

Message from West Bengal Municipal Polls

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On May 30, urban as well as semi-urban West Bengal (many municipalities are still considerably rural) voted to elect 81 municipal bodies across the state. Unlike panchayat elections, municipal elections are not held simultaneously all over the state – many municipalities have a different electoral calendar. Yet as municipal elections go, this was surely the biggest round of elections covering the metropolis of Kolkata and its predominantly middle-class neighbourhood Bidhan Nagar (Salt Lake) as well as modest sub-divisional and block headquarter towns in peripheral districts. The results have predictably been disastrous for the ruling Left Front. Its writ now runs in only 18 of these 81 municipal bodies, just a third of what the Left Front had won five years ago.

There was no formal electoral tie-up between the TMC and the Congress in these elections. Commonsense suggests that such a division should prove beneficial for the Left Front. In fact, the entire 'revival package' or 'survival strategy' of the CPI(M) in West Bengal revolves around a pathetic attempt to wean the Congress away from its partnership with the TMC. Yet results clearly show that the CPI(M)/LF has lost miserably despite the TMC-Congress divide. In fact, had there been a formal tie-up between the Congress and TMC, the CPI(M)/LF tally would have been further reduced. The erosion of the LF is reflected most tellingly by its humiliating loss in municipalities considered invincible CPI(M) strongholds till recently. The CPI(M)'s failure to open its account in a municipality like Memari in Bardhaman district is probably the most shocking of all results in these elections.

The *People's Democracy* editorial on West Bengal municipal poll results has made a ridiculous ostrich-like attempt to downplay the poll debacle and its implications for the LF. The editorial argues that every election is a different ballgame, and therefore there is nothing supra-municipal about these elections and their results. As far as the May 30 municipal polls are concerned, nothing could be farther from the truth. Municipal issues took a backseat in most places and the entire election became just another referendum against the CPI(M)'s increasingly discredited rule in the state. The CPI(M) too fought the polls in this overarching political context – its campaign highlighted its belated attempt to address Muslim grievances and on the last day of the campaign there was a desperate attempt to cash in on the Gyaneshwari Express tragedy. It is another matter that nothing worked in favour of the CPI(M).

Before last year's Assembly by-elections Jyoti Basu had infamously appealed to traditional Congress supporters to vote for the CPI(M) which had predictably fallen on deaf ears. During the municipal poll campaign, Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee carried it one step forward and asked BJP supporters in his home constituency Jadavpur to support CPI(M) nominees against TMC! The State CPI(M) Secretary of course sought to make light of this loaded political appeal by soliciting votes from Congress and TMC supporters as well! Who knows how many more such gems are awaiting us in the run-up to 2011!

The Chief Minister and one of his key cabinet colleagues, industries minister Nirupam Sen, both avoided the PB meeting after this latest poll debacle. CPI(M) circles are debating whether the cause of the debacle should be searched in administrative lapses inside West Bengal or in the central leadership's violation of the Party's Coimbatore Congress line which had apparently ordained the party to stick to the course of collaboration with the Congress and not risk any confrontation. The so-called rectification campaign remains a non-starter. In any case the rectification document reads

more like an ethical edict against consumerism than a political call to fight opportunism.

Talking about consumerism, is it just a question of new party members falling prey to the dominant cultural milieu driven by India's globalising capitalism? Could there be a more shocking example of consumerism than the CPI(M)'s 2009 LS election campaign that revolved overwhelmingly around the 'tragedy' of Tata Nano not being able to be 'born' in West Bengal?

Apart from 'consumerism', the other issue being debated in the CPI(M) seems to concern democratic centralism. The latest issue of CPI(M)'s theoretical quarterly has a signed article by Prakash Karat in defence of democratic centralism. But if the major lapses in West Bengal all belong to the domain of 'democracy' what about the centralised guidance under which this democracy has all along been conducted? What about the party's 'updated' programme and tactical line which has redefined the role of state governments led by the party as brutal agencies of implementation of neo-liberal policies, a role which has been played out to perfection by the Buddhadeb regime under the benign supervision of CPI(M)-style 'democratic centralism'?

No matter how the CPI(M) deals with these questions in the coming days, the Left movement in the country cannot afford to overlook the message from West Bengal, and will surely have to provide an appropriate communist answer to the rightwing resurgence happening in the state in the garb of maverick populism.

P.S.

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