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The Modi-Mamata Thaw: Notes on Recent Developments in West Bengal

While India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee appear to have buried the hatchet in a bid to advance their respective political agendas, a question-mark hangs over the relationship between their political parties at the grassroots.

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In the run-up to the 2014 national elections, the then prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Mr Narendra Modi, and West Bengal Chief Minister, Ms Mamata Banerjee, had traded charges against each other. The relations between the two remained frosty even after Mr Modi became the Prime Minister. Ms Banerjee did not congratulate Mr Modi on his assumption of office as Prime Minister; she also did not attend the first meeting of the NITI Aayog (the government think tank that has replaced the Planning Commission) in February 2015, chaired by Mr Modi and attended by most chief ministers. But both seem to have warmed up to each other in recent times.

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Ms Banerjee broke the ice by meeting Mr Modi in Delhi on 10 March 2015. During Mr Modi's recent visit to West Bengal, both shared the stage at a function on 9 May in Kolkata. Even when she complained at the event about the absence of banks in rural Bengal despite Mr Modi's promise to ensure a bank account for every household in India, the Prime Minister, rather understandingly, said: "I do agree with her view. This problem has persisted for 60 years. She has said this in front of me because she knows that I can deliver goods".² At the same function, Ms Banerjee said: "The state and the Centre should work shoulder to shoulder for the country's development".³ The next day, the two leaders again shared dais at the steel town of Burnpur where he spoke of the need for a "Team India" consisting of the central government and states in a cooperative framework.⁴

Incentives for a Rapprochement

There are three possible reasons for the thaw in the relations between Mr Modi and Ms Banerjee. The first is his government's desperate need for the support of regional parties like the Trinamool Congress (TMC), which she heads, in the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of Parliament) to pass legislation. The BJP, with only 47 seats, is well short of a majority in the 250-member Rajya Sabha. The TMC, with 12 MPs, is thus of vital importance.

Second, the West Bengal Government is severely cash-strapped and in dire need of the Centre's assistance. According to Ms Banerjee, the state's total debt burden at the end of the 2014-15 financial year stood at Rs 274,800 crore, which she has asked Mr Modi to write off. She has also maintained that the devolution of funds to the states, based on the recommendations of the 14th Finance Commission, has hurt West Bengal since it had been offset by drastic cuts in the central funds for social development schemes.⁵ In addition, a tacit agreement might have been reached between the two leaders to the effect that the central agencies go slow in their investigation into a chit fund scam that involves several senior TMC leaders.

Finally, the BJP, which had hopes of making a dent in West Bengal based on its performance in the 2014 national elections, did poorly in the polls held in the state's 92 municipalities, including Kolkata. This could well have signalled to the BJP's central leadership that their

² *Times of India*, 10 May 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Indian Express*, 11 May 2015.

⁵ *India Today*, 9 May 2015.

party stands little chance of running the TMC close in the next state elections in West Bengal, expected to be held in 2016. The BJP's state leadership has admitted that it had lost ground since 2014.⁶ In such a situation, Mr Modi might have taken a pragmatic decision to maintain cordial relations with the TMC in the short run to further his government's agenda.

The Quid Pro Quo

On the first two issues, Mr Modi and Ms Banerjee have worked out a quid pro quo. The TMC helped make up the BJP's shortfall in the Rajya Sabha in passing the coal bill and the mines and minerals bill during the recently-concluded Budget session of Parliament. The TMC has also extended support, in principle, to the goods and services tax (GST) legislation, which is now being examined by a parliamentary select committee. Importantly, the TMC backed the Constitution (119th Amendment) Bill, which operationalised the 1974 Land Boundary Agreement with Bangladesh. The Central Government has reciprocated by announcing a Rs 3,008-crore package for West Bengal for rehabilitating the affected inhabitants of enclaves in Bangladesh.⁷ Whether this bonhomie will extend to the land acquisition amendment bill, which the BJP is keen to push through, is to be seen since the TMC has been one of the most vocal opponents of the legislation. Moreover, Ms Banerjee's electoral success in the 2011 West Bengal Assembly elections, when she stormed to power in the state, can partly be ascribed to her resistance to the Central Government's land acquisition policies.

