to October 2010 from 2011. Though her demand is unlikely to be accepted, Banerjee will not relent easily.⁹

The Congress on its part realises that Banerjee is indispensable in West Bengal. Right on the eve of the municipal council elections, senior Congress leader and Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, had warned the TMC supremo not to cross the 'lakshmanrekha' as CPI(M) general secretary Prakash Karat did during the tenure of the first UPA government at the Centre. The verbal slugfest began when Banerjee accused the Congress of being soft on the Communists. Mukherjee, visibly miffed at the TMC supremo's tirade, was quick to make the point that Banerjee should refrain from unnecessary criticism of the Congress. The party has 207 MPs, and the UPA can survive without TMC support. Mukherjee reiterated point that in its earlier tenure, the UPA had managed to survive with 147 Congress MPs inspite of the Left Front's departure from the alliance.¹⁰

Mukherjee was quick to make amends by promptly congratulating Banerjee for her party's swashbuckling performance in the polls. Banerjee on her part has expressed complete faith in

⁸ See 'Mamata's moment', *The Hindu*.

⁹ Raktima Bose, 'Mamata renews demand for early Assembly Polls', *The Hindu* (2 June 2010), <http://beta.thehindu.com/news/national/article444870.ece>. Accessed on 4 June 2010.

¹⁰ 'Pranab warns Mamata: Don't go Karat way Mamata told', *The Statesman* (27 May 2010). http://thestatesman.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=329323&catid=35. Accessed on 8 June 2010.

the UPA leadership and stated that she is keen to put up a joint fight, with the Congress, against the Left during the assembly elections in 2011.¹¹

Banerjee's win may also compel her to quit from her ministerial position in the cabinet so that she can devote more time to West Bengal. Her political career has evolved on securing the ouster of the Left from West Bengal and she is unlikely to relinquish the post of Chief Minister following her impending victory in the assembly polls. She has drawn considerable flak for her casual handling of the Railways Ministry and spending more time in Calcutta than at the Centre.¹²

Banerjee's recent victory is bound to make her more assertive vis-à-vis the Congress Party. It remains to be seen whether the Congress is prepared to play second fiddle to the TMC, in the run up to the assembly poll. The TMC supremo on her part needs to articulate her party's stance on Maoism, which has so far been woolly to say the least. While Banerjee has been quick to blame the West Bengal government for the increase in Maoist violence, she has never outlined her party's policy. On the subject, this critical issue along with Bengal's economic revival and better governance are areas where she needs to articulate her position for obtaining lasting popular support.

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¹¹ 'Pranab warns Mamata', *The Times of India* (28 May 2010). <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Pranab-warns-Mamata-Banerjee/articleshow/5983237.cms>. Accessed on 3 June 2010.

¹² Harish Gupta, 'West Bengal in sight, Mamata Banerjee may give up railways', *DNA* (4 June 2010). www.dnaindia.com/india/report_west-bengal-in-sight-mamata-banerjee-may-give-up-railways_1391700. Accessed on 5 June 2010.