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West Bengal Elections: Trinamool Congress' Rural Vote Blunts Opposition Alliance

The six-phase elections in the eastern Indian State of West Bengal are over and the results will be declared on 19 May 2016. In the last three phases of polling, elections were held in districts which are Trinamool Congress (TMC) strongholds. The results for the final phase will determine if the TMC can retain power.

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The gruelling month-long, six-phase Assembly elections in West Bengal got over on 5 May.² The last three phases of the election saw polling in 127 of the State's 294 constituencies across the southern districts of North and South 24-Parganas, Howrah, Hooghly, East Midnapore and the city of Kolkata as well in the northern district of Cooch Behar, which borders Assam in India's Northeast and Bangladesh. Except for Cooch Behar, the remaining districts that went to the polls in the final phase are strongholds of the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) and hold the key to its electoral fortunes. It is here that the TMC had won 105 of its 184 Assembly

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² For an analysis of the first three phases of the West Bengal elections, see Ronojoy Sen, 'West Bengal Elections: Despite Setbacks Trinamool Congress has the Edge', *ISAS Brief* 420. For the election results in West Bengal in the 2011 and 2014 elections, see Sen, 'Elections in Four Indian States: A Test for the BJP and Modi', *ISAS Insights* 318.

seats in the 2011 Assembly elections. But it is also in the final phase of the elections where the party could have been most affected by the fallout from the sting video, showing several TMC politicians taking bribes, and the flyover collapse in Kolkata, both of which happened days before the polls began. Indeed, West Bengal's largest media house, the ABP Group, which publishes the highest circulated Bengali language daily, the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, and runs a popular television news channel, had conducted a concerted campaign against the TMC Government on both these counts. However, most exit polls, whose results were released on 16 May after polling in the States of Tamil Nadu and Kerala ended, have predicted a clear majority for the TMC.

Factors Favouring TMC

One of the reasons why the TMC has been relatively untouched by the recent adversities is its continuing support in rural Bengal. In the districts where the final three phases were held, particularly in the rural constituencies of Hooghly, East Midnapore and North and South 24-Parganas, the TMC enjoys considerable popularity. Part of this support stems from government handouts such as rice at Rs 2 a kilogramme for families below the poverty line and free bicycles for high school students. In addition, the government has invested in rural infrastructure like roads, bridges and electricity. For some constituencies like Singur in Hooghly, where the TMC once supported the agitation against land acquisition for the Tata's Nano car factory, families that refused to give up their land have got a special package. An estimated 3,500 'unwilling' families have been getting a dole of Rs 2,000 and 16 kg of rice every month ever since the TMC came to power. All these measures have made corruption less of a poll issue in rural areas. It is instructive that that the TMC's alleged involvement in a chit fund scam became public just before the 2014 national elections, but it did little to dent the party's performance. In 2014, the TMC ended up winning 34 of the 42 parliamentary seats.

The second factor that could favour the TMC in south Bengal is the Muslim vote. While for West Bengal as a whole, Muslims constitute around 27% of the population, it is estimated that in a third of the State's Assembly constituencies Muslim voters play a decisive role. The TMC did extremely well in these constituencies in both the 2011 Assembly elections and the 2014 national elections. In 2014, the TMC led in 72 of the 81 Assembly segments, where Muslims are over a quarter of the population. During its tenure in government, the TMC has given several sops to Muslims, including stipends to imams and muezzins and scholarships to Muslim

students. These could pay off for the TMC in the current elections despite studies showing that Muslims in West Bengal lag far behind their counterparts in most Indian States.

Finally, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee continues to be the TMC's trump card, especially in rural Bengal. While her intolerance to any sort of criticism, her whimsical measures, such as painting Kolkata blue and white, and her often crude political discourse have alienated the middle class, Ms Banerjee still remains popular in large swathes of the State. During this election campaign, over the course of two months, Ms Banerjee crisscrossed West Bengal addressing 200 rallies and urging voters to cast their vote as if she were the candidate in each and every constituency. Her high energy levels and her fiery speeches have earned Ms Banerjee the nickname, *Banglar agni kanya* (Bengal's fire goddess). In contrast, neither of the opposition leaders, including Surjyakanta Mishra of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]) or Adhir Chowdhury of the Congress, has a mass appeal to match Ms Banerjee.

Why the Elections Could Still be Close

The electoral tie-up prior to the 2016 polls between the CPI(M)-led Left Front, which governed West Bengal for 34 years from 1977 to 2011, and the Congress caught the TMC by surprise. If one goes by numbers, the alliance is a formidable one since the combined vote of the Left parties and the Congress, on one side, and the TMC's on the other were roughly the same in the 2014 national elections. In the 2011 elections, the Congress had contested the elections in alliance with the TMC, going to show to what extent the political situation in the State has changed. This time, the unlikely Left-Congress alliance surprised many by not only dividing electoral constituencies smoothly, but also campaigning vigorously on a joint platform. Thus, on 27 April 2016 one saw the unusual sight of former West Bengal Chief Minister and CPI(M) leader, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi sharing the dais in Kolkata. Down the hierarchy, there were several instances of leaders who were once avowed foes campaigning side by side. The closing of ranks of the Left and the Congress has significantly narrowed the electoral gap between the TMC and the opposition.

The sting video involving several prominent TMC politicians might have surfaced just before the elections, but long before that the TMC's alleged involvement in the chit fund scam had disenchanting the middle class in Bengal. Besides, extortion rackets or 'syndicates' run by the TMC cadre, lack of job opportunities and poor law and order have angered middle class voters.

The opposition did not, however, make full use of the middle class disillusionment by putting up candidates with little credibility in many urban constituencies. In constituencies in Kolkata, for instance, several of the sting-tainted TMC leaders were pitted against political novices. Bhowanipore constituency of south Kolkata, from where Ms Banerjee contested, was one of the few seats where the Opposition alliance had a heavyweight candidate in former Union minister Deepa Das Munshi.

The month-long election schedule and the elaborate security arrangements by the Election Commission (EC), which included transfer of officials seen as close to the government, could have also worked against the TMC. The municipal elections in West Bengal in 2015, where the TMC swept the polls, were marked by violence and allegations of electoral malpractice. Despite sporadic violence in the 2016 polls, the Central security forces ensured a fair election where the ruling party workers were not given the opportunity to falsify votes or intimidate voters. Indeed, the discomfiture of the government was apparent in Ms Banerjee's intemperate criticism of the EC and Central forces in several of her campaign speeches.

Finally, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s vote share could make a difference to the eventual outcome in several constituencies. It is generally accepted that the BJP's vote share in West Bengal will come down from an all-time high of 17% in 2014. Arguably in 2014, the BJP dented the Congress and the Left's vote bank and helped the TMC. While the BJP could still improve on its existing one seat in the West Bengal Assembly, the party that gets a major share of the BJP's 2014 vote in 2016 could end up as winner.

Conclusion

The TMC has its nose ahead in the 2016 elections primarily due to its rural vote bank. The Left-Congress alliance made things tougher for the TMC, but despite its chemistry the alliance lacked organisational strength and popular leaders. If the TMC forms the next government in West Bengal, as looks likely, it will at least have a more vocal opposition to deal with.

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