The BJP of course is hedging its bets with regard to getting support in the Rajya Sabha. Mr Modi was one of the first to call the former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and leader of a regional party, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), J Jayalithaa, after the Karnataka High Court acquitted her in a disproportionate assets case. Ms Jayalithaa's party has 11 seats in the Rajya Sabha, and like the TMC could be of invaluable assistance in helping pass legislation.

The Municipal Elections

Elections in 92 municipalities in West Bengal, including the prestigious Kolkata Municipal Corporation, were held in April. The TMC swept the polls by winning in 71 municipalities;

⁶ *Anandabazar Patrika*, 10 May 2015.

⁷ *Indian Express*, 7 May 2015.

the Left Front won in 5; the Congress in four; and the BJP drew blank.⁸ Twelve civic bodies threw up a hung result. The TMC bettered its performance from the last civic elections in 2010 when it had won 66 municipalities. In Kolkata, the TMC won 114 of the 141 wards, an improved performance from last time.⁹

The results were a huge boost for the TMC with Assembly elections in West Bengal not too far away. Indeed, there is every chance that the TMC could call a snap election to the West Bengal Assembly ahead of 20 May 2016 when the term of the current House ends.

For the BJP, which had ambitions of gaining a foothold in the state, the results in the latest municipal polls were a disappointment. Following its performance in the 2014 national elections, where the party's vote share had jumped to 17% from 6% in 2009,¹⁰ the BJP had hoped to give the TMC a fight in the municipal elections. Indeed, the party had also won its first seat in the West Bengal Assembly in a by-election held in September 2014. But its expectations came to nought. Even in the Kolkata municipality, where the BJP has pockets of strength, the party won only seven seats. Though the BJP has done marginally better than in the 2010 municipal elections, where it won just three seats in Kolkata, its performance is nowhere near the central leadership's expectations. In fact, the Left Front, which has been on a downward spiral since the 2009 national elections, found some solace in the results, since it hung on to the principal opposition status in the state, something that had been under threat due to the BJP's strong showing over the past year. It must be noted, however, that all opposition parties have complained of intimidation and electoral rigging by the TMC party. There were also media reports of violence both during campaigning and on the day of elections.¹¹

Conclusion

The West Bengal municipal results have confirmed that the BJP's relatively strong showing in the state in the 2014 national elections had more to do with Mr Modi's popularity and the prevailing national mood than with any inherent strength of the party's local organisation. This is true for some other states, too, with strong regional parties. The warming of relations

⁸ [http://www.wbsec.gov.in/\(S\(03pb23554s15yc45q0ygfa55\)\)/Municipal/FinalResult_All_Mun.aspx](http://www.wbsec.gov.in/(S(03pb23554s15yc45q0ygfa55))/Municipal/FinalResult_All_Mun.aspx).

⁹ [http://www.wbsec.gov.in/\(S\(f1jcr3izpskhsojh1vbpg545\)\)/Municipal/FinalResult_Mun_KMC.aspx](http://www.wbsec.gov.in/(S(f1jcr3izpskhsojh1vbpg545))/Municipal/FinalResult_Mun_KMC.aspx).

¹⁰ http://eci.nic.in/eci_main/archiveofge2014/17%20-%20State%20wise%20seat%20won%20and%20valid%20votes%20polled%20by%20political%20party.pdf.

¹¹ *The Hindu*, 25 April 2015.

between Ms Banerjee and Mr Modi has, however, thrown the BJP's West Bengal unit into a quandary. In fact, following his visit, one of the two BJP Members of Parliament from West Bengal, Union Minister of State for Urban Development Babul Supriyo, praised Ms Banerjee at a public function in Kolkata on 15 May. Some local BJP leaders have, however, questioned the perceived proximity of their party to the TMC, and began analysing how it might hurt the BJP in the future.

The BJP's General Secretary in charge of West Bengal, Siddharth Nath Singh, has been forced to clarify that though the centre-state relations have to be cordial in a federal structure, there is no question of the BJP reaching a political understanding with the TMC.¹² The contradictions between getting support in Parliament for the government's agenda and furthering the BJP's strength in the states is nowhere as apparent as in West Bengal. The Modi-Mamata duet has larger implications, for BJP's national strategy as well as for India's unsolved boundary and water-sharing issues with Bangladesh. These would be the larger themes to look out for in the unfolding of the Modi-Mamata thaw.

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¹² *Anandabazar Patrika*, 18 May 2015.