

# ISAS Brief

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## **West Bengal Assembly Elections: Despite Setbacks Trinamool Congress has the Edge**

*Three phases of the six-phase Assembly elections in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal are over. The ruling Trinamool Congress is still the favourite to retain power, but it faces a tough contest thanks to corruption allegations and a flyover disaster, which occurred just before the State went to the polls.*

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West Bengal is half way through its six-phase Assembly election, which began on 4 April and will run till 5 May. What had initially seemed like a relatively easy victory for the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC), led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, could turn out to be closer than anticipated. A video sting on several senior TMC leaders showing them allegedly taking bribes, which surfaced just before the polls, followed by the collapse of an under-construction flyover in north Kolkata on 31 March 2016, which resulted in casualties, have put the TMC on the back foot. In addition, an electoral tie-up between the two major opposition parties in the State – the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M])-led Left Front and the Congress – has turned out to

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be much more cohesive than expected. In contrast, the TMC has been riven by internal squabbles in the run-up to the elections. The sting operation and flyover calamity have thrown into doubt pre-election opinion surveys, one of which gave the TMC 178 out of 294 seats in the State Assembly, the Congress-Left combination 110 and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 1. Interestingly, the survey gave roughly the same vote share – around 45% – to both the TMC and the Left-Congress combination. However, according to the survey, the BJP, which increased its vote share dramatically to 17% in the 2014 national elections thanks to a wave in favour of then prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi, could see its share plummet to 5%.

## **The Prospects of the TMC**

The TMC had come to power in West Bengal after a historic victory in 2011 when it unseated the Left Front government which was then the world's longest-serving democratically elected Communist government. The Left Front, which had governed West Bengal for a record 34 years, was reduced to a mere 62 seats in the 294-seat Assembly while the TMC won 184 seats. The Congress, which was then the TMC's ally, won 42 seats.

In the five years since the 2011 verdict, however, there is little to be seen of the *poriborton* or change that the TMC had promised. There has not been much by way of investment in the State, the government has been tainted by a chit fund scam, incidents of political violence are high and Ms Banerjee has been intolerant of any criticism. But the chief minister's ability to connect with the masses has served to gloss over some of the shortcomings of her government and her party. Besides, the Left Front, hamstrung by a mass migration of its cadre to the TMC and an ageing leadership, has been an ineffective opposition. Indeed, since 2011 the TMC has done very well in the 2014 national elections as well as in the local panchayat polls in 2013 and the municipal elections in 2015. The municipal elections, however, were marked by violence and allegations of intimidation and electoral rigging by the TMC. In fact, this is a throwback to the Left Front government's tenure in West Bengal, when the ruling party was routinely accused of electoral violence and rigging. That the 2016 elections are being

held over a month in six phases in contrast to other states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the polls are being conducted in one day, is testimony to the threat of political violence in West Bengal. Indeed, despite a heavy presence of Central security forces and Election Commission (EC) officials and transfer of bureaucrats seen to be partisan to the TMC, the three phases of polling in West Bengal have seen incidents of violence.

## **The Three Phases**

In the ongoing Assembly polls, the TMC is on less sure ground than the elections at various levels held in West Bengal over the past five years. In the first phase of the West Bengal elections in 49 constituencies in the districts of West Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia and Burdwan held over two days on 4 and 11 April, the TMC's prospects are bright. The three districts of Bankura, Purulia and West Medinipur are among the poorest and most underdeveloped in the State and is also home to many of its tribals. This area has also seen violence by Maoist groups. The TMC government is likely to reap electoral dividend in these districts from its investment in infrastructure projects, initiatives to help girl students and efforts to stem the Maoist violence. Thus, in the 2014 national elections, the TMC won 52% of the vote share in West Medinipur compared to the Left Front's 29%.

The second phase of the West Bengal elections in 56 constituencies was held on 17 April in the northern districts of Darjeeling, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Malda, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and the southern district of Birbhum. It is in the northern districts of the State where the opposition parties are at their strongest. If one were to go by the 2014 national polls the combined Left-Congress vote in the four districts of Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, Malda and North Dinajpur was significantly higher than that of the TMC. Indeed, North and South Dinajpur and Malda districts have traditionally been Congress strongholds even during the tenure of the Left Front government. Darjeeling is unique since the regional Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), an ally of the BJP and with strong support in the district, has fielded five candidates. The GJM is also backing five BJP candidates in north Bengal. In the 2014 election, the BJP won the Darjeeling parliamentary seat with the backing of the GJM. In the ongoing election, the GJM could

possibly win 4-5 seats in Darjeeling. The Birbhum district is a stronghold of the TMC and it is expected to do well in the 11 seats in the district. Birbhum, however, has been the site of several incidents of political violence. The situation was such that the district TMC president was kept under close surveillance, on the instructions of the EC, by security forces prior to the election and on polling day.

The third phase of the West Bengal elections, which was held on 21 April, saw voting in 62 constituencies across the three districts of Murshidabad, Burdwan and Nadia and seven seats in north Kolkata. While the Congress has pockets of strength in Murshidabad, from where it won two seats in the 2014 national polls, the TMC is expected to do well in Burdwan and Nadia. It is in the seven constituencies of Kolkata that the fight is expected to be close. The collapse of the flyover, which was located in the Jorasanko constituency of north Kolkata, has had a ripple effect in the city. In the 2014 national elections in the Jorasanko Assembly segment of the Kolkata North parliamentary constituency, which has a significant number of migrants from outside Bengal, the BJP had a lead of over 16,000 votes. It is likely that the BJP, which has fielded its former state unit president in Jorasanko, could win the seat. In the neighbouring constituencies of Kolkata, the anger against the TMC government, due to corruption scandals and the collapsed flyover, could see the opposition winning a few seats.

## **Conclusion**

The tie-up between the Left Front and the Congress and the poor publicity for the TMC before the elections have introduced an element of uncertainty in the Assembly elections in West Bengal. The TMC is expected to come back to power on the back of its strength in the rural areas of the State. It is the northern districts of West Bengal and the urban constituencies that could vote against the TMC. But like the earlier Left Front government, which held on to power based on its strong rural support, the TMC too could form the government again with the backing of rural Bengal.

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