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Reading the West Bengal *Panchayat* Poll Results

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Elections to the *panchayat* – comprising the three tiers of village, block and district of a state in India – often go unnoticed at the national level. That the recent *panchayat* elections in West Bengal, which were won convincingly by the governing Trinamool Congress Party, made news is due to several reasons.

For one the state is seen as one of the success stories of the *panchayati raj* or decentralised rule in India. Unlike most other Indian states, West Bengal has held regular *panchayat* elections since 1978. This time around, however, the run-up to the elections was marked by uncertainty and acrimony. There was an unseemly tussle between the Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal and the State Election Commission over the poll dates and use of federal security forces. Eventually the Supreme Court had to step in, ruling that the elections must be held in five phases — a common practice for national and state-level polls but unheard of in *panchayat* elections — from 11 July to 25 July, and in the presence of 15,000 federal security forces for the first two phases, 25,000 for the next two and 2,000 for the last. Such unprecedented steps were taken on the plea of the state election body which feared violence during the elections.²

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² *The Hindu*, June 29, 2013.

Despite the security arrangements, the elections were marred by violence, casualties and allegations of malpractice. The electoral campaign was also tarnished by verbal attacks of Trinamool leaders on the state poll panel and intimidation of the opposition. For example, a district president of the Trinamool Congress urged his supporters at a public meeting not to allow the opposition to field candidates. Another Trinamool leader called for the beheading of a political rival.³

If the election rhetoric of the Trinamool Congress was disappointing, the election results were a resounding success for the party. At the highest tier of the three-tier election, the Trinamool won in 13 of the 17 districts.⁴ At the next two tiers too the Trinamool won convincingly. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)]-led Left Front, which had governed the state for a record 34 years before it was voted out in 2011, won only one district. The Congress party too could only win in one district. The remaining two districts threw up hung verdicts.

A Barometer of Rural Support

The results were clear evidence that the popular wave that swept the Trinamool Congress to power in 2011 remains intact in rural Bengal. The *panchayat* elections had always been a reliable guide to the rural support enjoyed by Left Front in its three decade-plus stint in power. Indeed, the last *panchayat* election in 2008 was the first indication of the cracks in Left Front rule. Then the Left Front's vote share had dropped to 52 per cent from previous highs which had gone up to 90 per cent.⁵

The situation has been reversed to the extent that the Left Front is struggling to gain a foothold in vast swathes of rural Bengal where it was once dominant. The reversal is so complete that in 14 per cent of the constituencies the Trinamool won uncontested since the Opposition could not even put up candidates. This was a throwback to the days of Left Front dominance when the opposition parties could not muster the will or the strength to put up candidates for many seats. Only this time it was the Left Front that was at the receiving end.

What is disconcerting, however, is the high level of violence in rural Bengal. During the tenure of the Left Front, the CPI(M) and its partners were not averse to resorting to violence in the countryside and had an iron grip on social institutions. Analysts have termed this phenomenon the "party-society" where rural life was inconceivable without the CPI(M).⁶ Indeed this was one of the key elements of the Left Front's success in holding on to power for so long in West

³ Kumar Rana, '2013 Panchayat Elections in West Bengal – A Role Reversal?' *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 27, 2013.

⁴ *The Hindu*, August 2, 2013.

⁵ Rana, '2013 Panchayat Elections in West Bengal – A Role Reversal?'

⁶ Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Of Controls and Factions: The Changing Party-Society in West Bengal,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 28, 2009.

Bengal. With the tide having turned against the Left, the rural elites as well as lumpen elements have shifted allegiance to the Trinamool. The Trinamool has proved to be a good student of the Left Front and is in many ways replicating the latter's tactics in rural Bengal.

While this might foretell a bleak future for West Bengal, the Trinamool's fortunes are likely to be on the upswing in the near future. The support for the party in the countryside will have a positive impact on its showing in the general elections due in 2014. Opinion polls predict that the Trinamool will increase its tally to 22 seats in the *Lok Sabha*.⁷ There are others who believe that the number could be even higher. Currently it sends 19 MPs to the Lower House of Parliament

Implications for National Polls

Given the predictions for a hung Parliament in the next general elections, the Trinamool is likely to play a key role in the formation of government. Two recent opinion polls have predicted that the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) will both fall well short of a majority. The one conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) predicts a maximum of 180 seats for the NDA and 153 for the UPA.⁸ This would make the Trinamool one of the key players in formation of the federal government.

The Trinamool, because of its large Muslim support base, is more likely to ally with the Congress despite having earlier pulled out of the UPA. It must however be kept in mind that the Trinamool was at one time part of the Prime Minister A B Vajpayee-led NDA. There is also the distinct possibility of a Third Front with the CSDS poll indicating parties currently not with either the UPA or NDA will win over 200 seats. Here too the Trinamool with 20-plus seats could play a decisive role. In the past few months, Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee has been an enthusiastic votary of a Third Front.

The violence around the *panchayat* elections does not bode well for West Bengal. Indeed, the Trinamool has not yet been able to deliver on most of the promises it held out when it rode to power in 2011 on a mandate of *poriborton* or change. But with the rural voters solidly backing it, the party's hold on power is likely to remain firm in the medium term.

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⁷ *The Times of India*, July 30, 2013.

⁸ *The Hindu*, July 26, 2013.